Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my committee. The members of my committee were always available for feedback and encouragement. I could not have completed this project without them. Mark Bell was always supportive of the project, provided feedback throughout the years, and was always willing to give professional advice and career guidance. Nisha Fazal provided insightful and incisive feedback throughout, and I was so lucky to have Nisha join our department during the early stages of developing this project. Paul graciously agreed to serve on my committee as an “outsider,” and my work is indebted not only to his feedback but also his own work. Ron’s commitment to the project and, more broadly, to my graduate education and training, was amazing. I am so thankful to have had such an engaged and committed mentor over the course of the past six years.

My dissertation group deserves special mention for the countless drafts that they have read over the years. I thank Pedro Accorsi, Tracey Blasenheim, Lukas Herr, Elif Kalaycioglu, Florencia Montal, Bryan Nakayama, and Jen Spindel for their support and feedback in dissertation group. And for the snacks!

My cohort made my graduate school experience unforgettable. They were supportive when times were tough and when things were going well. I thank Oanh Nguyen, Carly Potz-Nielsen, Marissa Theys, Malina Toza, and Thomas Vargas for their support. I also include in my cohort an honorary member/friend, Matt Motta. I learned so much from all of them and no doubt will continue to in the years ahead.
I thank Jessie Eastman, Alexis Cuttance, Kyle Edwards, Tia Phan, and Sara Flannery for their administrative support throughout my time in graduate school. The department could not function without their expertise and willingness to always lend a helping hand. I thank Sean Burns, who provided technical support that proved instrumental to my text analyses.

I thank the intellectual community at Texas A&M’s Albritton Center for Grand Strategy for advancing the dissertation and my professional development during the final year of my graduate education. I thank John Schussler, Jasen Castillo, Kim Field, Fritz Bartel, and Kelley Robbins. Special thanks to Jeongseok (Jay) Lee, who was my office mate and friend during the stresses and strains of the job market and dissertation-writing.

I have been fortunate throughout my time as a university student – some 12 years now – to have excellent mentors and professors who shaped my intellectual development over the years at Winthrop University and at Virginia Tech. At Virginia Tech, Dr. Edward Weisband and Dr. Priya Dixit were thoughtful and encouraging mentors as I completed my master’s degree and sought to go on to do a Ph.D. My friend Andrew Davis experienced these legs of my journey with me as a student at both Winthrop and Virginia Tech, and I was lucky to have his support and friendship throughout the last twelve or so years. This dissertation, and my intellectual development more broadly, is a result of these individuals investing time and energy in me. I thank them.

The dissertation was graciously funded and supported by the Albritton Center for Grand Strategy at Texas A&M University, the Charles Koch Foundation, the CATO Junior Scholars Program, and the Tobin Project. I would especially like to thank
Christopher Preble, whose discussions during the CATO Junior Scholars Program—and work—were invaluable in developing my understanding of the Kennedy case, from Sputnik through the missile gap and Kennedy’s victory in 1960.

I thank archivists and support staff at the Conservative Party Archives (Oxford, UK), the Labour Party Archives (Manchester, UK), the National Archives (Kew, UK), the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library (Boston, MA), the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (Simi Valley, CA), and the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library (Atlanta, GA). I am indebted to the archivists at each archive for all of their assistance navigating the material and putting up with countless box requests and naïve questions. I thank the archivists at the Nixon Library (Yorba Linda, CA) for scanning requested materials.

Several coffee shops deserve a special mention for providing excellent coffee, Wi-Fi, and atmosphere during different stages in the dissertation-writing process: Dunn Brothers in Hopkins, MN; Coffee Shop Northeast in Minneapolis, MN; Analace Coffee in Northeast Minneapolis, MN; and Humble Cup, Minneapolis, MN.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my family: my mum, dad, brother, and my family across the pond. Beau Ralston deserves all of the cookies that come his way for being such a good boy and dissertation distraction dog. I especially thank my wife Katie Ralston. I would not have completed this project without Katie’s support and love. Katie sacrificed a lot for me to complete this project and finish my Ph.D. She has put up with my stress and complaints. She provided words of wisdom and lots of love when the going was tough. During the final stretches of the dissertation writing process, which coincided
with the Covid-19 pandemic, we survived staying in social isolation in a small one-bedroom apartment. This dissertation is dedicated to her.
Abstract

Dominant narratives of international decline emerge in great powers frequently, often independent of ‘objective’ measures of international decline. Such narratives frequently sustain policies of global expansion to save face, regain lost glory, and reverse decline. Yet we have little understanding of when and why narratives of international decline become dominant, why they resonate, or their policy consequences. When, and why, does declinism emerge and become salient in great powers? As narratives of decline become or are dominant, what policies are advanced in the name of reversing the country’s international decline? Using computerized text analyses of UK parliamentary speech and newspapers and US congressional and presidential speech and newspapers, I track declinism in political discourse in both countries between 1945 and the 2000s. I then explain when declinism becomes a live issue in great powers. I show how different narratives of decline prescribe different polices or behaviors for overcoming decline.
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.............................................................................................................i

Abstract............................................................................................................................. v

List of Tables......................................................................................................................... vii

List of Figures....................................................................................................................... viii

Chapter 1: Introduction........................................................................................................ 1

Chapter 2: Measuring Declinism in the United Kingdom and United States...............10

Chapter 3: Make Us Great Again: The Politics of Decline............................................. 64

Chapter 4: Less like the Germans and More like the Italians: Thatcher, the New Right, and Declinism in 1970s Britain........................................................................ 109

Chapter 5: “The America We Must Not Be:” Missiles, Prestige, and Kennedy’s New Frontier..................................................................................................................177

Chapter 6: From Malaise to Morning in America: The Declinism of Ronald Reagan...234

Chapter 7: Brokers of Declinism: Declinism in France and Japan..............................283

Chapter 8: Make Us Great Again...................................................................................... 318

Bibliography .......................................................................................................................332

Appendix 1: Additional Figures, Tables, and Links from Chapter 2..........................344

Appendix 2: Description of Archival Research..............................................................355
List of Tables

Table 1: (UK) Dictionary Terms-Terms That Appear on Either Side of “declin*”……18
Table 2: Comparative Average Growth Rates..............................................................28
Table 3: (US) Dictionary Terms -Terms That Appear on Either Side of “declin*”……46
Table 4: Mechanisms Through Which Declinism Might Impact Policy…………82
Table 5: Policy Prescriptions for Different Narratives of Decline.........................91
List of Figures

Figure 1: Mentions, Speeches, and Refined Dictionary Counts of ‘declin*’ in Parliament…22
Figure 2: Mentions of ‘Declin*’ and ‘International Declin*’ in The Times of London………...24
Figure 3: The Mismatch between Decline and Declinism ..........................................................27
Figure 4: UK Composite Index of National Capability Scores Relative to Peers…………………31
Figure 5: Number of Speeches Mentioning Decline.................................................................39
Figure 6: Percent of Speeches Mentioning Decline ..................................................................40
Figure 7: Number of Speeches Mentioning Decline by Type....................................................44
Figure 8: Mentions of Declin* in the Congressional Record....................................................48
Figure 9: Refined Dictionary of Declinism in the Congressional Record.................................48
Figure 10: Mentions of “decline” in the New York Times, by Year.............................................51
Figure 11: Great Power Share of GDP (1945-2005) .................................................................57
Figure 12: The Mismatch between Decline (as GDP share) and Declinism..............................59
Figure 13: The Mismatch between Decline (as CINC) and Declinism......................................59
Figure 14: The Mismatch Between Decline and Declinism JFK and RR’s Campaigns……….60
Figure 15: US Composite Index of National Capability Scores Relative to Peers…………………62
Figure 16: Diagram 1 in Stepping Stones.................................................................................139
Figure 17: Diagram 2 in Stepping Stones................................................................................140
Figure 18: ‘The World had a bit of a Cold, but Britain has Double Pneumonia!’ .....................154
Figure 19: Gallup Polling on Missiles-August 1958 to February 1963.................................185
Figure 20: New Yorker Cartoon...............................................................................................216
Figure 21: New York Herald Tribune Cartoon.........................................................................232
Figure 22: Carter’s Presidential Job Approval in 1979..............................................................245
Chapter 1

Introduction

I. Introduction

In his State of the Union speech in January 2012, Barack Obama argued that “anyone who tells you that America is in decline or that our influence has waned, doesn’t know what they’re talking about.” Obama was responding to a claim that Republicans, including eventual Republican nominee Mitt Romney, were making during the primaries. Republicans claimed that Obama had oversaw a decline in the United States’ standing in the world. “We have in Washington today a president who has put America on a road to decline, militarily, internationally and, domestically, he’s making us into something we wouldn’t recognize,” then-candidate for the Republican nomination Romney declared.

Obama, as the incumbent running for a second term in office was fed up with hearing such claims. Obama read neo-conservative Robert Kagan’s influential article published in the New Republic entitled, “Not Fade Away: Against the Myth of American Decline” and was enamored by the argument. Shortly thereafter, Obama proclaimed in his State of the Union address that America was not in decline.

A few years later, Donald Trump entered the American political scene with a singular message, built around the notion of American decline and promising to “Make

---

1 Barack Obama, Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/299426


America Great Again” after eight years of Obama, and, indeed, decades of what Trump saw as the mismanagement of America. “The decades of decay, division and decline will come to an end. The years of American Greatness will return…We are going to make American Great Again,” he promised on the campaign trail in 2016. Four years later in his 2020 State of the Union address, President Trump changed course, claiming that his administration had ended the “American carnage” that he lamented in his inaugural address. Trump took on the role of America’s cheerleader in chief in his 2020 State of the Union address, proclaiming that his administration has put America’s “enemies on the run,” its “fortunes on the rise,” and promising, “We are moving forward at a pace that was unimaginable just a short time ago, and we are never ever going back.”

Such narratives of decline are nothing new, and do not occur only in the United States. Fear of falling down the ranking of states, or of losing “top dog” status, can be found in the politics of almost every major power stretching back to the Roman Empire. Yet we have little understanding of when and why narratives of international decline become dominant, why they resonate, or their policy consequences.

Most scholarly studies assume decline is an objective and easily-interpretable reality and that concern about the nation’s decline—or what I call “declinism”—becomes salient and prevalent in response to objective decline. I argue that this is not the case. I show, in the context of the United Kingdom and United States, that there is no

---

5 Donald J. Trump, Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/335440
6 See Lachmann and Rose-Greenland 2015.
neat correlation between decline and declinism. Narratives of decline can emerge in great powers when there is little or no observed decline based on available metrics. Likewise, concern over decline can be absent where conventional metrics suggest that decline is occurring. Given this puzzle, I ask two questions. First, when and why does declinism emerge and become salient in great powers? Second, what are the policy consequences of declinist narratives?

II. The Argument in Brief

Great powers throughout history have fretted about their international standing, at times justifiably, but at other times quite unjustifiably. The conventional approach to the question of great power decline typically seeks to examine declining or rising powers’ reactions to an objective relative decline. This approach tends to focus on questions such as how great powers respond to relative decline, or the strategies of rising powers vis-à-vis an actually declining great power. Despite its substantial contributions, however, the existing literature sheds no light on when and why decline becomes a hot-button political issue in great powers, what declinism’s ideological underpinnings are, and what foreign policy consequences declinism yields. My dissertation seeks to fill this substantial gap in the existing literature.

The dissertation’s first task is to demonstrate that declinism does not neatly correlate with observed decline. Using computerized text analyses of UK parliamentary speech and newspapers and US congressional and presidential speech and newspapers, I

---

track declinism in political discourse in both countries between 1945 and the 2000s. I find that, in the UK, declinism peaked during the late 1970s and early 1980s—ironically at the very time when, according to various objective indicators, Britain’s relative decline came to a halt. Puzzlingly, declinism was comparatively low during the 1950s and 1960s, when Britain’s decline vis-à-vis other major powers was most steep. A similar content analysis of US text corpuses reveals two intense postwar periods of declinism: the late 1950s and the late 1970s. Periodic declinism in the postwar United States is puzzling, because the US remained, in terms of its ordinal position with respect to great power GDP, the “top dog” in the international system throughout this period. Further, based on other operationalizations of “acute relative decline,” the United States has never undergone a period in which it declined long enough, or sharply enough, to be classified as having undergone acute relative decline. My research reveals that decline and declinism have not moved in lockstep. Consequently, the emergence of declinism as a dominant narrative in domestic politics is inherently worthy of explanation.

The dissertation’s second task is, therefore, to explain when declinism becomes a live issue in great powers, and I argue that domestic political reasons are at the heart of declinism. First, declinism is more likely to emerge from the opposition in national politics. Oppositions have an incentive to claim that the country is in decline as a result of the incumbent government’s failed policy choices, and this provides an opportunity for the opposition to paint their policies as policies of national renewal. Meanwhile, the incumbent finds it difficult to push back against declinist arguments without sounding

---

8 MacDonald and Parent 2011; 2018.
complacent or defensive. Once declinists are in power, I argue that the incentive to use declinist rhetoric for political gain diminishes. My case studies in Britain and in the United States demonstrates this dynamic, whereby opposition parties and candidates are more likely to evoke national decline, and declinism decreases substantially once a candidate or party is in power.

Second, I argue that the impetus for declinist rhetoric comes from a perceived need to break from the past and establish a new set of policies often associated with newcomers within a party. Declinism emerges as a result of the political desire to undo the status quo rather than out of a need to tinker with policies at the margins. It is unlikely to hear declinists claim that the nation’s supposed decline can be overcome with minor fixes and small plans. Rather, declinism often speaks to fundamental, deep-seated, issues that are perceived to be dragging the country down. For example, declinists often couple international decline with the nation’s moral and spiritual decline or tie economic decline with declines in the nation’s military readiness. Declinism is therefore more likely to be associated with generational change within a party or as the result of outsiders who gain clout and power within the party. These newcomers or outsiders are not beholden to the party’s recent past, and therefore can push back against not only the incumbent, but even against their own party’s decisions when in power to critique the country’s trajectory.

Moreover, I argue that particular kinds of actors—brokers—are able to bridge political networks and advance a message of decline. Therefore, I argue that declinism is more likely to be associated with “brokers,” or actors who are able to use their positions and access within parties, in the sense that they have access to traditional party
apparatuses, and outsiders, who appeal to voters, parties, and organizations/movements who are otherwise unconnected. Such brokers present themselves to the public as outsiders or newcomers to politics (whether such characterizations are true), and thus can blame the establishment and past actions of not only the incumbent but also members of their own party. These two components—the opposition-based component and the brokerage component—explain why narratives of decline emerge in some periods and not others.

I show throughout the dissertation that dominant declinist narratives have important implications for policy: such narratives often sustain policies of global expansion to save face, regain lost glory, and reverse decline. In addition to explaining why declinist narratives emerge, it is also important to explain the policy consequences of declinist narratives, because the consequences of declinist narratives motivate why we should care about declinism in the domestic discourses of great powers. I show how different narratives of decline prescribe different polices or behaviors for overcoming decline. In particular, I identify two main dimensions of declinist narratives: (1) the policy domain where the problem lies (domestic/foreign) and (2) the reason why the nation is said to have declined (done too much/done too little). Narratives of decline posit why decline has happened, and what is to be done to overcome decline. These two dimensions produce four important kinds of narratives: (1) domestic overextension narratives (which prescribe policies like cutting spending and reducing regulation), (2) international overextension narratives (which prescribe policies such as policies of retrenchment and decreases in military spending), (3) domestic decay narratives (which
prescribe policies like strategic investment in the nation’s infrastructure, education, and health), and (4) international re-exertion narratives (which prescribe policies from increased spending on the military to preventive war).

III. The Plan of the Dissertation

The remainder of this dissertation proceeds in 7 chapters. In Chapter 2, I introduce my two main cases, the US and UK, and highlight the important similarities and differences between them. The US and UK are, on the one hand, very different cases: the US is a globe-spanning hegemon while Britain is a declining post-imperial power. Yet both see declinism rise and fall intermittently in their national discourse. I employ automated text analyses of political speech (presidential, congressional, parliamentary, and newspaper) to measure the prevalence of declinist discourse between 1945 and 2008 in both countries. After tracking declinism, I compare the ebbs and flows of declinist discourse against measures typically used by IR scholars to measure changes in the international distribution of power. This chapter’s chief theoretical contribution is to demonstrate the limits of a strictly objectivist explanation for declinism and thereby to set up my theoretical intervention in Chapter 3 and the case studies that follow.

In Chapter 3, I set out my theory of declinism’s emergence and consequences. I argue that, contrary to conventional wisdom, declinism arises and subsides in great powers for domestic political reasons. First, I maintain that the political opposition is most likely to cultivate a narrative of decline. Second, I argue that the appeal of declinist rhetoric is greatest to those members of the opposition who wish to break radically from the past and establish a wholly new policy direction. These newcomers or outsiders, I
theorize, are able to occupy brokerage positions, whereby they are able to use their positions and access within parties, in the sense that they have access to traditional party apparatuses, and outsiders, who appeal to voters, parties, and organizations/movements who are otherwise unconnected. Finally, I outline how narratives of international decline impact policies at home and abroad.

In Chapter 4, I trace the emergence of declinism in Britain during the 1970s, using evidence from archival research in the UK at the Conservative Party and Labour Party Archives. I show how members of the New Right attempted to bring declinism to the Conservative Party message during and immediately after the 1974 general election but were pushed back by the establishment of the party. Once members of the New Right seized control of the party after 1974’s dismal electoral performances, they were able to bring declinism to bear and frame their message and policy goals around the question of Britain’s decline. I conclude the chapter by examining Thatcher’s rhetoric regarding the future of British foreign policy, and how Thatcher’s declinism carried prescriptions of greater defense spending—despite cuts elsewhere—and the rhetoric of decline in the buildup to, during, and aftermath of the Falklands War.

In Chapter 5, I trace the emergence of declinism during the latter half of the 1950s in the US, particularly with respect to John F. Kennedy’s presidential campaign. Using evidence from archival research in the JFK archives, I show that declinism was “instrumentalized” in the JFK campaign; the campaign recognized the strength of JFK’s argument versus Nixon regarding declining American prestige and capabilities and encouraged heightening and emphasizing such arguments as the campaign wore on. I
trace these developments using the papers of key speechwriters like James Tobin, Arthur Schlesinger, and Walt Rostow, demonstrating that declinism was rampant within the campaign’s inner circle. I conclude the chapter by examining Kennedy’s rhetoric regarding the missile gap and restoring American prestige abroad, and the consequences of his declinism with respect to his foreign policy and his defense spending.

In Chapter 6, I trace the emergence of declinism during the Reagan presidential campaign and presidency, famously from his campaign slogan “Make America Great Again” to his reelection campaign, including his memorable “Morning in America” advertisement. I show how Reagan, as an outsider, was able to deploy declinism to his advantage. Finally, I trace the consequences of Reagan’s declinism with respect to his foreign policy and his defense spending, including the death of détente and the birth of his Strategic Defense Initiative.9

Chapter 7 explores declinism beyond the US and UK by highlighting declinism two additional cases: France and Japan. In this chapter, I examine the declinism of Nicolas Sarkozy during 2007 French Presidential election and his early tenure and, in Japan, I trace the declinism of Tōru Hashimoto of the Japan Restoration Party and Shinzo Abe of the Liberal Democratic Party in 2012. This chapter serves to broaden the scope of my dissertation and serves as a launchpad for future research in these country-contexts.

In the concluding chapter, Chapter 8, I return to declinism’s consequences for policy and scholarship.

9 See Gaddis 2005.
Chapter 2
Measuring Declinism in the United Kingdom and United States

I. Introduction

Questions relating to the rise and fall of great powers have long been central to the study of international politics, partly because of the intimate connection between power transitions and war. This literature, built on primarily realist and positivist foundations, understands power transitions (and thus, international rise and decline) as largely observable facts to which states respond. This chapter demonstrates empirically that this assumption is unfounded. In this chapter I show, in the context of postwar Britain and the United States, that there is no neat correlation between observed international decline and declinism.

In particular, I show that in post-war Britain, domestic political concern over Britain’s international position dominated when British relative decline largely halted (the late 1970s, early 1980s). Meanwhile, there was relatively little domestic political concern about Britain’s international position while Britain was sharply falling in international standings (1950s and 1960s). With respect to the United States, I show that John F. Kennedy’s campaign in 1960 evoked the notion that America is/was in decline more than any other presidential candidate, and data from the Congressional Record similarly show that the late 1950s was a period of American declinism. Moreover, dictionary-based text analyses of the New York Times and the Congressional Record,

along with Reagan’s presidential campaign speech, point to the late 1970s—particularly 1979/1980—as being a period of high declinism. I show in this context that the United States was still “number one” throughout these periods of declinism, but that, depending on the metrics one uses, there are more or less “objective” reasons to be concerned about the nation’s decline.

In order to measure domestic political attention to decline, I analyze several corpora of parliamentary and newspaper text from the United Kingdom. As a case, Britain represents a declining post-imperial power; Britain’s relative superiority had been eroding since the late nineteenth into the early twentieth centuries, though such decline has hardly been constant, nor, as I show, has attention to decline been so either. Britain thus represents an important case of a declining power—the epitome of a declining power—in which to interrogate the mismatch between decline and declinism. With respect to the United States, the US reached its apex at the end of the Second World War. Yet, as I show in this chapter, vis-à-vis many important metrics the US has remained ‘top dog’ in the international system.

The mismatch between decline and declinism seriously questions common assumptions in IR about the relationship between decline and the domestic political recognition of decline. To miss periods in which decline is less prevalent in commonly-used metrics, but rampant in domestic politics, means that scholars not only miss cases in which ‘decline is on the mind’ of the nation, but also the opportunity to unpack the political dynamics through which decline is interpreted, narrated, and acted upon in the domestic politics of great powers. Moreover, if we cannot assume that commonly used
metrics are interpreted, narrated, and acted upon in the same way between states, or within states across time, then this chapter suggests that decline is at least as much a political process as it is an objective or structural one. Finally, scholars of international relations should take seriously the narrative dynamics that take place within and between states in their analyses of international politics, even, or perhaps particularly, in great powers.

This chapter proceeds as follows. I first conceptualize and define decline and declinism and specify the problematic assumption made in the literature in IR regarding decline and declinism. I then dive into each country-case (first, the United Kingdom and then the United States) by explaining how I measure declinism over time. Sections III to V cover the United Kingdom. In Section III, I describe how I measure declinism in the United Kingdom. In Sections IV and V, I discuss the mismatch between declinism from an empirical and historical perspective. Sections VI to VIII cover the United States. In Section VII, I describe how I measure declinism in the United States. In Section VIII, I assess the connections and correlations between decline and declinism in the United States. I conclude in Section IX by returning to the implications of this research for scholarship and the dissertation project.

II. Decline and Declinism

---

12 For work on the politics of legitimation between and within great powers, see Goddard 2018.
Great powers throughout history have fretted about their international standing, at times justifiably, but at other times quite unjustifiably.\textsuperscript{13} The conventional approach to the question of great power decline treats decline as dangerous: power shifts cause insecurity and conflict.\textsuperscript{14} Moreover, the conventional approach to the study of great power decline typically seeks to examine declining or rising powers’ reactions to an objective relative decline. This tends to focus on questions such as how great powers respond to relative decline,\textsuperscript{15} or the strategies of rising powers vis-à-vis an actually-declining great power.\textsuperscript{16}

I distinguish between two key concepts in this chapter: decline (as it is typically understood in IR research) and declinism. The literature in international relations treats decline as either an \textit{absolute} decrease in important metrics of interest to states, like economic output or military size, or the \textit{relative} loss of ordinal rank with respect to other states across similar metrics of interest.\textsuperscript{17} Shifrinson notes that decline can be treated either as a loss of capabilities, whether economic or otherwise, or, as a transition between powers, whereby one power surpasses another.\textsuperscript{18} For the purposes of this chapter, I examine decline in both ways.

Scholars normally measure power—and declining power—using two metrics: a major power’s share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and its Composite Index of

\textsuperscript{14} e.g. Copeland 2000, 1; Gilpin 1981. For a new treatment of power transitions, which emphasizes the social factors of power transitions, see Murray 2019.
\textsuperscript{15} e.g. MacDonald and Parent 2011; 2018.
\textsuperscript{16} e.g. Shifrinson 2018
\textsuperscript{17} For discussions of decline and its conceptualization, see Haynes 2015; Kennedy 1989; MacDonald and Parent 2018; Shifrinson 2018.
\textsuperscript{18} Shifrinson 2018, 14.
National Capability Score (CINC), both of which make possible measured comparisons between great powers. For example, MacDonald and Parent measure a great power’s standing as its “share of gross domestic product (GDP) among the great powers” in their study of retrenchment. With respect to CINC scores, Michael Beckley argues that “more than 1,000 studies have used CINC as a proxy for power.” Therefore, in this chapter I use these two measures to assess Britain’s postwar position in the world and track these measures against my measure of British declinism, and likewise for the United States.

Most studies of decline offer positivist (and generally realist) explanations. They assume that decline is an objective reality and is therefore interpretable by states. These explanations tend to focus on the structural imperatives of decline, and the degree to which states react swiftly or slowly to such imperatives; or on domestic pathologies like poor decision-making, bureaucratic fragmentation, or domestic dysfunction (e.g. special interests) as deviations from ideal responses to decline. Both sets of explanations overlook the social construction of decline, and declinism. In other words, most—if not all—explanations treat decline as knowable, as a “brute fact” which leaders respond to, absent domestic pathologies, mistakes, or delays.

I define declinism as the prevalence of international decline as a theme in the domestic discourse of great powers. Declinist narratives argue that the nation is in

---

19 Rauch 2017.
20 MacDonald and Parent 2018, 45.
21 Beckley 2018, 10.
22 e.g. MacDonald and Parent 2011.
23 e.g. Snyder 1993; Friedberg 1988.
24 For other conceptualizations and definitions, see English and Kenny 1996.
decline, has declined, or will soon decline. I treat declinism as the explicit articulation of an argument regarding the nation’s international decline. This, of course, can come in many different forms, as part of a potentially infinite number of different claims.

Declinists point to a plethora of different sources when diagnosing decline, from the nation’s military capabilities to its economic performance, from its moral character to its manliness. The blame resides either externally or internally, on people or circumstances, on different understandings of civilization (circular, etc.) or understandings of the nation’s past performance and position.

The existing literature on decline in international relations largely misses, or treats as given, declinism. Conventional approaches to decline are typically structural-realist in orientation, and therefore usually disregard domestic politics or ideational factors in understanding decline. Yet many of the policy responses to decline that such accounts argue occur (from preventive war to retrenchment and everything in between), suggest that declinism should accompany objective international decline. Such policies are legitimated to domestic and/or international audiences. Governments justify why they, for example, need to send troops abroad or ramp up defense spending at the expense of other policy priorities. There should, then, be a correlation between decline and declinism, if conventional accounts are correct: decline is recognized (rather quickly) by politicians, and they put forward policies to stem decline. This chapter begins to fill a gap in existing literature and problematizes assumptions inherent in conventional accounts that decline and declinism track closely with one another.

---

Why does the mismatch between decline and declinism matter? Common assumptions about how states respond to decline presume that states can observe their decline and react promptly. Indeed, such accounts suggest that decline is a sensitive affair, making power transitions dangerous and destabilizing. However, if domestic attention to decline is divorced from metrics of decline scholars use to measure rising powers, declining powers, and power transitions, then such presumptions about the observability of decline are unfounded. If leaders, and their oppositions in government, do not see decline as a major issue, or cannot agree that decline *is* occurring, then the mechanisms through which decline impacts policies, from preventive war to retrenchment, should be questioned. The mechanisms through which decline is said to matter, namely the notion that leaders can assess their nation’s position relative to others in almost real-time, assume a correlation between decline as observed by scholars and declinism. Such assumptions not only lead to scholars missing cases in which ‘decline is on the mind’ of the nation, but also the political dynamics through which decline is interpreted, narrated, and acted upon in the domestic politics of great powers.

### III. Measuring Declinism in the United Kingdom

I use automated dictionary-based methods of parliamentary speech and newspaper data in order to measure declinism over time in the United Kingdom. As I noted in the

---


27 Grimmer & Stewart, 2013. Validation is important when using dictionary-based methods such as my measures of declinism Grimmer & Stewart 2013, 268-269. Dictionaries are sensitive to the context in which they are used. Additionally, there is a necessary tradeoff between the scope of the analysis, the cost, and time when using automated methods of text analysis versus, for example, fine-grained human-coded content analyses. With the limitations of dictionary methods in mind, and to validate my results, I used a random number generator to select 20 random keywords in context, which I present in the appendix (see
introduction, Britain represents an important test case from which to investigate the linkages—or lack thereof—between decline as-observed by IR scholars and declinism. From the turn of the twentieth century, Britain has been a quintessential declining power. Yet, Britain has also punched above her weight, playing the role, as David McCourt calls it, of “residual great power.”  

Therefore, Britain makes a fascinating test case to examine the correlation between decline and declinism: a nation that has certainly declined—yet not steadily—and which still believes in maintaining a standing and role in the world in which its relative international decline would otherwise suggest is incongruent.

To measure declinism, I use two digitized versions of the parliamentary Hansard: the BYU Hansard corpus, which covers 1946 to 2004, and the Digging into Linked Parliamentary Data (DiLiPaD) project’s corpus, which covers 1946-2013. These two corpora offer different tools to measure declinism in parliament over time. The BYU corpus functions are designed for linguistic analysis and provides information on the frequency of terms over time. The DiLiPaD corpus treats as its unit of analysis the speech rather than the word in order to examine my measure of declinism in a different manner.

While parliamentary speech is a stable body of speech, it represents only one aspect of British politics and discourse. Other forms of political speech, from the speeches of party leaders during election campaigns, for instance, to the elite discourses found in newspapers may provide an altogether different view of declinism in British

Appendix 1, Table 1). Additionally, I assess my measures of declinism against the impressionistic, historical, literature, in order to interrogate the plausibility of my findings.

28 McCourt 2014; see also Blagden 2019.
29 https://hansard-corpus.org
30 http://search.politicalmashup.nl
I therefore examine The Times of London—a right-leaning, London-based, broadsheet newspaper—as a second source of declinism alongside the Hansard.31

I measure declinism in the Hansard and The Times of London by looking at both the evocation of the term ‘declin*’32 as well as the co-occurrence of the term ‘declin*’ alongside other terms-of-interest. First, and most crudely, I measure declinism as the number of times the stem ‘declin*’ appears in the Hansard from 1946 to 2004 and in The Times of London from 1946-2012. This measure is crude, because there are many ways in which invoking decline may not be relevant. For example, a speaker may mention that they “declined” the invitation to attend a meeting, or a minister’s heath is “declining”, and they must leave office. Or, to take an example from Tony Blair, jokes about the opposition are not relevant: “The standard of Tory insults has declined in recent years.”33

I therefore refine the measure using additional dictionary-based methods to focus on discussions of decline with an international dimension. To do this, I create a dictionary of words that should appear alongside declin* in my corpus (within nine words on either side of the term declin*).34 Table 1 outlines these dictionary terms and their frequency alongside the term declin* in my corpus.35

---
31 The one exception to this consistency in the Times data is the year 1979. The Times went on strike in 1979, which depresses the raw number of editorials and articles published relative to other years. I augment the potential bias of looking only at the Times of London by carrying out analyses using The Manchester Guardian in Appendix 1 (See Figure 11). However, there are not similar search functions available for the Guardian, and this makes comparisons imperfect. I therefore focus my analysis on the Times data in this chapter.
32 This includes words such as “declined,” “declining,” “declines,” and “decline.”
33 On the other hand, we do not have any reason to assume that these evocations of “declin*” would vary substantially each year. https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1994-01-11/debates/6a0a29f4-0aa4-4d35-8501-82c88fd0a6ff/CriminalJusticeAndPublicOrderBill
34 There is a maximum of 9 words on either side of the word in the BYU database.
35 Graphs for these dictionary terms alongside decline over time can be found in the Appendix 1 (see Appendix, Figures 8A and 8B)
Table 1: Dictionary Terms --
Terms That Appear Within 9 Words on Either Side of “declin*”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Frequency alongside “declin*”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>competitive*</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foreign</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>global*</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>influence</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>international*</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>position</td>
<td>524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>power*</td>
<td>690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prestige</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>share</td>
<td>803</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>standing</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>status</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strength</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>world</td>
<td>1155</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the parliamentary debates and analysis, I analyze The Times of London’s news and editorial sections for declinist arguments using keyword analyses. First, using Gale’s “Primary Sources Database,” I searched for all articles published in The Times of London from 1950-2009 that mention ‘declin*’ and plot various bigrams that are associated with decline. I then examine editorials as a subset of all articles published by The Times of London, in which arguments about a nation’s decline should more likely emerge. Where possible, my unit of analysis is the percentage of total articles
that the *Times* published in a given year. Where this is not possible, the unit of analysis is the number of articles.

IV. The Mismatch between Decline and Declinism

I first graph the occurrence of the stem declin* between 1946 and 2004 in the Parliamentary Hansard in Figure 1, which shows that declinism peaks in the 1980s. The average number of mentions of declin* in the Hansard from 1946 to 2004 in a given year is 940 mentions. The period between 1946 and 1974 averages 607 mentions of decline, while the period between 1975 and 1985 averages 1,516 mentions of decline. The two main ‘peaks’ in the number of mentions of decline in this measure come in 1980 and 1985.

Figure 1 also shows the number of *speeches* made in parliament that includes declin*. Declinism ranges from a low of about 300 speeches per year at the start of my analysis to a peak of over 1,000 speeches in the 1980s. It becomes clear that declinism in parliamentary speech was quite “flat” in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s: there was little change across periods. There is a small increase in the number of mentions post-Suez, but in terms of sheer frequency of mentions of decline alongside relevant words,

---

36 I also weight the results by the number of words per million words uttered in the Hansard, which obtains a similar trend (see Figure 2, Appendix 1).
37 For the raw numbers, see Figures 1-4, Appendix 1.
this initial period is marked by a relative lack of declinism compared to later half-decades. The average number of speeches from 1946-1974 is 428 speeches, while the average from 1975-1985 is 872 speeches. The average of the later years, 1990-2013, is 574 speeches. The average number of speeches that mention the term declin* across the whole series is 560 speeches per year, meaning that the period from 1980-1984, in which the average number of speeches is 970, is 1.84 times larger the average number of speeches that mention decline in the other years of the series.

The refined dictionary, which is based on mentions of declin* that co-occur with the terms in Table 1, again shows a similar trend: a steep increase in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Figure 1, dashed line). The average number of mentions of declin* based on the refined dictionary in the Hansard from 1946 to 2004 in a given year is 78 mentions. The period between 1946 and 1974 averages 57 mentions of decline, while the period between 1975 and 1985 averages 125 mentions of decline.
Figure 1: Mentions of ‘declin*’ in Parliament, Speeches mentioning ‘declin*,’ and Refined Dictionary Measures, 1946-2004 (Normalized).  

Min-max scaled y-axis. For graphs with each measure and non-min-max scaled y-axes, see Appendix 1, Figures 1, 3, and 4.
Newspaper Data

In terms of the newspaper results, data from *The Times* of London show similar trends to the parliamentary data: declinism peaks in the late 1970s/early 1980s. Figure 2 shows the percentage of all newspaper articles that the *Times* published in a given year that contain the term “declin*” from 1945-2012. There are more mentions of declin* in the period between 1975-1982 than in any other period in the data. There is a noteworthy drop-off after 1982, where the percentage of all articles that contain declin* decreases from around 4.5 percent to around 2 percent of articles.

This trend becomes even clearer when it comes to mentions of the bigram “international declin*” in the *Times*. This bigram is a more refined measure of declinism. Figure 2 shows the percent of all newspaper articles that the *Times* published in a given year that contain the term “international declin*” from 1945-2012. There are more mentions of declin* in the period between 1975-1982 than in any other period in the data. There is a noticeable drop-off after 1982, where the percentage of all articles that contain declin* decreases from around 0.6 percent to around 0.3 percent of articles. Again, similar results emerge when only looking at the number of editorials published by the *Times* that reference declin*; noticeably increases in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I observe similar results when looking only at the editorials section of the newspaper, which suggests that declinism is not only prevalent in, say, the markets section of the paper, but also in elite arguments regarding the major problems and issues facing the country (see Appendix, Figure 5).
As I noted earlier, it is incumbent upon the researcher, when using dictionary-based methods, to validate their results. In addition to the retrieval of random keywords in context (see Appendix 1, Table 1), I next examine these findings against the historical record. The impressionistic literature on declinism points to different moments in which declinism became dominant in British political discourse. My measure of declinism puts the high point of declinism in the 1980s, with its rise occurring in the late 1970s. This accords with historian Jim Tomlinson’s claim that “declinism was not invented in the 1970s, but it was in that decade and the early years of the next that it was probably most prevalent and most politically significant.”\textsuperscript{39} These data confirm Tomlinson’s, and others’, account of the decade, which demonstrates the validity to the measure.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{39} Black & Pemberton 2013, 51.
\textsuperscript{40} See, e.g. Cannadine 1998.
Beyond validation, the text analysis also allows for impressionistic analyses to be subject to empirical scrutiny. Other historians point to different, earlier, periods in which declinism began to run rampant; other impressionistic analyses of declinism in Britain tend to suggest that declinism began in the 1960s. Campbell notes of British declinism: “The notion of Britain's relative decline […] had struck the previously complacent public consciousness quite suddenly within the previous five years [1959-1964]. It was to be the staple assumption of every subsequent election over the next three decades.” 41
International historian Alan Sked has a similar impression of twentieth century Britain, from the perspective of the British public: “It was only in the 1960s that people in Britain became aware of their ‘decline.’ Even the Suez fiasco of 1956 had failed to undermine their self-confidence…” 42. A large group of scholars of British decline, be they political scientists, historians, or economists, point to the 1960s as the decade in which decline became, in Andrew Gamble’s words, the “dominant” issue in British politics. 43 This is not necessarily in complete opposition to my findings. My findings instead suggest that while the 1960s had a relatively stable average, the decade was not the ‘high point’ of British declinism. When considering the frequency of decline in public speech, declinism appears to fester and come to a head in the 1980s.

While my method and measure of declinism does not capture the rich context of impressionist accounts, it has the benefit of applying a stable standard across the entire time frame. This reliability allows scholars to identify relative trends in the data and

41 Campbell 1993, 163.
42 Sked 1987, 1.
43 Gamble 1990.
provide a clear picture of declinism over a much wider time frame than previous analyses. In the next section, I demonstrate that decline—as measured by international relations scholars—and declinism do not perfectly correlate with each other.

V. British Decline and Declinism Compared

As I noted above, there are two common ways in which scholars measure decline: a great power’s share of GDP and a great power’s “Composite National Index of Capabilities” (CINC) score, both of which are relative to other great powers. I next address each in turn. Each measure points to sharper declines during the 1950s and 1960s relative to the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, my measures of declinism point in the opposite direction, as Figure 3 shows below. Britain’s decline, represented in blue by the UK’s share of great power GDP, most sharply—and deeply—early on in the series, between 1946 and 1976. My measure of declinism, represented in red, then peaks when British decline slows down relative to other great powers. Figure 3 epitomizes my argument: there is no neat correlation between decline and declinism, as realists would expect. I next turn to unpacking each measure used by scholars to measure Britain’s decline.
**Figure 3: The Mismatch between Decline and Declinism (Normalized)**

![Graph showing the mismatch between Decline and Declinism](image)

*Gross Domestic Product*

Britain’s share of great power GDP sharply declined throughout the 1950s and 1960s, as demonstrated in Figure 3. Britain’s share of great power GDP was 14 percent in 1946, dropping to 7 percent by 1970. In other words, Britain’s share of great power GDP was cut in half, when comparing 1946 to 1970. With respect to *GDP per capita*, another way in which decline is measured, Britain’s share of Great Power GDP per capita declined from around 22 percent in 1950 to around 15 percent in 1975, a difference of

---

44 Min-max scaled y-axis. Declinism measure from Figure 1 (number of speeches, see also Appendix 1, Figure 3). Decline measure is UK’s share of great power GDP.

45 Atkinson and Williford 2016.
about 7 percentage points. Britain’s share remains between 15 and 17 percent of great power GDP per capita from 1975 onwards; ever-so slight differences occur in that period, but Britain’s share of great power GDP per capita remains about equal to peer states France, Germany, and Japan, and does not substantially change. The rate of change in Britain’s share of great power GDP per capita from 1946 to 1970 was roughly 0.5 percent per year. From 1970 to 1980, that rate is dramatically reduced to 0.08 percent; the slope of the decline becomes much less steep. My measures of declinism show that declinism rises as Britain’s decline, with respect to Britain’s share of great power GDP or GDP per capita, grinds to a slow halt.

For the majority of the second half of the twentieth century, Britain’s economy—in absolute terms—demonstrated growth in GDP, rather than decline. British relative economic decline during the second half of the twentieth century took place in two distinct periods. First, the “golden age” which was, for Britain, absolutely golden, but not relatively golden, and, second, the period post-1973, in which Britain’s relative economic decline to continental peers largely halts (Broadberry 1997; Crafts 2002, 22-23).

---

46 GDP per capita data from Atkinson and Williford 2016. Atkinson and Williford (2016, 2) note that “states are ranked according to their overall share of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita among great powers. This is preferable to measures of absolute power, such as overall capabilities, that do not allow us to capture the relational nature of our theory. States can experience relative decline because their own economic performance is poor, or because other states are simply advancing faster than they are.”

47 Other measures of power and decline that use economic data, such as Lebow and Valentino’s measure of power (GDP * total population) similarly show little movement on the part of the UK from 1945 onward (Lebow and Valentino 2009, 400).
Table 2: Comparative Average Growth Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK (Rank)</td>
<td>3.0 (6/6)</td>
<td>2.2 (6/6)</td>
<td>1.8 (4.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference between U.K. and Average</td>
<td>-1.5</td>
<td>-2.23</td>
<td>-.038</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yet, even Britain’s absolute growth during the golden age (1950-1973) was, in relative terms, weak. Britain’s economic clout and productivity was falling behind in the 1950s and 1960s relative to the rest of the industrialized world. Table 2 shows that the other major industrial powers were growing, on average, faster than the UK (Bernstein 2004, 161; Budge 1993). The first column examines the putative “golden age” between 1950 and 1973 and shows that Britain was ranked last in terms of its average growth rate during the period, growing 1.5 percentage points less than the average of other industrialized countries during this period. The period between 1962 and 72 was likewise relatively bleak, as Britain again was growing slower than other powers, growing 2.23 percentage points less than the average of other industrialized countries during this period. Declinism peaks in my data when Britain’s relative performance was better than it had been for the two decades prior.

In sum, the period in which declinism is greatest in my data—the late 1970s and 1980s—shows that Britain was growing faster than its continental peers Germany and France and was just barely growing below the industrialized average of the six countries. This is a different story than the one told by my measures of declinism; when declinism
peaked in the late 1970s and 1980s, Britain was growing faster than France and Germany, perhaps the most relevant peers in the minds of British leaders.

*Composite Index of National Capability Scores (CINC)*

Economic indicators are not the only way in which scholars assess whether a country is declining vis-à-vis its peers. While economic power certainly can carry over into other important domains (e.g. military power), GDP is only one part of a larger story. The “Composite Index of National Capability” (CINC) is another popular measure to gauge a state’s relative power that considers more than economic performance. CINC scores are based upon industrial, military, and demographic measures. The CINC score accounts for a state’s total population, urban population, iron and steel production, energy consumption, military personnel, and military expenditure in a measure composed of averages of percentages of world totals.

Britain’s postwar CINC score certainly declines, from about 0.06 of the world’s total in 1950 to about 0.025 for much of the latter half of the twentieth century. Relative to continental peers France and Germany, the UK does not substantially differ, and largely tracks the trends of the French and Germans from 1960 onward; there is no sharp decline in the CINC score. Moreover, the differences in UK CINC data appear even more minimal when compared to the other great powers (Figure 4).

---

The CINC measure is messy, especially when treating it as an indicator of decline. Power does not equal prestige, and it is not clear that these components are always equally salient to leaders (e.g. military expenditure vs. urban population). Moreover, as MacDonald and Parent note, “By aggregating measures of economic output with military indicators, however, this index conflates the causes of relative decline with its consequences. A decision by a great power to reduce its military expenditures, for example, may reflect a decision to retrench, and thus be an outcome rather than a marker of relative decline.” Debs and Monteiro argue that the CINC score contains both

---

49 On the relationship between status and CINC scores, see Duque 2018.
50 MacDonald and Parent 2011, 24.
plausibly exogenous components of the CINC index (economic and demographic measures) and components that are more directly linked to endogenous decision-making (military measures).51

Regardless of these important caveats, one can still observe a decline throughout the 1950s to the 1980s with respect to the CINC score. However, the score improves beginning around 1984, and the decline in CINC score is less steep from about 1975 onward. In other words, the period in which Britain’s decline in its CINC score is most pronounced is between 1950 and 1975, which is inversely related to the frequency of declinist speech, which rises as relative decline seems to grind to a halt. In other words, the period in which Britain’s decline in its CINC score is most pronounced is between 1950 and 1975, which is inversely related to the frequency of declinist speech, which rises as relative decline seems to grind to a halt.

Discussion

Declinism, in the United Kingdom, does not track objective measures of decline. The rate of relative British decline in the twentieth century has not been consistent; the decline has been marked by more rapid periods of relative decline than others. Declinism peaks in the 1980s, after Britain’s relative decline vis-à-vis other OECD countries (largely) halts according to these traditional metrics as well as Crafts’ analysis. Declinism was comparatively low from 1950-1975, but decline, as measured by a Britain’s CINC score, was falling quite substantially during that period. Similarly, Britain’s share of GDP

51 Debs and Monteiro 2014, 5.
per capita decreased more sharply during the period in which observed declinism is lower. Overall, these figures show that my measure of declinism is not a simple response to Britain’s relative decline.

It may be the case that declinism lags behind these common metrics of decline. As Haynes (2015, 494) notes, “prior work has shown that policymakers often respond to shifts in relative power only belatedly and incompletely.”52 One may look at the declinism data alongside Britain’s steady decline in the 1950s and 1960s and, understandably, respond that the late 1970s represents a nadir of British decline, and therefore British declinism became rampant during that time. This is an important possibility, but the data requires the lag to be far too long. Most realist accounts treat decline as either immediately knowable or close to immediately knowable (within, say, five years). However, the steepest decline takes place over the course of twenty or so years, and we do not see markedly different levels of declinism in that period; there is not a growth in declinism as Britain’s relative decline is most obvious.

Moreover, historical evidence points to British parties recognizing decline behind the scenes yet choosing not to make a political issue of it. In other words, in this case it was not the case that British leaders only realized their decline in the late 1970s. To the contrary, both the Labour and Conservative Parties chose not to run campaigns on the theme of international decline. Both parties campaigned in the 1974 General Election on stability and growth. Neither party leader was an ostrich with their head in the sand, incapable of recognizing arguments about Britain’s decline. Internally, both parties

considered the prospect of evoking Britain’s decline, but both parties decided against it. A lagged response alternative explanation to the mismatch between decline and declinism still assumes that the evocation of decline emerges as decline is recognized.

In conclusion, both Britain’s share of GDP and CINC scores point to sharper declines during the 1950s and 1960s relative to the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, my measures of declinism point in the opposite direction: relatively less talk of decline occurred when Britain’s decline was steepest, and far more talk of decline once Britain’s relative decline ground to a halt. These measures, GDP and CINC, versus my declinism measures, tell different stories of the British experience of relative decline.

In this section, I have illustrated, in the case of the United Kingdom, that such narratives do not correlate with the metrics of decline scholars commonly use to assess a state’s international position. The same can be said of the United States, to which I turn next.

VI. Measuring Declinism in the United States - Introduction

Many commentators have noted, with varying degrees of puzzlement, acceptance, or frustration, that Americans and their leaders go through bouts of declinism (Huntington 1988; Joffe 2014). As one commentator notes about American declinism, “the volume and diversity of [declinist] literature is enough to suggest the whole country

---

would be wise to get hooked on Prozac.”\textsuperscript{54} Josef Joffe argues that “[talk of] “Decline” is as American as apple pie.”\textsuperscript{55} Yet, talk of America’s decline is not nearly as consistent as Americans’ love of apple pie. Declinists par excellence in the United States have forewarned of America’s decline, even on the eve of America’s unipolar moment.\textsuperscript{56} Or, as another example, then-candidate for President John F. Kennedy pushed a narrative of American decline in his race to the White House in 1960, despite the so-called ‘missile gap’ being nonexistent.\textsuperscript{57}

My goal in this section is to understand how declinism varies in its frequency over time, and in a manner, which does not neatly mirror conventional metrics of decline offered by scholars of international relations. The latter proposition, that American declinism does not match American decline, is on the one hand an easy argument to make: the United States has not experienced an ordinal shift in its relative ranking of great powers, whether measured by the size of its economy its military preponderance during the time period I examine in this chapter.\textsuperscript{58} Therefore, any declinism is somewhat puzzling. However, there have been times when, relative to its past self, the United States has been stronger. This makes interrogating the (mis)match between decline and declinism an important empirical undertaking before explaining American declinism.

The main conclusions I draw from this analysis are as follows. First, with respect to campaign speech, John F. Kennedy (1960) evoked the notion that America is/was in

\textsuperscript{55} Joffe (2010)
\textsuperscript{56} Friedberg 2010; Kennedy 1989; Kennedy 2002.
\textsuperscript{57} Preble 2004; Joffe 2013.
\textsuperscript{58} On measuring national power, see Beckley 2018.
decline more than any other presidential candidate. While Kennedy was the most
delinist, Stevenson (1956) and Reagan (1980) both campaigned—at least in part—on a
message of American decline as well. Reagan (1984) and George H.W. Bush (1988) were
both candidates who rejected decline. Second, in terms of presidential speech, presidents,
while in office, are most often anti-declinists. As incumbents, they seem to find it
difficult to evoke the notion of American decline, lest they are assumed responsible for
such decline. In particular, the data show that Reagan spoke a great deal about American
decline as something that he lifted America out of, while George H.W. Bush was
preoccupied with rejecting Clinton’s argument that America was in decline. Finally,
dictionary-based text analyses of the New York Times and the Congressional Record point
to the late 1970s—particularly 1979—as being a period of high declinism. Moreover,
there is evidence that the 1950s was a period of high declinism in the Congressional
Record as well.

I next describe how I measure declinism in presidential campaign material
(speeches, ads, and debates) and present the results from that analysis. I then do the same
for presidential speech, text the congressional record, and the New York Times. Next, I
have a discussion of case selection based upon the findings across these different sources
before examining objectivist measures of American power and decline, as I did for the
British case above.

VII. Measuring Declinism in the United States

In this section, I first review presidential campaign data (speeches,
advertisements, and debate data), before moving to presidential speech and congressional
speech to measure declinism in the United States. Finally, I examine newspaper data from the *New York Times*.

**Presidential Campaign Speech, Ad, and Debate Data**

The Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse\(^59\) includes data from 21 campaigns over 12 elections from 1952 to 1996.\(^60\) The archive provides every available speech, television ad, and debate from September 1 of that year to the date of the election.

Using the archive’s search function, I searched for every speech, debate, and television advertisement that included the term declin*.\(^61\) After compiling these documents, I extracted the keyword (declin*) in its context and coded the key words in context for (1) relevance and (2) whether the relevant words were accepting of decline (declinist) or whether they were rejecting or pushing back against declinist arguments (anti-declinist).\(^62\) An example of a relevant declinist passage is then-candidate John F. Kennedy in 1960 on the campaign trail: “I have made the charge in this campaign that our prestige has been declining, and our prestige is important, because it involves the question of whether other countries will follow our leadership…” An example of a

---


\(^{60}\) I thank Sean Burns (University of Minnesota, LATIS) for his assistance accessing this digital archive of documents from a CD-ROM created in 2000 using Windows XP. Speeches from 1964 Goldwater-Miller Campaign unavailable. For other uses of this dataset, see Bonikowski and Gidron 2016.

\(^{61}\) This includes words such as “declined,” “declining,” “declines,” and “decline.”

\(^{62}\) Due to the size of the spreadsheet, I have not reproduced the coded segments here. However, they are available [at this link](#).
relevant ‘anti-declinist’ passage is George H.W. Bush, in a familiar refrain in 1992, who critiqued Clinton’s declinism: “But the biggest difference I have is they go around trying to win by saying that America is in decline. They say that we're less than Germany -- this is their words, or Clinton's words -- less than Germany, but a little above Sri Lanka. They ought to open their eyes. We are the most respected nation on the face of the Earth.”

These speeches are important evidence for when decline is a topic of national discourse, even if the presidential candidate or president is rejecting, rather than accepting, the notion of decline. I code for such nuances in my dataset.

Figure 5 presents the number of speeches that include a declinist message or outright reject declinist messages in the campaign data. What becomes immediately clear, based on the campaign speech, is that then-candidate John F. Kennedy evoked decline—i.e., advanced declinist messages—more than any other candidate in the dataset. In 28 speeches, Kennedy draws upon the notion of American decline. Moreover, the Figure 1 is staggering in the extent to which Reagan evoked the end of decline during his reelection campaign (27 speeches) and George H. W. Bush pushed back against declinism during his reelection campaign (68 speeches).

However, presidential candidates do not give the same number of speeches during a campaign cycle. Therefore, in Figure 6, I weight the number of speeches which contain declinism (or reject declinism) by the candidate’s total speech count to get an idea of how

---

64 While I have collected data based on every utterance of decline, these figures concern the number of speeches. I do not include in these figures candidates with no relevant speeches related to declinism (accepting or rejecting declinism).
many speeches, relative to the total number of speeches they gave from September 1 to election day, which could be called declinist (or anti declinist). By weighting the speeches by total speech count, the extent to which Kennedy is the extreme declinist in the data diminishes. Both JFK (1960) and Reagan (1980) were declinists, as indeed, was Stevenson, each devoting between 7 and 10 percent of their speeches to the theme. The extent to which Reagan (1984 reelection) and George H. W. Bush, during their respective campaigns, rejected declinism remains impressive after weighting the number of speeches they gave, rejecting the notion of American decline in 25 percent and 54 percent of their speeches, respectively.

Figure 5: Number of Speeches Mentioning Decline (Presidential Campaign Speech Data)
In addition to presidential speech, the Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse data includes two advertisements from the Reagan campaigns that are relevant for measuring declinism: one 1980 advertisement that is declinist, and one 1984 advertisement that triumphantly suggests decline is a thing of the past. Reagan’s campaign in 1980 included the following advertisement, which asserts America has lost its international stature and has declined:

Figure 6: Percent of Speeches Mentioning Decline
(Presidential Campaign Speech Data)
This is a man whose time has come, a man whose principles have been familiar to Americans for 30 years, a man whose accomplishments make him the natural choice for president of the United States, a man who believes that the decline of America must be halted and can be halted, a man who rejects the concept of lowered expectations because he believes in the boundless opportunities of the American idea, a man who has prepared himself for strong, creative leadership. Through all the years, the outstanding characteristic of Ronald Reagan has been confidence, confidence in the triumph of the principles he has consistently defended throughout his personal and political life. This is the man who believes our nation can regain the stature it has lost in the eyes of the world. This is the man who understands the principles that make America great. Above all he believes in America and the kind of strong creative leadership that can restore our faith in the future. He calls not for retreat into the past but for a confident advance into the future. The day Ronald Reagan takes office as president of the United States will be the day when America comes together for a new beginning.65

An advertisement during Reagan’s 1984 reelection campaign again evoked the theme of American decline:

My fellow Americans, I'd like to speak to you about the choice you'll be asked to make this November 6th, election day. I believe it's the clearest choice in 50 years on what direction our country should take for your future and America's. We've made a new beginning but there's more to be done. And now we're being asked to choose. Will we go forward with the courage, common sense and new spirit making America strong again, giving us new opportunities and offering, I think, the best hope for all? Or will we turn back to policies of high taxing and spending that weakened our economy, reduced opportunities and brought hardship to so many? [...] An opportunity society for America is our vision and our challenge, but not my opponent’s. His policies would take us off the new path of an opportunity society and put us back in the old path of defeatism, decline and despair.66

Finally, the Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse data includes presidential debates between 1952 and 1996 that are relevant to measuring declinism. I supplement these presidential debate transcripts with those from the

65 1980 Ronald Reagan Ad Cite. Presidential campaign archive. See video here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=np1ow0_Ay88
American Presidency Project. My analysis of the debate transcripts yields two main findings. First, two debates between Nixon and Kennedy during the 1960 presidential campaign prominently featured questions about American decline. Second, during the 2011/2012 Republican presidential primaries, then-presidential candidate Mitt Romney evoked the decline that President Barack Obama purportedly brought about in numerous debates.

In sum, my analysis of the Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse data suggests that, at least during the campaigns (beginning September 1, ending on election day), that John F. Kennedy (1960) evoked the notion that America is/was in decline more than any other presidential candidate. While Kennedy was the most declinist, Stevenson (1956) and Reagan (1980) both campaigned—at least in part—on a message of American decline as well. Reagan (1984) and George H.W. Bush (1988) were both candidates who rejected decline.

Presidential Speech Data

Using data made available by the American Presidency Project, I searched for every mention of declin* in presidential speech. I examined these mentions of declin* in their context and created a database of presidential speech that was directly relevant to the question of American decline. This produces 317 speeches that are relevant to American decline.

---

68 While other debates mentioned decline, they were either (1) fringe “undercard” debates; (2) made by fringe candidates; (3) not substantial enough in number or relevance to the overall debate to include.
69 This includes words such as “declined,” “declining,” “declines,” and “decline.”
These text data provide both qualitative and quantitative evidence in tracking declinism over time. First, the speech counts capture when ‘decline is on the mind’ longitudinally. Second, if I only focused on campaign rhetoric, it would be equivalent to “selecting on the evidence” if declinism did not have an electoral logic underpinning its use. In other words, in order to assess whether declinism has an instrumental logic, it is important to examine campaign speech. However, examining this language in isolation would miss other settings in which declinism may arise in political speech.

Presidents in this dataset sometimes evoke the notion that the country is in decline. Sometimes they reject the notion that the country is in decline outright. For example, Gerald Ford in 1976: “We hear some talk these days about America being in a state of decline. We hear that America's best days are behind us. We hear that America is only a second-rate power in the world today. Frankly, I am tired of hearing those who would run down America.” Others critique their opposition for evoking decline. For example, George H.W. Bush, in a familiar refrain in 1992, critiqued Clinton’s declinism: “But the biggest difference I have is they go around trying to win by saying that America is in decline. They say that we're less than Germany -- this is their words, or Clinton's words -- less than Germany, but a little above Sri Lanka. They ought to open their eyes. We are the most respected nation on the face of the Earth.” Presidents can also neither evoke the notion that the country is in decline or that it is not in decline, but make the

---

point that the nation was in decline before they showed up on the scene. These speeches are important evidence for when decline is a topic of national discourse, even if the president is rejecting, rather than accepting, the notion of decline, or is evoking past periods of decline as a warning. I hand code for such nuances in my dataset.

The bar graph below (Figure 7) presents the number of speeches by president that references American decline, color-coded by whether the President is accepting decline ("we are in decline"), whether they are rejecting decline ("anyone who tells you we are in decline does not know what they’re talking about!") or is looking back on decline ("only a few years ago we were in the grips of some serious decline and despair, until I showed up"). It becomes evident that the top three presidents that referenced American decline are Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Barack Obama. It is important to note, however, that these results do not mean that these presidents are declinists, as the color-coding indicates. George H.W. Bush and Obama’s speeches that reference decline most often reject decline. Reagan’s speeches can be characterized as “looking back” on American decline, warning of the dangers of going back to right before he was president during the Carter Administration. These speeches are largely geared toward advancing his political agenda, supporting political allies during midterm elections, and securing his second term.

**Figure 7: Number of Speeches Mentioning Decline by Type**

*(Presidential Speech Data)*
The presidential speech database I constructed points to a few familiar patterns that validate parts of my *New York Times* and Congressional Record data. In particular, three trends emerge. First, 60% of speeches that mention decline take place during the year of a national election, which represents only a quarter of the years in my dataset. Moreover, 73% of presidential speeches that mention American decline occur in even-numbered years, where there is either a presidential election or midterm election. This provides evidence for my claim that declinist rhetoric is based around the politics of elections and the opposition, something I address in fuller detail in Chapter 3.

The second trend further exemplifies the instrumental logic of my theory presented in Chapter 3. Presidents Ford and George H.W. Bush reject declinism outright. These administrations follow administrations that are of the same party (Nixon and Reagan respectively). Therefore, it is difficult to evoke the notion of American decline, except to reject it.
The third trend that emerges and is in line with my quantitative data presented below, is that the 1979/1980 period is constantly referred to by Ronald Regan throughout his eight years as president as a period of darkness and decline. For example, in a speech in 1982, Reagan took a trip down memory lane: “Will you forgive me if I offer some reminders? In the years prior to the 1980 election, our economy was on the skids, our people were demoralized. Indeed, a voice from the White House told them they suffered a malaise. Overseas, our friends and allies alike saw us as a nation in decline.”

Reagan campaigned in 1980, 1982 (for Republican allies), and 1984 by evoking decline and critiquing Carter.

In sum, the data from the American Presidency Project suggest—in terms of presidential speech—that presidents, while in office, are most often anti-declinists. As incumbents, they seem to find it difficult to evoke the notion of American decline, lest they are assumed responsible for such decline. In particular, the data show that Reagan spoke a great deal about American decline as something that he lifted America out of, while George H.W. Bush was preoccupied with rejecting Clinton’s argument that America was in decline.

**Congressional Record Data**

---

Using data made available by Gentzkow et al., I extract every mention of declin* from each bound edition of the congressional record from 1949-2011. I use the R package quanted to generate the key words in context for each mention of decline during these periods. There are 92,257 total utterances of declin* in the congressional record bound edition from 1949-2011. The natural time unit, based on the availability of digitized congressional records, is the congressional session rather than the year. This means that each point in Figures 8-9 spans two years of congressional speech, whereas my other data from presidential and newspaper sources are yearly counts. I weight these results by the total number of phrases in each session.

As I note throughout this chapter, it is likely the case that “declin*” picks up topics that are irrelevant to my focus on declinism. I therefore refine the measure using dictionary-based methods to focus on discussions of decline with an international dimension. To do this, I draw upon words that should appear alongside decline in my corpus (within nine words on either side of the term declin*). Table 3 below outlines these dictionary terms and their frequency alongside the term declin* in my corpus. Below, I provide findings based on both the general measure of declinism and the refined dictionary analysis. While there are 92,257 total utterances of declin* in the congressional record bound edition from 1949-2011, there are 15,400 utterances of declin* alongside words-of-interest in my refined dictionary. In other words, my refined dictionary-based method isolates 17% of the total mentions of declin* in the congressional record.

73 See Gentzkow, Shapiro, and Taddy, 2016.
74 Data on words/session provided by Gentzkow et al., 2016.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Frequency alongside “declin*”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>competitive*</td>
<td>932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foreign</td>
<td>2184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>global*</td>
<td>317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>influence</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>international*</td>
<td>1153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>position</td>
<td>1003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>power*</td>
<td>2303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prestige</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>share</td>
<td>1822</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>standing</td>
<td>932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>status</td>
<td>351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strength</td>
<td>669</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>world</td>
<td>4027</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 8: Mentions of Declin* in the Congressional Record (Weighted)

Figure 9: Refined Dictionary of Declinism in the Congressional Record (Weighted)
The graphs above show the crude measure of declinism in the Congressional Record, similar to the United Kingdom measure I produced earlier in this chapter as well as weighted by the number of phrases per session. By weighting by the overall number of terms per session, we can get a sense of the relative usage of the terms over time. If more or less words than average were uttered in Congress in a given year, the weighted measure takes that into account. The average number of mentions of “declin*” in the Congressional Record per session is 2,976. The 1979-1980 session saw a spike in the Congressional Record data to 5,273, 1.77 times the average and 1.28 times the number of mentions in the 1977-78 session. This spike holds when weighting the counts by the number of phrases per session (Figure 9).

The average number of mentions of “declin*” in the Congressional Record per session, based on the refined dictionary is 497 mentions per session. The 1979-1980 session saw a spike in the Congressional Record data to 1,188, 2.4 times the average and 1.56 times the number of mentions in the 1977-78 session, and 2.5 times the number of mentions in the following session (1981-1982). The refined dictionary (weighted) paints a similar picture as the weighted overall refined dictionary graph: a curved peak in the 1950s and a spike in the late 1970s.

In sum, the weighted declin* and revised dictionary data from the Congressional Record suggest the late 1970s—particularly 1979—as being a period of high declinism. Moreover, there is evidence that the 1950s was a period of high declinism in the Congressional Record as well.
Declinism: New York Times Data

Coding congressional and presidential speech for declinism has its drawbacks. While they are stable bodies of speech, they represent only one aspect of American politics and discourse. Declinism resides in many places in political and social life. As Krebs notes, “…one cannot ascertain whether a public narrative is dominant by looking to only a single source, such as official government pronouncements, since that narrative may not be shared…”\textsuperscript{75} I therefore examine the New York Times as a potential other venue in which declinism emerges and triangulate the newspaper searches with the congressional and presidential searches. The New York Times has, throughout the decades, been “tightly tied to the national establishment” and “was the only newspaper that elites truly felt compelled to read.”\textsuperscript{76} If declinism is running rampant, we should be able to observe such dynamics in the New York Times. Moreover, as the nation’s elite newspaper, prominent academic arguments regarding may be captured in this setting.

First, using the New York Times API,\textsuperscript{77} I extract yearly counts of mentions of “decline” in the article body, headline, and byline of every New York Times article from 1946 to 2017. My unit of analysis is the number of articles. The available data do not allow me to weight the count of articles each year by the total number of articles the Times publishes. There are 524,007 mentions of ‘decline’ in the New York Times from 1946 to 2017.

\textsuperscript{75} Krebs 2015, 95.
\textsuperscript{76} Krebs 2015, 198.
It may be the case that “declin*” is simply too crude of a measure to use to measure declinism. I therefore narrow-in on words that should appear alongside and that may be more specifically related to my concept of declinism in order to check the general trend with more refined trends.78

The average number of mentions of “declin*” in the New York Times per year is 7,278 mentions per year. 1980 saw a spike in the New York Times data to 11,487, 1.57 times the average and 1.70 times the number of mentions in 1979. With respect to the bigram data, there are significant spikes in the “international decline,” “economic decline,” “relative decline,” “absolute decline,” and “American decline” in 1980 as well. We see a similar peak in 2009. 2008 saw a spike in the New York Times data to 12,763, 1.75 times the average. However, unlike the spike in 1980, there are several years which are well above the average in the New York Times data. The years from 2007-2012 average 11,704, 1.6 times the average.

Figure 10: Mentions of “decline” in the New York Times, by Year

Table 2 in Appendix 1 lists these bigrams and their overall counts in the newspaper.
In sum, the data from the New York Times suggest a real spike in 1979, similar to the Congressional Record data. There is a second bump in around 2008, coinciding with the financial crisis.

The Big Picture: Assessing the Validity of my Measure(s)

Conventional wisdom regarding American declinism suggest that declinism comes in waves. Josef Joffe, for example, argues that “doomsaying comes in cycles, and has done so since the birth of the Republic.” 79 While this may indeed be true, my data point to varying degrees of declinism. With respect to the 1970s, these findings accord with impressionistic accounts such as Cox (2001), Strange (1987 & 1988), and Zanchetta (2015), who all note that declinism was rampant during this period. With respect to the second major peak in declinism, impressionistic accounts also point to a bout of declinism during, and after, the crisis. Robert Kagan, Aaron Friedberg, and Stephen Walt all write about fears of American decline since 2008. Similarly, MacDonald and Parent argue that “since 2008, there has been vigorous argument about whether the United States is in decline.” 80 In an op-ed in 2009, Charles Krauthammer lamented the resurgence of declinism: “The weathervanes of conventional wisdom are engaged in another round of angst about America in decline,” Krauthammer argued, and went on to note that “for America today, decline is not a condition. Decline is a choice. Two decades into the unipolar world that came about with the fall of the Soviet Union, America is in the

79 Joffe 2013.
80 MacDonald and Parent 2018, 11.
position of deciding whether to abdicate or retain its dominance. Decline—or continued ascendency—is in our hands.”81

Moreover, we see dips in declinism during periods in which we would least expect declinism. For example, during the United States’ “unipolar moment” after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, mentions of declin* in the Congressional Record, as well as in the New York Times—in both broad-based measures and in the bigram data—do not appear frequently compared to other decades. However, this does not suggest that my measure of declinism undercuts my overarching claim that decline and declinism often do not match up. First, the proposition that American declinism does not match American decline, is somewhat of an easy argument to make in the sense that the United States has not experienced an ordinal shift in its relative ranking of great powers, whether measured by the size of its economy its military preponderance during the time period I examine in this chapter. Therefore, any declinism is somewhat puzzling. Second, it would be worrying, from a validation standpoint, to be completely surprised by the results. That would suggest that there is a great deal of noise in the measure, impressionistic accounts are entirely off-base, and/or that the measure lacks validity.

All of this suggests that my measure of declinism is picking up on something valid about declinism in the United States: my measures of declinism are not entirely surprising from the perspective of impressionistic accounts of declinism. However, my measures of declinism in the different venues provides additional leverage that impressionistic analyses cannot provide. I am able to say something about the extent of

81 Krauthammer 2009.
declinism in these periods, weighing, for example, the late-1970s as ‘more declinist’ according to these measures than, say, around 1960, which impressionistic accounts also point to as a period of declinism.

VIII. Decline and Declinism in the US

How does declinism map on to traditional measures of decline? Does rhetoric match reality? Most broadly, the US has, since becoming a major power, declined little over its history, at least according to conventional measures utilized by political scientists. According to MacDonald and Parent’s data on acute relative decline, the United States has never undergone a period in which it has declined long enough, and sharply enough, to make its way into their universe of cases of periods of acute relative decline.82 The United States, once classified as a major power in the Correlates of War Major Powers dataset, never “exits” the dataset, even temporarily.83 The United States remains, in terms of its ordinal position with respect to ‘great power GDP,’ number one.

Of course, this is not to say that the United States has never experienced some form of decline, setback, etc., that would make any amount of declinism unexpected or overblown. For example, looking at the United States’ global share of GDP per capita and CINC scores, it becomes clear that the United States has commanded different shares on these metrics throughout the past century or so. Carsten Rauch (2017, 655) demonstrates, and I replicate below, that “between 1971 and 1988, the highest CINC

82 MacDonald and Parent 2011, appendix.
score was held by the Soviet Union.” This paints a different picture of the postwar era than a state’s relative share of GDP per capita. However, how obvious, or substantively different, some of the smaller ups and downs are is questionable.

As I noted in the UK case, there are two main conceptualizations and operationalizations of power in Power Transition Theory (PTT): (1) a major power’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and (2) its Composite Index of National Capability Score (CINC), both of which are measured relative to other great powers. In parallel to the British case, I use these two measures as well as a measure created by Michael Beckley (GDP x GDP per capita), to assess the objectivist measure of decline and track these measures against my measure of American declinism.

I begin this section by outlining the United States’ position with respect to economic data (including the Beckley measure) before turning to the United States’ CINC score. My goal in this section of the chapter is not to provide a fine-grained, nuanced picture of the United States’ economic history since WWII. Rather, my goal in this section is to assess typical measures used to pinpoint moments of great power decline, and to then align these measures with my measures of declinism in the United States.

In terms of Gross Domestic Product, the United States has remained number one throughout the postwar period, as indicated in Figure 11 below. However, scholars have noted that GDP alone is a problematic metric to measure power. For example, Michael Beckley critiques the use of GDP alone, or the use of CINC, because, Beckley argues, “these indicators systematically exaggerate the wealth and military capabilities of poor, populous countries, because they tally countries’ resources without deducting the costs countries pay to police, protect, and serve their people. A country with a big population might produce vast output and field a large army, but it also may bear massive welfare and security burdens that drain its wealth and bog down its military, leaving
conventional measures of decline, this measure is perhaps most important, and is used in major studies that attempt to measure decline—and states’ responses to decline—over time. There was a steady decline in the US’s percentage of great power GDP from 1945 to 1958 in this series, a decline of about seventeen percentage points (58% in 1945 to 41% in 1958). From the late 1950s through the 1990s, the United States’ share of great power GDP has remained by and large fairly constant. The average US share of great power GDP in the 1960s was 41.1%, while the average US share of great power GDP in the 1970s was 38.4%, a difference of about three percentage points, and a trend that would remain constant through the 1990s. In other words, at least according to this metric of decline, the US (1) remained top dog throughout the period from 1945-2005 and (2) the US share of great power GDP has largely remained constant, with the exception of postwar adjustments from 1945-1958.

---

it with few resources for power projection abroad” Beckley 2018, 9. Therefore, Beckley proposes a new measure of measuring power that takes into account the net resources available to states rather than gross resources. This indicator is measured simply as GDP x GDP per capita. As Figure 15 in Appendix 1 shows, I reproduce Beckley’s measure for the period of 1946-2006 in a relative sense between major powers. The overall trends vis-à-vis a great power’s share of GDP remain largely the same, so I focus on this measure in the main text.
According to Figure 12 below, the US share of great power GDP declined most sharply—and deeply—early on in the series, between 1945 and 1958, as I described above. My measure of declinism is represented in blue in Figure 12. Figure 12 shows that there is no neat correlation between decline and declinism in this comparison. We do see a peak during the steepest decline early on in the series, but also see a peak when the

---

86 GDP in 1990 Int. GKS. GDP data from MacDonald and Parent 2011; 2018. Thanks to the authors for sharing their data.
decline bottoms out. We see similar trends in Figure 13 with respect to the US CINC score. Moreover, as Figure 14 shows, the two main periods of declinism I identified above, JFK and Reagan’s declinism during their 1960 and 1980 election campaigns, both show that, at least with respect to US share of great power GDP, their declinism came when decline was relatively flat in substantive terms.
Figure 12: The Mismatch between Decline (as GDP share) and Declinism (Normalized)

Min-max scaled y-axis. Declinism measure from Figure 8, which is the congressional dictionary (for refined dictionary, which looks largely the same, see Figure 9). The Congressional Record measure contains information from each session of congress, which contains two calendar years.

Figure 13: The Mismatch between Decline (as CINC) and Declinism (Normalized)

Min-max scaled y-axis. Declinism measure from Figure 8, which is the congressional. The Congressional Record measure contains information from each session of congress, which contains two calendar years.
Economic indicators are not the only way in which scholars assess whether a country is declining vis-à-vis its peers. While economic power certainly can carry over into other important domains (e.g. military power), GDP is only one part of a larger story. The “Composite Index of National Capability” (CINC) is another popular—if controversial—measure to gauge a state’s relative power that considers more than economic performance.\(^8^9\) CINC scores are based upon industrial, military, and demographic measures. The CINC score accounts for a state’s total population, urban population, iron and steel production, energy consumption, military personnel, and military expenditure in a measure composed of averages of percentages of world totals. The United States’ postwar CINC score certainly declines, from about 0.37 in 1946 to

\(^{8^9}\) Version 5.0. Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey 1972.
about .15 for much of the latter half of the twentieth century. Again, some of this postwar decline was inevitable, as the US scaled back in terms of the size of its military and as China’s iron/steel production meteorically rose, key components of the CINC score. This drives home Beckley’s point about gross resources versus power. From around 1973 to 1987, the USSR was ranked #1 in terms of its CINC score, before the collapse of the USSR. China surpasses the United States with respect to the CINC score in 1998.

As I note in earlier in this chapter, is important to note that there is messiness in the CINC measure, especially treating it as an indicator of decline. Power does not equal prestige, and it is not clear that these components are always equally salient to leaders (e.g. military expenditure vs. urban population vs. iron/steel production and—in the case of China—iron/steel dumping). Yet, scholars who study historical power transitions often use a nation’s CINC score. Therefore, it is an important measure to consider when assessing the United States’ relative position in the world, albeit a flawed one.
In short, the relative share of GDP per capita measure and the Beckley power measure versus the CINC score paint two different pictures of US power in the second half of the twentieth century. The GDP rankings show no power transitions taking place from 1946-2000, whereas the CINC score shows four power transitions taking place. This discrepancy, despite GDP and CINC scores being relatively well-correlated with one another broadly, points to the difficulty of measuring national power and capability; depending on which measures one chooses to use, there are different stories to be told. The United States case represents a different context from which to examine declinism.

---

Figure 15: US Composite Index of National Capability Scores Relative to Peers

---

90 See also: Rauch 2017.
While the British case is one of decline—albeit one that varies over time, with different degrees of intensity—the United States, by and large, represents a major power that has yet to decline relative to other major powers.

IX. Conclusion

International relations theorists and scholars of international decline should pay attention to declinism in considering the relationship between metrics of decline and the consequences of international decline. It would be a mistake to assume that measures of power in international relations, such as gross domestic product (GDP) or Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) scores, correlate closely with domestic political attention to international decline. If leaders, and their oppositions, do not see decline as a major issue, or cannot agree that decline is occurring, then the mechanisms through which decline impacts policies should be questioned. Policies to stem decline, from preventive war to retrenchment, require, to some extent, domestic legitimation. We should, therefore, expect metrics of decline to correlate closely with declinism. This chapter finds otherwise: decline and declinism do not move in lockstep. Moreover, there are periods in which ‘decline is on the mind’ of politicians, yet common metrics of decline tell us that decline is not occurring. Such periods, in which decline is—at least according to metrics of power typically used in IR—mis-recognized by governments and their oppositions, are missed by scholars. My next task is, therefore, to explain when declinism becomes a live issue in great powers. It is to this question that I turn next.
Chapter 3

The Politics of Declinism

“The idea of our decline is emotionally magnetic, because life is a long slide down, and the plateau just passed is easier to love than the one coming up.”
-Adam Gopnik

“I tell you, things ain't what they used to be.”
-Duke Ellington

I. Introduction

When, and why, do narratives of decline emerge and become dominant in great powers? Why does the belief that the country is heading towards decline, or that decline is already on the doorstep, arise in national discourse? What are the policy consequences of declinist narratives? As narratives of decline become dominant, what policies are advanced in the name of reversing the country’s international decline?

In this chapter, I argue that, counter to conventional wisdom, decline becomes an issue in the domestic politics of great powers largely for domestic political reasons rather than as the result of states, and their leaders, assessing objective international decline. As Chapter 2 demonstrates, in the context of the United Kingdom and the United States, there is no neat correlation between decline and declinism. This chapter builds upon this puzzle and provides a theory of declinism’s emergence and the consequences of declinist narratives.


For other conceptualizations and definitions of decline and declinism, see English and Kenny 1996.
Why, then, does declinism arise in national discourse, if it is seemingly independent of ‘actually-occurring’ decline? I first argue that declinism emerges and resonates because declinism sparks a “negativity bias” in political discourse and in the political psychology of audiences. In short, the “negativity bias” suggests that negative information is weighted more heavily, believed more often, and is “stickier” than positive information. Drawing upon recent applications of this psychological finding to international relations, I argue that the “negativity bias” helps explain why declinism seems to win in political debate, as well as explain why declinism seems to correspond so heavily with expansionist foreign policies and grand strategic visions. However, negativity bias alone cannot explain declinism, because the negativity bias is a constant. In other words, the negativity bias cannot explain variation in the prevalence of narratives of international decline over time. What then explains why declinism is more prominent in some periods and not in others?

In addition to the predictions emerging from psychology regarding the negativity bias, I argue that declinism is more likely to emerge from the opposition in national politics. Oppositions have an incentive to claim that the country is in decline as a result of the incumbent government’s failed policy choices, and this provides an opportunity for the opposition to paint their policies as policies of national renewal.

Moreover, I argue that particular kinds of actors—brokers—are able to bridge political networks and advance a message of decline. The impetus for declinist rhetoric comes from a perceived need to break from the past and establish a new set of policies. It

93 Johnson and Tierney 2018.
emerges as a result of the political desire to undo the status quo rather than out of a need to tinker with policies at the margins. Therefore, I argue that declinism is more likely to be associated with “brokers,” or actors who are able to use their positions and access within parties, in the sense that they have access to traditional party apparatuses, and outsiders, who appeal to voters, parties, and organizations/movements who are otherwise unconnected. Such brokers present themselves to the public as outsiders or newcomers to politics (whether such characterizations are true), and thus can blame the establishment and past actions of not only the incumbent but also members of their own party. These two components—the opposition-based component and the brokerage component—explain why narratives of decline emerge in some periods and not others.

Finally, in this chapter I discuss the consequences of declinism for policy. Dominant declinist narratives have important implications for policy: such narratives often sustain policies of global expansion to save face, regain lost glory, and reverse decline. In addition to explaining why declinist narratives emerge, it is also important to explain the policy consequences of declinist narratives, because the consequences of declinist narratives motivate why we should care about declinism in the domestic discourses of great powers. I show how different narratives of decline prescribe different polices or behaviors for overcoming decline. In particular, I identify two main dimensions of declinist narratives: (1) the policy domain where the problem lies (domestic/foreign) and (2) the reason why the nation is said to have declined (done too

94 This does not, however, mean that all newcomers or outsiders must engage in declinist rhetoric. My theory, in this respect, is probabilistic, not deterministic: newcomers/outsiders are more likely to adopt declinism than established politicians in the mainstream of the party.
much/done too little). Narratives of decline posit why decline has happened, and what is to be done to overcome decline. These two dimensions produce four important kinds of narratives: (1) domestic overextension narratives (which prescribe policies like cutting spending and reducing regulation), (2) international overextension narratives (which prescribe policies such as policies of retrenchment and decreases in military spending), (3) domestic decay narratives (which prescribe policies like strategic investment in the nation’s infrastructure, education, and health), and (4) international re-exertion narratives (which prescribe policies from increased spending on the military to preventive war).

The chapter proceeds as follows. In Section II, I explain why declinism emerges. In Section III, I unpack the consequences content of declinist narratives and in Section VI, I explain the content of declinist narratives. In Section V, I return to the implications of my argument for IR theory. In Section VI, I discuss how I evaluate this theory in the remaining cases.

II. The Politics of Declinism

Why does declinism emerge? Why do politicians claim that the nation is in decline? Under what conditions does declinism gain traction in the domestic politics of great powers? Why do politicians think that declinism is a winning message, rather than simply a depressing message? In this section, I develop a theory of declinism that stresses the psychological and domestic political reasons for why declinism emerges, explaining who is likely to advance a message of international decline and under what conditions declinism can be used by parties or politicians to advance policies of renewal. I first
explain why declinism might resonate with audiences and the reason why declinism can be a winning message for politicians to deploy: the negativity bias. However, by unpacking the psychology of the negativity bias, it becomes evident that the negativity bias overpredicts declinism by expecting declinism to always arise and always win out in politics, contrary to what I demonstrated in Chapter 2. Negativity bias, therefore, while offering an explanation for why declinism may resonate, cannot fully explain the variation in the emergence of declinism over time. Thus, I move from a broad point about the psychology of the negativity bias and declinism to an instrumental, party-political account, of declinism’s emergence.

*Psychological Origins: Negativity Bias*

Why would declinism resonate with audiences? Why do politicians think that declinism is a winning message, rather than simply a depressing message? Why would declinist narratives, from a political-strategic point of view, work well for oppositions? Why is it seemingly difficult to (convincingly) counter declinist narratives? In this section, I draw upon the well-established finding and principle in psychology called the “negativity bias” in order to help explain the politics of declinism, from why declinism is a winning political message to the difficulty in responding to declinist narratives. I also explain the limitations of the negativity bias as an explanation for declinism, and why relying on the negativity bias alone does not explain declinism’s emergence.

The principle of “negativity bias” is that negative information has a greater impact on people than positive information. Put another way, “bad news consistently exerts a
more powerful influence on thinking and behavior than does good news.” 95 This principle is well-established in the psychological literature (and indeed beyond, from communication to political science)—a trend found both in nonhuman and human animals 96 and even among infants 97—yet, as Johnson and Tierney note, is underexplored in international relations. 98 Negative information is resistant to alternative, positive, information. 99 Negative information is, additionally, more quick to leave an impression than positive information. 100 In short, the psychological literature has found with a profound degree of consistency that, as Baumeister et al. put it, “bad is stronger than good.” 101

Psychologists have gone to great lengths to demonstrate the negativity bias in a variety of contexts. Explanations for the ubiquity of the negativity bias in humans tend to focus on evolutionary factors. There are good reasons why, from an evolutionary perspective, the bias in humans to overweigh negative information is, well, “positive.” In many cases, negative information provides more meaningful—especially from the perspective of survival—information than positive information. A frown in a crowd of smiles signals danger. However, the psychological bias to weigh the bad over the good leaves open the possibility that such biases can be exploited politically. Declinists exploit our psychological bias toward negative information.

96 See Rozin and Royzman 2001.
97 See Hamlin, Wynn, and Bloom 2010.
100 Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs 2001.
As I note throughout this project, declinism is as much a social fact as it is a material fact. Events do not speak for themselves, nor do mounds of statistics or abstract indices of things like ‘national power.’ Declinists often link decline to salient events, telling a story of the nation’s trajectory and position in the international league table of states vis-à-vis these events. These failures, missteps, or negative events play to the strengths of negativity bias. For example, blunders abroad, competitor success, or economic recessions increase what psychologists call “failure salience.” These events are simply more impressionable than successes. As Johnson and Tierney note, an observable implication of negativity bias is that “actors dwell more intensely on memories of failure than on success and learn more from past disasters than from triumphs.” In the political arena, the incentives to dwell on memories of failure are abundant.

Negativity bias creates all sorts of difficulties for those who try and counter declinism with alternative positive evidence of the nation’s international standing, prestige, power, etc.: positive information is less “sticky” and impactful on the minds of the public. The public, upon hearing of triumphs or positive-sounding statistics, takes less away from the information than from hearing about the nation’s shortcomings and the reasons why the statistics tell us everything is not okay. In short, individuals learn less from positivity and more from negativity. Campaigns, and politics more generally, is about communicating a message to the voting public, and to inform them of one’s own

---

102 Krebs 2015, 2.
103 Johnson and Tierney 2017, 117.
104 Boydstun, Ledgerwood, and Sparks 2017.
successes and, especially, other’s failures. This intuition finds supportive evidence in social psychological research. Boydstun et al. argue that “as negative frames can be more powerful than positive frames in shaping people’s judgments, they can also be “stickier” than positive frames, in that they have a stronger tendency to lodge in people’s minds and resist the effects of a subsequently encountered frame.” The authors find that it is quite easy to shift people from thinking about a candidate, party, or issue in terms of positives to negatives, but it is far more difficult to shift the other way, from a negative label/frame to a positive label/frame. In turn, I argue that those fighting against narratives of decline (as I note below, particularly incumbents), facing declinist narratives, face an uphill battle from the start.

This uphill battle is steepened by yet another implication and finding emerging from psychology on the negativity bias, namely that the same information, when presented to individuals with a negative valence, is treated with more veracity than positively-valenced information. In other words, beyond the content of arguments, framing the exact same information as positive or negative has, likewise, a “negativity bias.” As an example, in an experiment in which respondents were presented with one of two frames regarding the world’s ecological health, Hilbig found that respondents were more likely to believe that “Across the world, more than 60% of ecological systems are damaged” than respondents who were presented with the same information, but

---

105 See Geer 2008. For a more nuanced discussion of negativity in campaign advertising, see Motta and Fowler 2016.
106 Boydstun, Ledgerwood, and Sparks 2017, 54.
108 Hilbig 2009. See also Hilbig 2012.
109 Hilbig 2012, 44.
presented positively: “Across the world, up to 40% of ecological systems are intact.” An implication of this research on the negativity bias is that declinist arguments, which are typically framed with a negative valence by their very nature, are seemingly more believable than positive information presented to counter declinist narratives. 

In sum, with respect to declinism’s emergence, negativity bias helps explain the political incentives to ‘go negative’ and claim that the nation is in decline. Negative information elicits a stronger response than positive information. Additionally, negative information is deemed more credible than positive information. It is, therefore, more difficult to counter declinism in politically meaningful ways that are convincing and regains control of the political narrative.

However, as-constructed thus far, negativity bias over-predicts when declinism will arise and resonate. Why, if ‘bad is stronger than good,’ would politicians ever choose not to engage in declinist rhetoric? Negativity bias, in short, can only take us so far. In addition to this psychological substrate which helps declinism resonate—at least among the mass public—several domestic political factors, I argue, limit the possibilities and opportunities for using declinism by just anyone. To move from the negativity bias to an instrumental-political account of why declinism emerges is then to move from a general psychological principle that helps explain why negativity rings louder in one’s ears to the decisions made by political actors to engage in declinism in the first place. I address these next.

---

100 Hilbig 2012, 46. Hilbig notes that these frames were presented to German respondents, in German. These are thus translations.
**Oppositions vs. Incumbents**

Domestic political factors are at the heart of declinism. First, declinism is more likely to emerge from the opposition in national politics. Oppositions have an incentive to claim that the country is in decline as a result of the incumbent government’s failed policy choices, and this provides an opportunity for the opposition to paint their policies as policies of national renewal. In other words, talk of decline is used as a rhetorical bludgeon to beat opposition party policies, identify enemies within from whom to critique or scapegoat, and advocate for ditching former policies and replacing them with policies of national renewal.  

Once declinists are in power, the incentive to use declinist rhetoric for political gain diminishes. While it is still possible, particularly early on, for new leaders to assert that the nation is in decline, their incentive to do so weakens over time, as they begin to “own” the direction of the country and meet the realities of governance. It is therefore more likely that declinists, once in power, turn around and proclaim victory against decline. For example, I observe this dynamic in a number of cases including in Reagan’s 1984 reelection campaign and Thatcher’s proclamation that Britain was no longer a “nation in retreat,” and that “Great Britain is great again.” Another potential avenue for declinists to abandon the rhetoric of decline is if declinists “update” after coming into office and once they have access to information that goes against their belief and rhetoric that the nation is in decline.

---

113 [https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104989](https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104989)
Meanwhile, when faced with declinism, the incumbent finds it difficult to push back against declinist arguments without sounding complacent or defensive. Whether they argue that “you’ve never had it so good” as Harold MacMillan famously did in 1957, or simply assert that the nation is not in decline, as Obama did in 2012 by arguing that “anyone who tells you that America is in decline…doesn’t know what they’re talking about,” incumbents are often drawn into defending their record, and painting the opposition as doomsayers. Incumbents may choose to reject declinism outright: the opposition has their facts wrong or they are misleading the public. Alternatively, incumbents may critique opponents of putting the country down, of not recognizing its strengths, or of engaging in self-fulfilling prophesies. Indeed, we saw this during the 2016 campaign, in which Hillary Clinton and her surrogates claimed “America is already great!” Or, in another example, Nixon respondent to Kennedy’s declinism in the 1960 presidential election by claiming that “America's prestige abroad will be just as high as the spokesmen for America allow it to be.” These responses typify the ways in which incumbent governments can respond to declinism.

Yet, if it is always better to be a Chicken Little than a Pollyanna, or if oppositions are more likely to peddle in declinist rhetoric, why is declinism not a constant and dominant feature of domestic politics? In other words, given that there are always oppositions, why isn’t every opposition politician a declinist all the time? A purely

---

opposition-based account, therefore, also does not explain on its own why declinism emerges, because oppositions, like the negativity bias, are constant—at least in democracies. To explain variation in declinism over time, we need more than a purely opposition-based account of declinism.

**Brokers, Outsiders, and Narratives of Decline**

Because oppositions are a near constant, I argue that declinism emerges from a particular kind of politician: a broker who can advance an image as an outsider or newcomer and build a coalition around their message of decline and renewal. In order for declinism to arise and gain traction, such dynamics of brokerage are required. In their declinism, these brokers stress that the impetus for declinist rhetoric comes from a perceived need to break from the past and establish a new set of policies. Most often, such claims are associated with brokers who characterize themselves as “outsiders” or “newcomers” who are able to maintain a foothold in the traditional party apparatus as well as seek to build coalitions that do not otherwise exist. In this section, I unpack the nature of these brokers whose message is decline and who are able to advance such a message based both on their structural position as well as their self-characterization and narration. I begin by defining brokers and brokerage, before discussing how brokerage helps explain when declinism becomes dominant.

Brokers are, according to Stacie Goddard, “actors who bridge ‘‘structural holes’’” in networks.117 Brokers, by virtue of their structural position, are able to glean the

---

advantages of positions within different networks. Brokers bring together “actors that would otherwise remain unconnected.” Brokers are able to draw on their position as a source of “entrepreneurial power.” Brokers can at once act within the system, as well as operate outside the system because of their unique position. They can, in my telling, both be part of a traditional party like the Republican or Democratic parties in the United States or the Conservative or Labour Parties in the United Kingdom yet also (1) separate themselves from the establishment of the party and (2) bring in other voters, organizations, or movements who are otherwise not connected to the party. Because of this ability to bridge networks vis-à-vis their structural position—but also, as I show throughout the dissertation, the ability to present a “ messianic” message and image to the public—declinist brokers are fundamentally political entrepreneurs.

Declinists have enough institutional (party) support and clout in order to create an intra-party coalition, while also being able to put forward an independent image that contrasts them with what they describe as the consensus or traditional power center of the party. In other words, declinists can straddle the symbolic (as an outsider/newcomer) and the institutional (having the ability to activate and mobilize a coalition).

Declinists, as I show throughout the dissertation, are able to combine different appeals under the umbrella of combatting decline, whether it is diagnosing decline as having economic, military, and moral dimensions (for example), or putting forward policies that can be seen as contradictory or pulling in multiple directions (e.g. Margaret

---

119 Goddard 2018, 771.
120 Goddard 2018, 771.
121 Goddard 2009, 257.
Thatcher’s “free economy and strong state” appeals). This is similar to the concept employed by Stacie Goddard and, in sociology, Padgett and Powell: multivocality. Multivocality is defined as the “tactical capacity of robust-action brokers to sustain multiple attributions of identity through uttering sphinx-like statements that plausibly can be interpreted in multiple ways.” As Goddard notes, “studies of domestic politics, especially in democracies, have stressed the importance of complex and ambiguous appeals. By appealing to multiple principles simultaneously, leaders attempt to forge winning coalitions among domestic coalitions…” Alongside multivocality, brokers may engage in two other kinds of legitimation strategies, according to Goddard: (1) brokers be hypocritical (where, depending on the audience, different messages are advanced) or (2) brokers can engage in synthetic legitimation strategies (where brokers combine symbols and norms). For the purposes of this project, I do not argue that one legitimation strategy or another is more likely to arise from declinist messages. However, in general, because declinists are brokers, they are able to engage in such legitimation strategies to hold together coalitions and bridge political networks.

Declinists, then, in this account, bring together different coalitions through both their position and their rhetoric. I identify two types of coalitions that may be mobilized by declinists: popular coalitions and elite coalitions. Declinists can forge coalitions at the elite level and/or the popular level. Elite-level coalitions can form in academic, policy, or civil society circles. For example, in Chapter 6, I show how the Committee on the Present

---

123 Padgett and Powell 2012, location 977.
124 Goddard 2018, 30. See also Goddard 2009.
125 Goddard 2012, 506.
Danger (the second iteration of the committee) coalesced around the belief that the US was losing to the Soviets and was made up of academics and policymakers alike. These elite coalitions also can have their eye on the public dynamics of their declinism as well. Elites may look to activate constituencies or to sway public opinion. Once/if declinists obtain power, it stands to reason that members of the elite coalition also make their way into positions of power. Popular coalitions can be formed through electoral appeals. As I show in each of my cases, declinists often bring together intra-party coalitions, but also capture the imagination and votes of citizens who typically do not vote for the declinists’ party. One such example is the effort to “jump the class barrier” by the Conservative Party in 1979 and appeal to working-class Britons and appeal to a broader, inter-class, constituency.

In addition to their structural position vis-à-vis parties—which affords them the ability to present themselves as outsiders, “newcomerness” or “outsidership” makes advancing a message of decline easier, for two reasons: such newcomers or outsiders are not beholden to the party’s past performances and they are, by their nature, breathing ‘fresh life’ into politics, something which they often lean upon rhetorically.

First, by portraying themselves as outsiders/newcomers, brokers are, crucially, not beholden to the party’s recent past, and therefore can push back not only against the incumbent, but even against their own party’s decisions when in power to critique the country’s trajectory. They can enter the political ring and distance themselves from the ‘mistakes’ made by their own partisan predecessors or engage directly in critiques of their own party’s past policies and politics. In other words, these individuals can engage
in a degree of “self-blame” that directs blame at their intra-party competitors while, conveniently, contrasting their predecessors’ records with their own policies of national renewal. For example, as I show in Chapter 4, the Conservatives of the 1970s “New Right” under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher in Britain were able to not only critique the policies of the Labour Government, but also of past Conservative Governments as well, who they thought were not “Conservative enough.”

This ability to self-blame is not available to everyone. Put another way, the putative “establishment” of the party, such as long-standing members of a former government’s cabinet, or even former leaders, find it difficult to put their own record under the magnifying glass and claim that their past actions were part and parcel of a broader set of causes of the nation’s decline. Those with long track records in politics, particularly in party leadership, “own” the past in a way that newcomers or outsiders do not. For an establishment politician to engage in declinism that includes some form of self-blame is a difficult tightrope to walk and contradicts incumbents or long-serving politicians’ typical focus on their own past accomplishments.

Self-blame is often important, because engaging in declinist rhetoric requires some benchmark in the past or period in which the country’s decline is said to have begun. Often, but not always, declinists make arguments about the nation’s decline that tells a long-ranging story, one of a long-simmering decline that requires fundamental change in order to stem the tide of decline. For example, declinists may couple evidence of the nation’s relative slippage to a competitor in industrial or economic metrics with the decline of long-standing national virtues that made the nation great. Or, as another
example, a decline in the nation’s prestige abroad may be coupled with declining virility at home and a need for the country to ‘get tough.’ These kinds of claims are typically not claims associated with brief mishaps or misdoings in the country’s recent past (e.g. two or four years). Rather, these claims are typically made against the backdrop of a longer decline and national malaise, one which, by the virtue of democratic politics, almost inevitably wraps up both the incumbent and past administrations/governments of the declinist’s own party. Therefore, the ability to both distance oneself and critique one’s own party, makes advancing a message of decline easier for newcomers/outsiders.

Second, by presenting themselves as outsiders or newcomers, these brokers stress their ‘new’ ideas, and tie their candidacy to national renewal. They paint themselves as viable alternatives to the status quo, while at the same time maintaining the advantages of a party apparatus that allows them a route to power. They can engage in the politics of hope while sounding the alarm about decline and critiquing the incumbent and their own party. In other words, declinists, with their doom and gloom on the one hand and with promises of renewal on the other, are ‘messianic’-type figures, often achieving some form of cult or ‘strong man’ status. It is difficult to reinvent oneself as a messiah for the nation if one has been involved in politics for decades, part and parcel of an establishment which brought about decline. Indeed, as I show throughout the dissertation, leaders leaning on declinist narratives are popular figures, both in the sense that they have a certain degree of a cult-of-personality around them, but also that they exhibit, through

---

their leadership and rhetoric, a strength which makes them seem singularly able to lift the country back up again. Whether it is JFK, Ronald Reagan, or Thatcher, these leaders are, unsurprisingly, representatives of strong leadership and new ways of governing.

*Alternative Arguments: Why Declinism Emerges*

The main foil of this project is the argument that declinism emerges when there is actually occurring decline. I have addressed (and tested) this possibility at length in Chapter 2. In this section, I address other potential explanations for declinism’s *emergence*: (1) salient events and (2) political ideology. My aim in this section is not to dismiss these alternative arguments, but, rather, to outline their theoretical logic. In each empirical chapter I assess how each explanation fares empirically.

An alternative or competing explanation to my instrumental and psychological explanation for declinism is that declinism pops up in the domestic politics of great powers when things are going wrong, or when events shake the confidence of the nation. Unlike the objectivist argument outlined in Chapter 2—in which declinism is driven by long-term trends and metrics—this account argues that salient available events make declinism possible. The argument goes that certain events clearly tell the nation and its political leaders that all is not well and that the nation is in decline. Policymakers react in turn to stem the tide and overcome international decline. For example, events like the Sputnik launch in 1957 or the Suez Crisis in 1956, may jolt an otherwise complacent nation to realize its own decline. A variation of this argument appears in Friedberg’s work on British relative declining the late 19th and early 20th century: “external shocks
are a necessary but not sufficient condition for downward adjustments in assessments” of national decline and power, according to Friedberg. If the contextual account is correct, I should observe in each case declinism following from major events that are likely to shake the nation’s confidence, such as losses in war, and, importantly, that declinists use these major events as rallying cries and as diagnoses of the nation’s decline more broadly. In other words, declinists should attribute such events, such “external” shocks, as at the very least, symptomatic of the nation’s decline, if not the cause of the nation’s decline. A further implication of this argument is that events “speak for themselves.” If events offer an unambiguous lesson for all observers, then the events-based account should suggest that major narratives of decline and anti-declinist narratives should share in the meaning of the events purported to drive narratives of decline.

An additional alternative, or competing, explanation is that political ideology, namely conservatism, predicts declinism. This explanation holds that there are elements of declinism that seem to resonate, or find a voice in, conservative politics and rhetoric. Declinism, in this account, emerges because conservatives are more likely to care about the nation’s decline and harp on about it. This logic underpinning this explanation is that conservatives are more attuned to, and moved by, status concerns than liberals. As Dianna Mutz argues, “perceived threat makes status quo, hierarchical social and political arrangements more attractive. Thus, conservatism surges along with a nostalgia for the stable hierarchies of the past. Perceived threat also triggers defense of the dominant in-

128 Krebs 2015, 2.
group, a greater emphasis on the importance of conformity to group norms, and increased outgroup negativity.” More, psychologists have demonstrated that people typically respond to threats by supporting conservative positions. In other words, declinists may not just find declinism appealing, but others, upon receiving declinist messages, which posit a threat to the nation’s position (and, often, security), will adopt more conservative positions. As Jost et al. argue, “Psychological reactions to fear and threat thus convey a small-to-moderate political advantage for conservative leaders, parties, policies, and ideas.” If the ideology account is correct, I should observe in each case that declinism emerges from those who occupy conservative positions in politics. Moreover, in the content analysis presented in Chapter 2, moreover, I should observe that declinism is driven by conservative voices in national politics, voices which also push policy and responses to decline to the political right.

III. The Consequences of Declinism

Thus far, I have offered an explanation for declinism’s emergence: why narratives of international decline emerge in the domestic politics of great powers. In other words, my dependent variable has been a uniform variable: “declinism.” I shift my focus now to declinism as an independent variable. Further, I unpack declinism to look at varieties of declinism, which leads to different potential outcomes for foreign and domestic policy.

---

Why does declinism matter? Why should scholars of international relations care about declinism? Narratives of international decline matter insofar as these narratives impact how policies are conceived, legitimated, and understood relative to other policy options leaders have. In this section, I first outline how declinism might impact policy: the potential mechanisms through which declinism may have an impact on policy behavior. I then unpack the content of declinist narratives. By unpacking different declinist narratives, I generate behavioral expectations for different narratives of decline. I show that declinism could, in theory, advocate for policies across the spectrum, from war to regain prestige to retrenchment to focus resources and attention at home.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanism</th>
<th>How declinism impacts policy:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Fluff</td>
<td>Declinism is nothing more than rhetorical fluff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalization</td>
<td><strong>Instrumental True Believers.</strong> Declinists are true believers, but use declinism instrumentally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Drinking the Kool-Aid.</strong> Declinism is used instrumentally, but speakers come to believe it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency Constraints</td>
<td><strong>Rhetorical Consistency.</strong> Audiences value consistency, therefore, speakers are beholden to what they say.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Blowback.</strong> Audiences are ginned up by declinism and entrap leaders in their own rhetoric.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective Mobilization</td>
<td><strong>Integration &amp; Fragmentation.</strong> Declinism mobilizes collective identities and otherwise separate groups into coalitions while excluding others.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Declinism may simply be indicative of pre-established, embedded, policy preferences. In other words, declinism might be “little more than the rationalization or masking of grand strategy determined by more fundamental interests,” as Tjalve and Williams describe the critique of rhetoric. In this account, declinist rhetoric is epiphenomenal: these beliefs are sincere, and rhetoric just reflects these beliefs. Rhetoric may be deployed strategically in this account, but only insofar as it the rhetoric mirrors underlying beliefs. If this is the case, then declinism matters to the extent that it illustrates or uncovers underlying beliefs. However, unlike the other mechanisms outlined in Table 4, the rhetoric itself has no independent effect on policy.

Another way declinism may impact policy is through ‘rhetorical consistency constraints’ placed upon leaders. This mechanism works by entrapping leaders into maintaining a consistent message over time. It assumes that relevant audiences, upon hearing at time T that the nation is in decline and certain policies must be advanced to overcome decline, will be unconvinced, and indeed punish, leaders who, at time T+1, profess something fundamentally different about the state of the country or the policy requirements to overcome decline. For example, Daniel C. Thomas defines rhetorical entrapment as occurring “when actors who have endorsed a particular idea for instrumental reasons then adhere to its logic even when the reasons for adhering to it have been exhausted. They do so in order to avoid the costs of rhetorical inconsistency.” Seo-Hyun Park describes rhetorical entrapment as “as a process of

---

133 Tjalve and Williams 2015, 38.
134 See, e.g. Goddard and Krebs 2015; Park 2017; Thomas 2005; Morin and Gold 2010.
135 Thomas 2005.
social influence that alters the range of possible future actions by eliminating, or exaggerating the political cost of, specific – including previously used – policy options.”¹³⁶ In seeking to maintain consistency over time, leaders are constrained by the narrative groundwork they previously laid. Thus, this mechanism, unlike the underlying policy preferences mechanism, has more of an independent impact on policy: declinism is not epiphenomenal. An observable implication of the “rhetorical entrapment” account is that leaders remain committed to policies they advance when in full declinist mode, even if those policies are no longer as appealing as they once were. Another observable implication of this mechanism is that, behind the scenes, leaders express feeling entrapped by their rhetoric. For example, a leader might suggest that they cannot advance a different policy that is inconsistent with their narrative throughout the campaign, because they will see backlash from important constituencies or audiences.

Finally, declinism may impact policy is by “locking in” the declinist politician to a platform and policy agenda that they, once in office, would rather not pursue or that is irrational.¹³⁷ Once declinism is in the air and has been accepted by publics, by this account, it is hard to pull back in. For example, Snyder argues in his study of myths of empire that elites, in propagating imperialist propaganda, could become entrapped in their own rhetoric, even if they (the elite) avoid internalizing such myths.¹³⁸ Snyder refers to this kind of entrapment as “blowback.” Political elites may, in pitching imperialist propaganda to society, end up having to “live up to their own rhetoric” once they

---

¹³⁶ Park 2017, 490.
¹³⁷ For a critique of ‘blowback’ accounts, see Goddard 2006.
¹³⁸ Snyder 1993, 41-42.
mobilize publics. For example, Snyder finds evidence that Japanese leaders faced the constraints of mass public opinion, finding “retreat from the brink” difficult to explain after decades of militaristic and social-imperialistic discourse. In this account, declinists put forward a narrative of decline, with particular prescriptions as to how to overcome the nation’s decline. In doing so, they become ‘entrapped’ by such rhetoric, and, once the incentives to talk decline diminish (or they realize the nation is not in decline), find themselves still having to put forward such policies. In other words, this account believes that speakers are beholden to what they say and that rhetoric shackles political elites. This mechanism, then, has the most potential for declinism’s impact on policy. An observable implication of the “blowback” account is that declinism, once planted, is difficult to uproot. Politicians, in this account, will keep with declinism for a considerable period of time and will not abandon declinism once in office, if they are in the opposition. Moreover, if the blowback account is correct, we should expect to see politicians being raked over the coals by their opponents for claiming that the country is no longer in decline and for dropping declinism immediately once in power. Importantly, groups mobilized by the declinist rhetoric will demand that the policies put forward by declinists when in full declinist mode be enacted and leaders will feel compelled by these groups to follow through with their rhetoric. We should thus observe declinists pressured by these audiences if they attempt to veer away from declinist policies they advanced.

Another potential mechanism through which declinism may impact policy is through collective mobilization. Declinism, by this account, brings groups together by

139 Snyder 1993, 41-42.  
140 Snyder 1993, 149.
creating and activating collective identities and forging coalitions. Such a mechanism is closely tied to brokerage, which I outline above. Brokers mobilize otherwise unconnected groups and are able to hold coalitions together. Once mobilized, these groups help declinists into power, in some cases becoming part of the government as well. Two logics that underpin this mechanism are integration and fragmentation. 141 Goddard and Nexon argue that “Logics of integration involve efforts to maintain and expand joint action. They may involve activating or creating common identities and norms around relevant actors and social sites.” 142 On the other hand, logics of fragmentation “…involve efforts to disrupt or prevent joint action. They usually involve similar mechanisms and processes, but are oriented toward breaking apart or inhibiting the joint action of others.” 143 In this case, declinists seek to activate concern over the nation’s decline, and in so doing, expand their coalition to bring them to power and to advance their policy goals. They may also decry some, for example, “enemies within,” as being complicit in the decline of the nation and seek to ostracize and weaken such groups in the process of coalition-building.

This “collective mobilization” mechanism has roots both pre- and post-election. Pre-election, declinists can mobilize groups around the notion of decline and their proposed policy solutions for renewal. The mechanism, as I alluded to above, comports with my explanation for declinism’s emergence. Often, brokers are considered “entrepreneurs:” they stitch together coalitions for an instrumental purpose—winning.

141 See Goddard and Nexon 2016.
142 Goddard and Nexon 2016, 8.
143 Goddard and Nexon 2016, 8.
Moreover, as I noted above, positioning themselves as outsiders or newcomers, while having a base of support within the party, allows them to glean political purchase from their perceived outsidersness while having some institutional support within the party. Post-election, such groups can maintain mobilized, take up positions within government, push for their policy preferences, and, when another election comes about, support (or punish) the declinist.

In sum, narratives of international decline impact policy by suggesting policies for renewal in the face of decline. I outlined four different mechanisms through which declinism might have an impact on policy: (1) the rhetorical fluff mechanism, which suggests declinism’s impact on policy is epiphenomenal because leaders can pick up or drop declinism on a dime without any consequences; (2) the internalization mechanism, which suggests that declinism may impact policy through is either used instrumentally by “true believers” or that declinism generates true believers who engage in declinism; (3) the consistency constraint mechanisms, which suggest that leaders may be entrapping leaders into being consistent with past rhetoric or that declinism may animate and mobilize groups in society and will compel leaders to follow through on their rhetoric and (4) the collective mobilization mechanism, which suggests that declinism mobilizes collective identities and otherwise separate groups into coalitions while excluding others. Having laid out the ways in which narratives of international decline may impact policy, I now turn to the specific ways I see declinism impacting policy substantively through the content of declinist narratives.
IV. The Content of Declinist Narratives

Narratives of international decline matter insofar as these narratives impact how policies are conceived, legitimated, and understood. In other words, we care about narratives of international decline because they have policy consequences. What are the policy consequences of declinist rhetoric? This section proceeds in two main subsections. First, I unpack the content of declinist narratives with respect to how declinist narratives (1) spell out the policy domain where the problem lies (domestic/foreign) and (2) posit the reason why the nation is said to have declined (done too much/done too little). By unpacking different declinist narratives, I generate behavioral expectations for different narratives of decline. I show that declinism could, in theory, advocate for policies across the spectrum, from war to regain prestige to retrenchment to focus resources and attention at home.

As I have noted throughout this chapter, declinism varies not just with respect to its frequency in political discussion, but also its content over time. The declinism of John F. Kennedy in 1960 was different than that of Margaret Thatcher in the late 1970s. In this section, I draw upon a typology featuring two key dimensions which help distinguish between different prescriptions for ‘what is to be done’ with respect to the nation’s decline.

Narratives of international decline posit a problem (in this case, “we are in decline”). Declinists offer a reason why the nation is in decline and a subsequent solution given the reason that the declinist (prescription: “what we should do about it”). In this section, I outline different narratives of decline across two dimensions: (1) the policy
domain where the problem lies (domestic/foreign) and (2) the reason why the nation is said to have declined (done too much/done too little). The domestic/foreign dimension helps illuminate the policy domains where declinists focus their attention and potential pathways to renewal. The second dimension, the reason why the nation is declining, is crucial. Consistent with expectations from prominent theories of declining powers about how declining powers will respond to their decline, I examine whether narratives of decline posit that the nation has “done too much” (i.e. overextended or over-committed) in a given policy domain or has “done too little” (i.e. under-exerted or under-committed) in a given policy domain. “Doing too much” in this case implies that the nation has overcommitted itself relative to its available or potential resources (domestically or internationally). “Doing too little,” on the other hand,” suggests that the nation has undershot its expectations—that it has under-committed and left vacuums for others to gain in influence and power—and that the nation’s resources and resource potential suggest that the nation can do much more domestically or internationally.

This second dimension speaks to the “Lippmann Gap” between purposes and means.144 As Lippmann notes: “without the controlling principle that the nation must maintain its objectives and its power in equilibrium, its purposes within its means and its means equal to its purposes, its commitments related to its resources and its resources adequate to its commitments, it is impossible to think at all about foreign affairs.”145 Of course, as Lippmann notes, leaders and publics rarely are so practical and consistent.146

---

144 MacDonald and Parent 2018, 26. See also: Lippmann 1943, 7–8.
145 Lippmann 1943, 7.
146 Lippmann 1943, 7.
However, narratives of decline, in focusing on a reason why the nation has declined, and what is to be done to overcome decline, ultimately speak to declinists’ understandings of their nation’s putative “disequilibrium” between purposes and means, between commitments and resources, and between the declinists’ own vision of the nation’s role and position in the world and the role the nation is currently playing and the position the nation is currently occupying. It is for this reason that I highlight this second dimension in categorizing and generating behavioral expectations of different narratives of decline.

Declinists either understand the country as having overstretched, overextended, and overreached or they understand the country as having underperformed as a result of not “doing enough” with respect to policy. This dimension of the typology centers on the notion of disequilibria: too many commitments (whether domestic or foreign) or not exerting one’s power relative to one’s capability and therefore losing influence/power abroad to peer competitors.

The “status quo” for declinists is maintaining current policies. Declinists see the status quo as problematic, as contributing to the nation’s decline. In other words, declinists all have a “status quo” bias insofar as they want to see the nation maintain its top position in the international ranking of states, but they see how the country is run as degrading the status quo of national greatness. They see the status quo, in this respect, as faltering. Their baseline, then, is to do nothing. This is an unattractive baseline, for all the political implications (declinists seek to undo the status quo and are unattracted to tinkering at the margins of policy) and the implications with respect to how they see the
nation’s trajectory moving forward. This typology yields different behavioral expectations that are underpinned by the narratives put forward by declinists.

Table 5: Policy Prescriptions for Different Narratives of Decline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Domain Where the Problem Lies</th>
<th>Reason for the Decline</th>
<th>We’ve done too much (overextension/insolvency)</th>
<th>We’ve not done enough (underutilized power)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internal/Domestic</td>
<td>Domestic Overextension</td>
<td>Cut spending</td>
<td>Domestic Decay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reduce regulation</td>
<td>Strategic investment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External/Foreign</td>
<td>International Overextension</td>
<td>Reconfigure forces</td>
<td>International Re-Exertion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Redistribute burdens</td>
<td>Preventive war (extreme)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Decrease military spending</td>
<td>Increase force presence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Narratives in the first cell (domestic overextension) point blame for the nation’s decline on existing policies that, in their view, stifle the nation’s competitiveness and risks the nation’s international standing. These narratives suggest that the way out of decline is to unburden the economy and society from onerous regulation and spending which makes the nation inefficient vis-à-vis competitors. The narrative proposes that there is a pressing need to unshackle the economy and citizens from burdensome regulation and taxation and decrease spending on welfare in order to kick-start the nation and revitalize the economy. Take, for example, the content of Thatcher’s declinism in 1970s Britain. Thatcher’s rhetoric was largely focused on decline originating from home
rather than Britain’s follies abroad. Thatcher blamed British decline what she saw as the inefficiencies of the Keynesian welfare state as well as a drift from British (predominantly Victorian) values. Thatcher argued that in order to return Britain to her proper place internationally, Britain must undergo serious changes to its monetary policy, its approach to taxation, and its tolerance of trade unions, regulations, and privatization.147

Therefore, because the domestic overextension narratives posit that the nation’s ills result from excessive spending, regulation, and overreach, I expect to observe these narratives producing policy proposals centered on freeing up the economic, bureaucratic, and regulatory overreach of past government policy. These narratives should yield policies that largely mirror domestic policies of retrenchment, such as reductions in spending, institutional reform, and the reallocation of resources.148 More generally, policies of de-regulation and efforts to scale back “positive” policy should result from these narratives.

Narratives in the second cell (domestic decay) point blame for the nation’s decline on not doing enough to kickstart the nation and keep her competitive relative to her peers. Narratives suggest that the nation has declined because it has failed to provide adequate national investment in core institutions of society. For example, declinists in this cell may point to the education system, health system, or scientific advances as evidence that the nation is falling behind others. Opposition Labour leader Harold Wilson’s speeches in 1964 Britain exemplify the “domestic decay narrative.” Wilson took incumbent Sir Alec

147 See Cooper 2012.
Douglas Home and his Conservative Party colleagues to task for overseeing thirteen years of British decline relative to the Japanese, Russians, Germans, Italians, and French.149 In a speech in Edinburgh before the general election in October of 1964, Wilson argued that British decline was a result of Conservatives taking their hands off the wheel, of limited government intervention into the economy and limited investment in the country’s potential. “The essence of Tory policy is abdication,” Wilson argued.150 For Wilson, government intervention into the economy, from nationalization to investment in science and education to reindustrialization were necessary to restore Britain’s power and purpose in the world. “I believe we are only going to solve this problem now by creating new areas, by regenerating areas of social and economic decline, and by the creation of new industries, many of which will have to be publicly owned,” Wilson proposed.151

The domestic decay narratives posit that the nation’s decline is a result of underutilizing the nation’s potential. Therefore, I expect to observe declinists in this vein to propose and pursue policies of strategic investment in core areas of society and the economy with the goal of overcoming the nation’s decline and reinvigorating the nation’s international competitiveness.

Narratives in the third cell (international overextension) point blame for the nation’s decline on missteps abroad, namely policies that have left the nation overextended and overcommitted. An example of this narrative is what Josef Joffe describes as Richard Nixon’s “declinism lite” which suggested that America was

149 Wilson 1964.
150 See Wilson 1964, 49.
151 See Wilson 1964, 55.
“shrinking … in terms of global power and prestige.”\textsuperscript{152} Nixon, on the campaign trail in 1967, argued that the United States was no longer the top economic power in the world, instead, there were five economic powers (US, Western Europe, Japan, the Soviet Union, and China).\textsuperscript{153} For Nixon, decline was on the doorstep because of costly wars abroad (namely Vietnam). What was to be done, according to Nixon? “Decline was the diagnosis,” Joffe avers, “and modesty the medicine.”\textsuperscript{154} Nixon’s strategy was largely one of downsizing, from military withdrawals to cutting Pentagon budgets, and he would “go for broke” in order to retrench and recover.\textsuperscript{155}

International overextension narratives claim the nation has done too much abroad and should therefore propose and put forward policies that are broadly consistent with foreign policies of retrenchment: redeployment of forces, reduction of flashpoints, and the redistribution of burdens.\textsuperscript{156} At the extreme, these narratives should yield policies of complete retrenchment and perhaps even isolationism. The logic behind policies of retrenchment is, as Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent suggest, “strategic solvency,” or, as Josef Joffe puts it “reculer pour mieux sauter…take a few steps backward to gather speed and jump all the farther.”\textsuperscript{157} I expect to see, when speakers are advancing narratives of decline that are focused on blaming the nation “doing too much” in the international arena, then, policies of scaling back legitimated through the lens of preserving the nation’s place in the world and stemming decline.

\textsuperscript{152} Joffe 2014, 10.  
\textsuperscript{153} Joffe 2014, 10.  
\textsuperscript{154} Joffe 2014, 58.  
\textsuperscript{155} See Sestanovich 2014, Chapter 7.  
\textsuperscript{156} MacDonald and Parent 2018, Chapter 2.  
\textsuperscript{157} See MacDonald and Parent 2018, Chapter 2; Joffe 2014, 58. See also Gilpin 1983, 192.
Narratives in the fourth cell (international re-exertion) suggest that the nation’s decline has been caused by predecessors and policies which have left the nation “stalled.” Such policies have left the nation in a position of weakness because the nation has not exerted its full power and potential abroad, leaving open competitors to gain influence and power internationally. For example, Charles de Gaulle’s vision for France involved seeing France as a power again in its own right, not beholden to superpower influence, and in its rightful place in terms of international prestige and status: “Will France decline? Will it be Portugalized? Or will it again ascend the heights? . . . That is the only question,” de Gaulle asked. De Gaulle understood French decline as emanating from the national humiliation of Vichy France. De Gaulle’s policy prescriptions for restoring French grandeur when he returned to power in 1958 were centered on new forms of power (including nuclear arms and his Algeria policy). Alongside independence (as a great power alongside the United States and the Soviet Union) and stoking French nationalism, “de Gaulle added a third element, namely, faith in military force as the decisive means to project national influence.” In 1960, upon receiving news of the first French nuclear explosion, de Gaulle would proclaim “Hurray for France! From this morning she is stronger and prouder!” For de Gaulle, Vichy France was the epitome of “not doing enough” and his messianic message to the French people would be that he had

---

159 Kritzman 2007, 158.
160 Hoffmann 1974, 286.
161 Moravesik 2000, 10.
162 Hymans 2006, 85.
what it took to assert France’s independence and great power status, if only France exerted herself and fulfilled her destiny.

These narratives should thus yield policies that are ‘active’ abroad and the opposite of policies of retrenchment: force deployments, increased presence in flashpoint areas, and greater spending on the military. At the extreme, these narratives should yield policies of preventive war. Moreover, these narratives may generate symbolic measures consistent with what Morgenthau dubbed “policies of prestige,” which are often done ‘for their own sake’ abroad such as shows of force.

In short, different narratives of decline posit different reasons why the nation is in decline. In doing so, declinists offer ways to right the wrong and reverse the nation’s decline. Declinists can—and do—move between these different categories. However, declinists tend to focus their ire and their warnings on domestic or foreign missteps. Moreover, declinists center particular policies over others in their political messaging. For example, Thatcher’s policy proposals largely focused on domestic policy.163

I do not expect leaders to both claim decline is a result of overstretch and, at the same time, that decline is a result of under-exertion.164 This expectation is borne out empirically in my cases, which I detail further below. However, it is conceivable—and is borne out empirically—that declinists may move diagonally across the typology. For example, a declinist can want to increase investment at home and decrease presence

abroad or, on the other end of the spectrum, they may wish to decrease spending at home to make the nation more competitive and increase presence abroad to fulfill the nation’s putative role as a great power. The domestic/foreign dimension of the typology does not render certain messages inconsistent, because the “sin” at home/abroad may be different from that at home/abroad. However, the second dimension—the reason why we’ve declined—is more limiting with respect to the consistency of the narrative.

V. Declinism: Implications for IR Theory

My dissertation makes several contributions to IR theory. First, it takes seriously narratives, by focusing analytical attention on declinist narratives and exploring the foreign policy and grand-strategic consequences of declinism. I focus on narratives of international decline as both the *explanandum* and the *explanans* and stress that narratives are not mere artifacts of objective reality and that they have important effects, not just around political debate, but also on policy.

Second, by measuring declinism over time in a rigorous manner, I argue—and demonstrate—that narratives are disconnected from a corresponding “objective reality,” in many cases. This theoretical move paves the way for providing a domestic political theory of declinism, built around a different set of assumptions than realist accounts of relative international decline. Therefore, I build upon literature in IR theory that places an emphasis on the domestic sources of grand strategy. However, unlike existing arguments
that stress institutional barriers to retrenchment, from parochial interests to sclerotic political and economic institutions, or arguments that stress the fragmentation of decision-making as roadblocks to retrenchment, my argument stresses domestic party politics and the psychological consequences of a “negativity bias.” I thus introduce narratives of international decline as important for explaining expansionist grand strategies, increases in defense spending, etc.

Why, does the mismatch between decline and declinism matter? Common assumptions about how states respond to decline presume that states can observe their decline and react promptly. Indeed, such accounts suggest that decline is a sensitive affair, making power transitions dangerous and destabilizing. However, if domestic attention to decline is divorced from metrics of decline scholars use to measure rising powers, declining powers, and power transitions, then such presumptions about the observability of decline are unfounded. If leaders, and their oppositions in government, do not see decline as a major issue, or cannot agree that decline is occurring, then the mechanisms through which decline impacts policies, from preventive war to retrenchment, should be questioned. The mechanisms through which decline is said to matter, namely the notion that statesmen (sic) can assess their nation’s position relative to others in almost real-time, assume a correlation between decline as observed by scholars and declinism. Such assumptions not only lead to scholars missing cases in which

---

165 Snyder 1993.
166 Friedberg 2010.
‘decline is on the mind’ of the nation, but also the political dynamics through which decline is interpreted, narrated, and acted upon in the domestic politics of great powers.

Third, in unpacking the politics of decline, I show how international decline is understood, measured, and debated by those in power. Too often, the literature in IR assumes that statesmen (*sic*) can recognize decline. Few studies examine debates around a nation’s decline that would undercut such arguments. In challenging the assumptions of realists who argue that the international system is relatively unambiguous, and that statesmen can then interpret decline in prompt ways, my argument treats the international system, and beliefs about the international system, as a social construction rather than a material fact. By unpacking the psychological biases—namely the negativity bias—in arguing about decline, and potential responses to it, I further challenge the (neo)realist assumptions underpinning the importance of anarchy and the international system as the main explanation for state behavior, instead situating my theory in psychological and social constructivist terms.168

In short, the implications of my theory of declinism’s emergence and its consequences suggests that IR scholars should take seriously narratives of international decline not as simply by-products of actually occurring decline. I return to these contributions and implications for IR theory in the final chapter, in the context of the US and the rise of China.

VI. Evaluating the Theory

---

168 See also Johnson and Tierney 2019, 139.
This chapter has laid out an explanation for declinism’s emergence and its consequences. In this section, I first outline how I operationalize key concepts in my argument. I then discuss my case selection and scope conditions of my argument. I conclude by discussing my research methodology.

**Operationalization and Measurement of Key Concepts**

In this section, I outline how I operationalize and measure key variables in my analysis: oppositions and outsiders/newcomers. Chapter 2 details how I operationalize “declinism.”

**Oppositions.** I argue that declinism is more likely to emerge from the opposition in national politics. This is straightforward to code in my cases. I also look at how long the opposition has been out of power, and, conversely, how long the incumbent has held power. As I note in Section I, these are important considerations when thinking about blaming the incumbent for a decline in the country’s international standing.

**Outsiders/Newcomers.** I argue that the impetus for declinist rhetoric comes from a perceived need to break from the past and establish a new set of policies often associated with outsiders or newcomers—e.g. a generational shift within the party. This is a tricky concept to measure. In order to establish whether the declinist represents an outsider or a member of a new generation in politics, I draw from political biographies and histories of the period. To count as outsiders or members of a new generation in politics, I examine whether they were in the putative “mainstream” of the party (e.g. holding leadership positions, etc.), in the case of outsiders, and how long they had held
office, in the case of newcomers/a new generation. However, beyond simply establishing how much of a newcomer or outsider a given declinist is, I look at the degree to which they narrate themselves as being outsiders or newcomers, irrespective of a given baseline of “newcomer-ness” or “outsider-ness.” Throughout the cases, I provide evidence ranging from the way an individual frames themselves as outsiders or part of a new generation in politics to behind-the-scenes discussions regarding the utility and reason for pitching oneself this way. These additional sources are important, because, perhaps just as important as whether the individual is actually an outsider/newcomer, how a declinist narrates their political story in crucially important. In other words, I examine and treat this concept as both an objective fact as well as something that can be constructed by political actors. Of course, there are limits to this. Someone who has been a senator for four decades in the United States, for example, might find it hard to paint themselves as a newcomer to politics.

**Brokers.** Moreover, I argue that successful declinism requires individuals who are “brokers.” As I defined brokers above, brokers are “actors who bridge ‘structural holes’” in networks.\(^\text{169}\) Brokers, by virtue of their structural position, are able to glean the advantages of positions within different networks. Brokers bring together “actors that would otherwise remain unconnected.”\(^\text{170}\) In my telling, these declinist brokers are often characterized—by themselves, their surrogates, etc.—as “outsiders” or “newcomers.” However, unlike their characterization as outsiders or newcomers, whereby I examine the characterization of different actors, looking at brokerage requires examining their actual

---

\(^{169}\) Goddard 2012, 501.
\(^{170}\) Goddard 2012, 501.
structural position, especially vis-à-vis their parties, other parties, elite coalitions, and the electorate. In each chapter, I examine the extent to which individuals were brokers by virtue of their structural position.

Case Selection & Scope Conditions

The two main country contexts for this project are postwar Great Britain and the United States. On the one hand, the UK and US are very different. The UK represents a declining post-imperial power while US is, and in the scope of this project, has been, the global hegemon who is seeking to construct its own system in its own image. Yet, both Britain and the United States are arguably in decline during this period in a longue durée sense: Britain’s relative superiority had been eroding since the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries, though such decline has hardly been constant, nor has attention to decline been so either. The United States reached its apex at the end of the Second World War and would experience a fifty-year relative decline from those lofty heights, yet still remain, ordinally, top dog. In short, these two main country contexts provide rich differences and similarities from which to explore.

Relying solely on the US and UK as country-contexts would lend itself to an Anglo-American bias. I therefore include two other country contexts in my analysis: France and Japan. There is a current obsession with decline in France; in 2016 déclinisme (declinism) entered the Larousse dictionary. France, like the United Kingdom and the United States, has a mixed history of declinism. Present day France, the late 19th century,  

171 I thank Paul MacDonald for drawing this contrast.
and post-WWII France are periods in which the French have felt an acute sense of comparative decline, especially relative to other periods in French history. Japan is also an interesting contemporary case of decline and declinism. As Japan’s economy grew, so too did predictions that the Japanese would overtake the United States; the 21st century was meant to be Japan’s. However, that bubble burst, and in its wake—the “lost decade” or “lost score”—has left the Japanese feeling an acute sense of decline. These cases are used as plausibility probes for future research in both contexts. While these are important cases to consider in the dissertation, there remains an overall scope condition to my argument. The dissertation’s empirics hinge upon two English-speaking, modern, cases.

While I explore these other cases, there is are several important scope conditions on the project, as it stands. First, my focus on the UK and US not only lends itself to an Anglo-American bias, but my theory hinges on political dynamics found in democracies rather than autocracies. We may expect authoritarian leaders to use declinism to gin up their people for fighting back, or to hide prospects of the nation’s decline from the view of relevant audiences in order to prevent criticism. Many dynamics of authoritarian regimes, including the (potential) irrelevance of certain audiences, may factor into a different set of factors that explain when declinism arises in these different political contexts. Second, the timeframe for this analysis is post-1945. My dissertation, then, is a historically embedded story of modern political declinism. While this is a contribution in

---


its own right, it limits the potential scope of the project across time, especially during previous periods and cases of interest (e.g. the decline of 17th century imperial Spain).

Finally, my theoretical framework presented in this chapter, while not restricted to two-party systems, does lend itself to thinking about two-party systems insofar as the incumbent and opposition are most often treated as two fairly unitary actors. However, there is no reason that my theory cannot travel to multiparty systems. My theory is predicated on multiple parties—at least one viable opposition party—from which a coherent and strong narrative of decline can emerge. Therefore, I consider a scope condition of my theory to be democracies in which there are at least two parties.

Only examining periods in which declinism is rampant would be akin to “selecting on the dependent variable.” I therefore examine not only periods in which declinism is high, but periods in which declinism was absent yet could have plausibly been used. Specifically, in Chapter 4, I examine the 1974 general elections in the UK, a case in which both major parties in Britain could have deployed declinist rhetoric, but both chose not to. Moreover, I highlight in the dissertation an example in which declinism fell short of gaining traction in national discourse: Carter’s declinism at the end of his first term as president in 1979 in Chapter 6. Finally, in Chapter 7, I discuss how Tōru Hashimoto’s declinism in the 2012 Japanese elections did not gain as much traction as Hashimoto would have liked, given his true outsiderness. These types of “negative” cases are important for highlighting the conditions under which declinism does not arise, and why declinism fails.
Archival Research

Throughout the remainder of this dissertation I adopt a qualitative, historical, approach to declinism. Specifically, in order to trace the emergence and consequences of declinism in the UK and US, I draw upon archival evidence and historical accounts of each period in question. For the British case, my research uses primary sources located at the Conservative Party Archives (Oxford, UK), the Labour Party Archives (Manchester, UK), and the National Archives (Kew, UK) alongside available secondary material and archival material available online. Similarly, for the US case, my research uses primary source material from archives. Specifically, I conducted research in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library (Boston, MA), the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (Simi Valley, CA), the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library (Atlanta, GA), and the Richard Nixon Presidential Library (Yorba Linda, CA). 174 Again, in addition to these archival sources, I use secondary sources to supplement the primary source documents where possible or needed. For the Japanese and French case studies presented in Chapter 7, I draw solely on secondary sources. 175

Archival research has many advantages as a research strategy in this project. First, my theory suggests that declinism is used instrumentally by politicians. If this is the case, we would expect to see such logics appear in the deliberations and planning of politicians and parties. Archival research allows me to “look behind the scenes” in order to assess

174 The material I draw from the Nixon Library was scanned by archival staff. Due to the Coronavirus pandemic and travel restrictions, I was not able to visit the Nixon Library to conduct more in-depth research at the time of writing.
175 I discuss the limitations and directions for future research in these cases in Chapter 7.
the motivations and rationales political elites use in crafting their messages. Second, as becomes clear throughout my empirical chapters, there is often a degree of intra-party debate over questions of international decline. While such debates do spill out into the open from time to time, internal party meeting minutes and contemporaneous notes from attendees provide a rich source in which to assess where disagreements lay and among whom declinism was appealing within the party. Finally, while speeches are crucially important throughout my dissertation, these speeches are products of deliberation and craft behind the scenes. They are also often based on intensive research by staffers. Archival research provides an opportunity to see what evidence is driving declinism behind the scenes, and also when, and why, declinism appears in political speech. In short, archival research opens the door to assessing what leaders believed they were doing when evoking the notion of the nation’s decline, the cleavages within parties, and the evidentiary bases of declinist claims.

In conducting the research, I am particularly interested in periods in which declinism, based on my content analyses, seems to emerge and become a major narrative: elections. Moreover, my argument suggests that declinist rhetoric has an electoral edge and component. Thus, much of the archival material that I examine comes from the major parties around the time of national elections. This includes election strategies, memos within campaigns and parties, and public opinion polling conducted on behalf of, or analyzed by, campaigns. In order to ascertain not only how declinists thought their messages would resonate with voters, but also how incumbents sought to “punch back”

---

176 On archival research in international relations, see Trachtenberg 2006.
against arguments of decline, I examine material “on both sides” of the declinism calculation: the opposition, who typically engages in more declinism, and the incumbents, who typically seek to respond to such declinism.

While archival research represents an excellent opportunity to test my theory against historical cases, there are several limitations to my research strategy. First, I do not, nor can I, examine all material related to each leader throughout their careers. This means that my focus on elections in particular may be limiting. For example, perhaps declinism is floated as a potential message behind the scenes of an incumbent when they are writing speeches, crafting their messages, etc. Given my focus on election material in particular, such moments may go unnoticed. Second, it is difficult to observe silences. In other words, rarely do politicians or their political aids and strategists explicitly declare on paper why they chose not to engage in a particular political message. However, the inverse may be true in cases where politicians craft an anti-declinist message. On the whole—absent smoking gun evidence that would explicitly detail why a given message was not picked up—my research strategy is much better at identifying when declinism is articulated explicitly behind the scenes rather than implicit decisions not to engage in declinist rhetoric. This makes identifying “negative” cases all the harder.
Chapter 4

Less like the Germans and More like the Italians:
Thatcher, the New Right, and Declinism in 1970s Britain

“unless we change our ways and our direction, our glories as a nation will soon be a footnote in the history books, a distant memory of an offshore island, lost in the mists of time, like Camelot, remembered kindly for its noble past”
-Margaret Thatcher, Leader of the Opposition, 1979

“everything we wished to do had to fit into the overall strategy of reversing Britain’s economic decline, for without an end to decline there was no hope of success for our other objectives…we had to continually stress that, however difficult the road might be and however long it took us to reach our destination, we intended to achieve a fundamental change of direction. We stood for a new beginning, not more of the same.”
-Margaret Thatcher, 1993

I. Introduction

In 1973, Lord Rothschild, then head of the “Central Policy Review Staff” warned that by 1985 Britain’s domestic product may be half that of West Germany or France and on par with the Italians. Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath promptly and publicly rebuked Lord Rothschild’s assessment. Peter Jenkins, regular columnist for the Guardian, Sunday Times, and Independent newspapers, noted in 1978 that since Heath’s rebuttal of Lord Rothschild’s assessment, and since the 1974 elections in which the notion of Britain’s relative decline was “something of a novelty,” declinism had become “commonplace” in the late 70s. The Conservatives fully embraced

---

177 Cannadine 2004, 38.
178 Thatcher 1993, 15.
179 The “Think-Tank” – independent Cabinet Office
181 https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/written-answers/1973/oct/18/lord-rothschild-speech#S5CV0861P0_19731018_CWA_216
declinist rhetoric—including comparisons to competitor countries—by 1978 when they began preparing for a general election campaign.

In Chapter 2, I presented the main puzzle that motivates this chapter: declinism was rampant in the late 1970s, despite Britain’s relative decline slowing down compared to the “golden years” of the 1950s and 1960s. The goal of this chapter is to explore this period deeply and trace the emergence of declinism during the late 1970s. What explains why declinism emerged in the late 1970s? Why did declinism not emerge in the early 1970s, a period much closer to Britain’s sharp relative international decline?

1970s Britain highlights key aspects of my theory of declinism’s emergence. First, the early 1970s exemplifies that declinism is easier to pick up if you are in the opposition rather than the party in power. The Tories were in control during the early 1970s—they had been in office from 1970 to 1974—which helps explain why narratives of decline would be difficult to put forward by the Conservatives if they had control of the ship.

Second, the early 1970s begs the question: why did Labour not use declinist rhetoric? The explanation is twofold. First, Labour’s leaders at the time were long-serving members of the Labour Party leadership, including Harold Wilson who was Prime Minister. Therefore, my theory expects that declinism would be less likely to emerge in this context, because there was no outsider or newcomer who gained control of the party and who could serve a brokerage role to forge a new political coalition. Second, I show that Labour, ideologically, would not have found declinism appealing, even though they were in the opposition.
Third, as I argue in Chapter 3, declinism emerges as a result of the political desire to undo the status quo rather than out of a need to tinker with policies at the margins, and it is therefore more likely to emerge from outsiders or newcomers. The emergence of declinism among members of the so-called “New Right” within the Conservative Party exemplifies this argument. Moderate Conservatives who had been in charge of the party wanted to make evolutionary—rather than revolutionary—policy changes and were resistant to declinist discourses, while the New Right’s declinism was brought on by their feeling that the Conservative Party had, in a sense, lost the plot and were partly responsible for the decline of Britain. Thatcher, a quintessential outsider, was able to engage in heavily declinist rhetoric because she represented a new brand of conservatism and was able to appeal to voters who were fed up with what she decried as ‘consensus’ politics.

As I show in this chapter, Thatcher’s rhetoric is consistent with the “domestic overextension” narrative outlined in Chapter 3. Thatcherites doubled down on declinism as a way to push forward their ideological agenda, particularly when it came to difficult domestic policies of spending cuts and monetarist policies which led to further unemployment. Further, in the area of foreign policy and defense, at the same time in which the government was making the case for increased cuts on domestic spending they were asking the British people to foot the bill for the Trident missile system. Thatcher believed that the only way to restore British greatness was a tough economic policy at home which stressed public expenditure cuts, austerity, and anti-inflationary monetarist
policy. Only after securing further electoral gains in 1983 and achieving victory in the Falklands in 1982 did she largely abandon declinist rhetoric.

This chapter proceeds largely chronologically through the 1970s using archival material from the Conservative and Labour Party archives. I first address the reasons why decline was not on the tongues of politicians in the early 1970s, especially when we might expect it the most—during the 1974 elections. After explaining why the Conservatives did not pick up declinism early in the decade, I trace the emergence of declinism within the party from members of the New Right, particularly Margaret Thatcher, Keith Joseph, and the writers of the *Stepping Stones* report in Section III. I then turn my focus in Section IV to the 1979 general election, the Conservative strategy in the election spearheaded by Thatcher, and Labour’s response. Subsequently, I assess Thatcher’s outsider status and her 1979 election victory in Section V. I conclude in Section VI by turning to the consequences of Thatcher’s declinism.

II. Early 1970s: The “Dog that Did Not Bark”

Britain faced two general elections in February and October of 1974. After the February general election proved inconclusive, Britain went back to the polls in October and Edward Heath’s Conservative Party lost the election to the opposition Labour Party under Harold Wilson. In many ways, the domestic issues-of-the-day in 1974 were similar to those five years later in 1979: industrial militancy, union problems, strikes, and inflation. In this section, I explain why declinism did not emerge during the early 1970s,

183 See Appendix 2
particularly during the 1974 elections, but as my quantitative data demonstrate, more broadly in the early 1970s as well. The Conservatives in charge of the party did not make decline a central theme in their February or October 1974 election campaigns, nor did Labour. This presents a puzzle. Why was decline not an issue in 1974, if objectivist measures point to the early 1970s as temporally closer to Britain’s loss of relative standing? Both parties had two opportunities to deploy declinist rhetoric in full campaign mode, yet by my measures of declinist rhetoric in Chapter 3, the 1979 election featured twice the amount of declinist rhetoric as both 1974 elections combined.

Either party could have used decline as a theme, theoretically, during the 1974 general elections. Though perhaps uncomfortable as the governing party, the Conservatives could have argued, like they did later in the decade, that Britain’s decline had been a long time coming and that the problems facing the country had deeper roots than their four years in government. Labour, meanwhile, could have employed declinist rhetoric during their time in the opposition by suggesting that the Conservatives over the past four years were incompetent and brought about decline. Yet neither party seems to have engaged in declinist rhetoric to any notable degree, stressing Britain’s international decline. Neither party strategized about using decline as a theme behind the scenes, as the Conservatives did later in the decade.

I test my theory of declinism’s emergence during this time by examining the Labour and Conservative Party Archives and tracing their campaign strategies during this period. My theory of declinism’s emergence explains why declinism did not emerge during this period. First, with respect to the Tories, my theory expects that declinism is
more likely to emerge from the opposition than the government. The Tories were in control during the early 1970s—they had been in office from 1970 to 1974—which helps explain why narratives of decline would be difficult to put forward by the Conservatives if they had control of the ship; declinism, then, would have been self-flagellating. The Conservatives who were running the party during this period wanted to present an image of a party in government who were stable, reliable, and who had made progress over four years. While it is possible to think up scenarios in which the Conservatives could create a message around long-standing British decline, (most) top Conservatives thought it too dangerous—and divisive—a strategy.

Second, my theory expects that declinism is more likely to emerge when there is a viable ‘broker’ who can portray themselves or represent a new generation or outsider status and can forge a new coalition around the theme of decline. This is not the case during this period. Neither party was led by a newcomer or outsider. Both parties were dominated by ‘establishment’ politicians with long track records in government. The establishment, more moderate, Conservatives were not interested in the kinds of declinist themes that would emerge as part and parcel of Thatcher’s message later in the decade. Third, with respect to Labour, they were ideologically uninterested in declinism; documents suggest that the Labour Party had a different vision for Britain, a vision that emphasized a “middle power” status for Britain. There was no will, nor interest, in focusing on Britain’s status as a great power by the Labour Party during this time. Moreover, the Labour Party leadership, epitomized by the likes of Harold Wilson and Jim Callaghan, were established Labour Party members who had previously held posts in the
party. Therefore, there was not an outsider or newcomer who could push for a new message of renewal during this time. In short, neither party during the 1974 elections was spearheaded by an outsider or newcomer who could serve as a broker and credibly advance a message of decline.

I first address the lack of Conservative declinism during this period before outlining why Labour would have found declinism unappealing and counter to their electoral strategy. In 1974, Edward Heath, leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister, was not inclined to bring about a message of decline and doom to the British public. Heath and other party leaders wanted to paint a picture of contrasts between the Conservatives and the Labour party: the Conservatives were the moderates while Labour were the extremists; the Conservatives were “problem-oriented” while the Labour Party was beholden to the trade unions. Heath went on television in 1974 to justify calling an election, and to send a message to the British people. Heath told the British people that

“The issue before you is a simple one. Do you want Parliament and the elected government to continue to fight strenuously against inflation? Or do you want them to abandon the struggle … This time the strife has got to stop … it’s time for your voice to be heard – the voice of the moderate and reasonable people of Britain: the voice of the majority. It is time for you to say to the extremists, the militants, and to the plain and simply misguided: we’ve had enough.”184

The Conservatives thought of their brief tenure in government as mildly successful and that such success would inevitably continue. This sentiment is summed up in the line they evoked repeatedly behind closed doors as their implicit messaging strategy: “don’t let Labour ruin it.”185 In other words, the Conservatives at the helm were

---

184 Beckett 2009, 146.
both optimistic about the progress they were making and were more narrowly-focused on

The Conservative Party mulled election themes of continuing the growth they had

The faster growth already achieved is the major strategic success story on which we can

The rise in living standards is our strongest counter to the essentially material

All of this implies the idea of expansion as our essential theme.” 187 In other words, the Conservatives at the helm thought that their
tenure in government was at least mildly successful.

---

186 Butler and Kavanagh 1974, 11.
187 CPA SC 73/21 – Manifesto Themes – 18 September 1973
An alternative theme the Conservatives considered was stability, in stark contrast to the declinists of the New Right later in the decade who wanted the British public to realize the dangerous situation they thought the country was in. With respect to the theme of ‘stability’, the old guard of the party argued: “There is no doubt that many people would welcome a rest from radical upheaval in policies, in institutions, and in many aspects of day-to-day life. This again is something we may well wish to exploit against Labour. But the tension with the expansion theme would be particularly strong.” The (supposed) tension between these themes to the Select Committee is telling. Neither theme, when compared to the message of Britain’s decline later in the decade, rocks the boat.

Neither theme is particularly energizing, nor are they themes to which Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative Party just a few years later would pick up and build upon. Rather, Britain, according to Thatcher, who represented a new generation of conservatives who were critical of both parties’ establishments, was declining rapidly because leaders from both parties rested on their laurels.

_Intra-Party Debate over Decline and the Future of the Country_

The Conservative message going into 1974 was optimistic and focused on Conservative economic successes. However, this optimism rubbed some within the party the wrong way, including Nigel Lawson. Lawson had access to the Conservative party hierarchy, because he was “Special Political Adviser Attached to Conservative Party

---

188 CPA SC 73/21 – Manifesto Themes – 18 September 1973
Headquarters” at this time and was a journalist. Eventually, he would become a MP and a member of Thatcher’s cabinet. Lawson saw the present economic situation as “grave” and a setback for any immediate hopes for prosperity. In 1973 Lawson wrote an “alternative” or “contingency” manifesto. The idea, in Lawson’s mind, was to better reflect the country’s dismal economic prospects and the mood of the country.189 This document, entitled “An Appeal to the Nation,” was dramatic and not at all optimistic as his opening sentence exemplifies: “This is the moment of truth for the British people.”190 Lawson “thought that the lengthy draft manifesto, celebrating economic success, was quite inappropriate. […] Lawson thought that the economic prospects were poor and that people should be warned of the tough times ahead.”191 The document contained many themes that would reappear as the decade wore on, such as the dangers of inflation, the “self-inflicted wounds” of industrial militancy, and the pessimism of the current moment in British history. Specifically, Lawson pointed to three “distinct but cumulative” dimensions of the danger that threatened Britain. First, Lawson pointed to the worldwide economic crisis—specifically caused by the increase in the price of oil by the major oil-producing nations. Second, Lawson saw inflation as a major threat, which was, in Lawson’s view, partly a function of rising world prices, but also the “self-inflicted wound” of pay rises at home. Finally, Lawson saw trade union militancy as subverting the will of the people and of the democratically elected parliament and government.

189 Ball and Seldon 2014, 356.
Taken together, these three dimensions painted a much grimmer picture of the state of Britain than Conservatives in charge had in mind, or perhaps even believed.

Lawson’s memo, while dramatic, saw a pathway out of Britain’s present economic condition and toward a more prosperous nation. As I argued in Chapter 3, declinism for declinism’s sake rarely works, especially publicly. There is almost always an upside to a declinist message, whereby declinists offer a “way out” of decline. In several places, Lawson points to the promise of North Sea oil as a potential avenue to solve Britain’s dependence on world oil prices as well as balance of payment problems. Moreover, Lawson’s memo, while drawing upon themes that would eventually be characteristic of Thatcher’s agenda (a preoccupation with inflation, tackling the issue of unions, etc.), it does not meet a strict definition of a declinist piece, in that it does not engage in negative peer comparisons, assert outright that Britain is a nation in international decline, or take a very long view of British history, as is typical in other New Right writings later in the decade. However, Lawson’s memo is instructive for tracing declinism, and for my theory, in two respects. First, the reaction to Lawson’s memo exemplifies the notion that parties and their leaders in power find it difficult to strike a negative tone about the state of the country. Second, and perhaps more importantly, moderate Conservatives saw their brief tenure in government as mildly successful and that such success would continue. They were insiders who did not engage

---

192 “An Alternative Manifesto: Foreword” 7 December 1973. CPA OG/73/136. See especially pages 2 and 14. This sentiment is heavily contradicted in the later Stepping Stones report, which refers to the promise of North Sea Oil as a mask covering the severity of Britain’s economic decline.

193 Lawson is actually quite hopeful on this front, that Britain’s North Sea oil may give her comparative advantages compared to competitor nations in the long run, if used properly.
in self-blame. They shook off critiques, diagnoses of decline, and prescriptions for renewal because they were not interested in major overhauls in the way Britain was governed. It would take an outsider to gain a foothold in the party in order to advance such a message.

The reaction to Lawson’s alternative manifesto “Appeal to the Nation” is indicative of a Party divided and a growing sense of frustration with the status quo of Conservative Party politics. In the meeting of the Steering Committee, Lord Carrington found the document far too divisive, to which former Conservative PM Sir Alec Douglas-Home and others agreed. Others, such as James Douglas, pushed Lawson on the tone, but also the logic of presenting such a manifesto to the public when the Party was trying to paint a picture of stability, of Britain united in moderation:

This form of Manifesto would be for the scenario by Sophocles. Even if, as you rather imply in the last paragraph of your forward, the language would be toned down and the appeal made perhaps rather less dramatic, we are still postulating an appeal in a crisis situation presented as in high tragedy as a cross-roads where the elector must choose between great and fateful alternatives. Can we, however, really combine this approach—“The moment of truth”, “If the line cannot be held”, “Strains that will tear apart the very fabric of our society”—with the appeal from the posture of moderation. Can Oedipus ever be a moderate?

Douglas’ response to the memo is telling. Douglas notes the difficulty of making grand statements regarding the state of Britain—of Britain at a crossroads, with one path leading to doom and despair and the other to promise and prosperity—and the attempt of the party at the time to “appeal from the posture of moderation.” Conservatives in charge

---

194 CPA SC/73/25 – “Steering Committee Minutes” 20 December 1973. However, Lawson himself admitted the tone was perhaps over-dramatized, and that it is easier to scale back the tone than to “tone up.” See “An Alternative Manifesto: Foreword” 7 December 1973. CPA OG/73/136.
during this period, in short, were reluctant to go dramatic, to paint the immediate future of Britain as one of decline and demise if not for the public voting Conservative.

Ultimately, the message the Conservatives sent to the electorate tried to balance moderation and fairness with the promise of prosperity, summed up in their election manifesto’s vision of a Britain “united in moderation” in which change could come “without revolution…”196 Incremental change was the answer to Britain’s problems of the day, not a fundamental re-think of Britain’s economic, political, and moral fiber. As I argue in Chapter 3, declinism tends to focus on big changes, rather than small tinkering, declinism would be difficult to put forward to the public without the Conservatives “owning” some of the responsibility for the decline, because the Conservatives did not seek to separate themselves from their predecessors—as declinists often do—nor did they see what they were doing or proposing as fundamentally different than the past. It would take an outsider or newcomer to do this from an insurgent wing of the party.

Moreover, the Conservatives thought that the public craved certainty due to fears arising from Britain’s economic troubles. Declinism would have only exacerbated such fears and anxiety, which would have worked against the image of the party—and the government—that the Conservatives wanted to cultivate. Behind the scenes, the Conservatives were optimistic about their electoral chances. During a cabinet meeting before the election, Heath and the cabinet were “content and saw no need to modify their plans.” “We’re winning nicely, thank you,” one Conservative assessed of their situation, while another expressed that the Conservatives had to “hold it steady.”197

---

197 Butler and Kavanagh 1974, 94.
The Labour Party in Opposition

Over in Transport House, the Labour Party, as the party in the opposition, could have picked up on declinism as a theme for their election campaign, but did not. A purely instrumental, opposition-based, explanation of declinism suggests that they would indeed be inclined to push such a message. Their public statements, party manifesto, and behind-the-scenes discussions, however, make clear that they were largely uninterested in campaigning on the theme of Britain’s decline.

Declinism was unlikely to emerge from Labour during this period for three reasons. First, the Labour campaign in 1974 wanted—much like the Conservatives—to portray themselves and their leader as competent and sensible. Harold Wilson, according to Labour, was going to calm everything and everyone down, to work together with the unions and the managers. Additionally, Labour adopted a campaign tactic of portraying itself and its policies as positive. This, again, is incompatible with declinist rhetoric, in which fundamental change is needed, rather than a dash of common sense and conciliation. To claim decline is to claim things are not going well, that there are deep and (often) long-standing roots to the decline of the nation. Labour was not interested in this presentation of their policies or their message.

Labour leaders, like the Tories, wanted to focus on a narrow set of issues they thought were at the forefront of the public’s mind and to which they had an advantage over the Heath government. These issues included housing, pensions, the EEC, prices and

198 Beckett 2011, 151.
199 Butler and Kavanagh 1974, 93.
the cost of living.\textsuperscript{200} Behind the scenes, future Labour Prime Minister Jim Callaghan argued that the party “must campaign on simple issues.”\textsuperscript{201} Harold Wilson argued that the party should campaign on prices, rents, and mortgages.\textsuperscript{202} Wilson ended the meeting by again suggesting first that “no attack should be made on the Labour Governments of 1964/1970”—of which Wilson was a part—and that the Labour Party “must campaign on prices, the poor housing record of the Government, the Balance of Payments deficit, industrial disputes and issues of the like kind.”\textsuperscript{203} Indeed, Harold Wilson’s Leader’s Speech at the Labour Party conference in 1973 heavily stressed prices, mentioning prices (inflation) no less than twenty times during the speech. In short, Labour leaders, with respect to electoral messaging and strategy, preoccupied with so-called ‘bread and butter’ issues.

Second, while my theory expects declinism to emerge from the opposition, I argue it is more likely to emerge when there are ‘newcomers’ or generational shifts within the opposition party. This was not the case during this period. The Labour Party leadership, epitomized by the likes of Harold Wilson and Jim Callaghan were established Labour Party members, who had previously held posts in the party, including Prime Minister, Home Secretary, and Chancellor of the Exchequer. Therefore, the generational change needed within the opposition to push a new message of renewal were not present during this time.

\textsuperscript{200} Butler and Kavanagh 1974, 93.  
\textsuperscript{201} LPOA “Minutes of a Parliamentary Committee Meeting held on Wednesday 16th January 1974.”  
\textsuperscript{202} LPOA “Minutes of a Parliamentary Committee Meeting held on Wednesday 16th January 1974.”  
\textsuperscript{203} LPOA “Minutes of a Parliamentary Committee Meeting held on Wednesday 16th January 1974”, 5.
Third, declinism did not fit their vision for Britain. As I detail below, Labour already saw Britain as a ‘medium rank’ power and emphasized the role Britain could play in creating a world of ‘peace and progress.’ In the realm of foreign policy, Labour’s keystone document of the early 1970s, Labour’s Programme for Britain provides a telling glimpse into how little the party was concerned at this time with Britain’s international position. In their foreign policy section, Labour first take pride in the “historic decisions concerning Britain’s role in the world” of previous Labour governments, including decolonization and the pulling back of military commitments outside of Europe. Labour was explicit when it came to their message to the British people with respect to foreign policy and Britain’s role in the world. First, the Labour Party tellingly characterized Britain’s decline as a ‘change.’ Second, Labour assumed that the British people had accepted the change of Britain’s world power. The Conservatives, on the other hand, would see Britain’s place as one of a “number of similar medium-sized powers” as settling for second-best, and campaigned upon decline as something that the British people should not accept.

Since the end of the Second World War Britain’s status has changed from that of a first rank to a medium rank power. The post-war dissolution of the Empire, the comparative rate of decline in our economic growth and the concentration, especially at elections, on domestic rather than world affairs, are symptoms of this change. British Governments, more than the British people, have been slow to acknowledge our new limitations as a world power, but such recognition must underlie our future relations with other countries. But neither the traumatic changes over the last decades in Britain’s position…should cause us to postpone or ignore the question of the role we want Britain to play in the world. The fact that we are now only one of a number of similar medium-sized powers does not mean that we cannot chart for ourselves a course which is both radical and imaginative.

However, one Labour Party official, Denis Healey, did raise the prospect of campaigning on Britain’s international decline. The notes of a 16 January 1974 meeting of the Shadow Cabinet state “Mr. Healey thought much could be made of the fast declining influence of Britain in the world.” Healey, who was to be Chancellor of the Exchequer two months later, by all appearances, was not picked up and elaborated on by those in the meeting, nor was it mentioned in subsequent meetings of the Shadow Cabinet. In many respects, Healey was perhaps the most likely member of the Shadow Cabinet to raise the prospect of Britain’s decline internationally; throughout his career, Healey served in roles that would have made him particularly sensitive to Britain’s place in the world, such as Secretary of Defense and Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Conclusion

In this section, I have examined the lack of declinism in the early 1970s through the lens of my theoretical expectations. The Conservative Party leadership were uninterested in messages of decline, as were the Labour Party leadership. Both parties were led at this time by leaders who had long ties to the party. The introduction of declinist rhetoric would have raised questions of (recent) past party performance and would have cut against messages of stability both parties sought to maintain. No clear
outsider or newcomer emerged who could forge a different kind of election coalition at this stage. I next trace the emergence of declinism in the Conservative Party in the mid-1970s, after Labour’s victory at the polls. As I will describe, the emergence of the ‘New Right’ in Britain, spearheaded by Margaret Thatcher, would bring declinism to the fore and manage a campaign built around a message Britain’s decline and the repudiation of past Labour and Conservative governments.

III. The Emergence of the New Right and Declinism within the Conservative Party

“One of the many reasons for our electoral failure is that people believe too many Conservatives have become socialists already.”
-Margaret Thatcher, 1975

“It was only in April 1974 that I was converted to Conservatism. (I had thought I was a Conservative but now I see that I was not really one at all).”
-Keith Joseph, 1975

The election loss in 1974 inspired a re-think and Heath’s loss to Thatcher as the head of the Conservative Party in 1975 provided an opening for change within the party and facilitated the rise of an insurgent candidate from outside the party’s mainstream. This change did not come overnight, but it can largely be pegged to the consecutive 1974 election losses. As Cowley and Bailey (2000) persuasively show, while Thatcher emerged victorious in part because she was not Heath—the so-called ‘orthodox account’ of the rise of Thatcher within the party—there is considerable evidence that, ideologically, Heath won the “left” of the Conservative Party and Thatcher the “right.” Heath won the inner circle, senior party figures, and the establishment Conservative

207 Kavanagh 2005, 224
208 Cited in Denham and Garnett 2002, 250.
press, while Thatcher won the backbenches. Once it became clear that Heath would not win the leadership election, momentum swung to Thatcher and she became Party Leader.

In this section, I highlight the emergence of declinism within the Conservative Party between 1974 and 1979’s election campaign. In particular, I highlight the role that Keith Joseph played in fomenting declinist ideas, which were part and parcel of his broader push toward shifting the Conservative Party to the right and encouraging the party to adopt particular social, political, and economic policies to put the brakes on Britain’s decline. Moreover, I also highlight the development of an important report during this time, *Stepping Stones*, which was written by individuals associated with the New Right (including John Hoskyns and Norman Strauss) who grew dissatisfied with the approach of moderate Conservatives toward trade unions. While showing the emerging declinist themes within the party, I also show how the moderates within the party reacted to such proposals. Crucially, this highlights the intra-party divisions around not only messages of international decline, but also the reality behind such thinking. In other words, those who advanced declinism, and those who pushed back against such ideas, highlight (1) different assessments of whether Britain was even declining and (2) the ideological nature of declinism during this time, as something that the establishment Conservatives were nervous—if not resistant—of and that the New Right fully embraced. This section thus shows that declinism emerged within the Conservative Party from Conservatives who were not beholden to past Conservative successes (or lack thereof), who were uninterested in moderation, and who were “self-critical” in the sense that they

---

challenged not only their political enemies, but also their own predecessors. In this sense, they were initially “outsiders,” but would make their mark on the party that would characterize the Conservatives through the late 1970s and 1980s.

I begin by describing Keith Joseph’s role in fomenting declinism within the party, particularly his report “Notes Toward the Definition of Policy” in 1975 and his relationship with Thatcher and “Thatcherism.” Again, I show how this report was met with pushback from within the party from moderates. Finally, I outline the Stepping Stones report, which would come to be described as “the effective blueprint of the 1979-1983 Thatcher government,” and show how it too was met with criticism from the middle. By outlining the back-and-forth between these reports, their writers, and party old guard, I show that the Conservatives contested declinism within the Party and show the importance of the New Right in bringing declinism to the Conservatives in the 1970s. Declinism was not compatible with tinkering, and those who thought Britain’s problems were immediately solvable—for example, with the discovery of North Sea oil—were skeptical of the depth of Britain’s decline and its root causes.

*Keith Joseph*

Among the emerging New Right of the Conservative Party, Keith Joseph played a key role as an architect of declinism. Perhaps best remembered for his “gaffes,” the growing faction within the Conservative Party on the far right saw Joseph as a potential

---

leader of the party, despite his tendency for saying outlandish things. Keith Joseph grew to prominence in the mid-1970s for his widely respected speeches on monetarism and economic liberalism more generally. While a member of the Conservative Party leadership during Heath’s premiership as Secretary of State for Social Services, Joseph did not look fondly on his role in the Heath government, confiding afterward that he felt a sense of “guilt” for his role “for all that had gone wrong despite the fact that he was not really in the economic policy sector.” Keith Joseph, in other words, was an insider in the strict sense, but was also a dissatisfied member of the party who did not look fondly on recent Conservative governing. Given Joseph’s perceived political liabilities, Thatcher emerged as the main proponent of the New Right. However, Joseph’s declinism, intellectually, was instrumental during this period, and his personal friendship with Thatcher meant that they were two peas in the declinist pod of a new movement within the Conservative party.

Joseph circulated a paper in April 1975 banally titled “Notes Towards the Definition of Policy” to members of the Leader’s Consultative Committee, headed by Margaret Thatcher which critiqued not only the Labour Party, but his own party. The

---

211 Such as “the balance of our population, our human stock is threatened” by low-class women bringing children into the world who would become “future unmarried mothers, delinquents, denizens of our borstals, sub-normal educational establishments, prisons, hostels for drifters.” Denham and Garnett 2002, 265; For the full speech, see https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/101830
212 https://www.theguardian.com/politics/1994/dec/12/obituaries
213 https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/114757
214 Among his supporters, Margaret Thatcher canvassed on Joseph’s behalf to become leader. When Joseph decided to not run for party leadership, he invited his good friend and close ally Margaret Thatcher for a meeting. Upon hearing Joseph was taking himself out of the running for party leader, Thatcher told him “if you’re not going to stand, I will, because someone who represents our views has to stand.” In short, Joseph was not only very close to Thatcher as a person, but exemplified New Right thinking in the party at this time.
report itself was anything but banal. “We meet under the shadow of electoral defeat and national decline,” Joseph began, “to take stock, to work out a strategy for party renewal and national recovery. Our electoral reverses last year were the heaviest this century. The national crisis of the economy, morale and political stability is serious. It is no use closing our eyes to the dangers…Now is our opportunity, perhaps our last, to make a new start.” Joseph saw the Conservative Party as succumbing to the middle-ground, to consensus politics which led to national decline: “we must not regard them [our mistakes] as of only recent origin. The trouble began probably over a century ago when our lead and our national initiative began to falter. We made things worse when, after the war, we chose the path of consensus.” Joseph painted this opportunity to change path as “perhaps our last.” However, it was not just consensus politics that Joseph saw as problematic.

Somewhat surprisingly—given that much of the focus on British decline has historically centered on Britain’s economic decline—Joseph saw Britain’s decline as something much deeper than an economic malaise, pertaining instead to the health of the body politic: the decline of self-reliance, of thrift, of respect for laws, and the increase of mass immigration. Joseph drew inspiration for his report “Notes on the Definition of Policy” from an editorial by Lord Hailsham, which is worth quoting at length:

The cause of our troubles is not economic, nor has it anything to do with world conditions or our loss of empire, or with any other easy excuses which we are so ready to accept, and our present rulers to invent, for our comfort. It is a disease of the spirit for which there is no one to blame but ourselves. There is no objective factor in our present situation with which our neighbors have not had to contend.

216 LCC/75/71 – “Notes Towards the Definition of Policy” 4 April 1975, 3.
217 LCC/75/71 – “Notes Towards the Definition of Policy” 4 April 1975, 3.
218 LCC/75/71 – “Notes Towards the Definition of Policy” 4 April 1975, 3.
since 1945, except those which, at the outset, rendered their situation far less promising and more difficult than our own. There is no possible excuse for our bad performance, which is due, and in my opinion entirely due, to facts wholly within our control as a nation […] we must recognize our own nation as, until recently, among the most successful political communities ever to organize itself on the face of the planet. Yet we are suffering from a revulsion of feeling against our national past and traditions, our moral and spiritual values, our political and economic achievements, which is comparable only with the malaise of nations smarting under some national humiliation or prolonged failure. Yet we have lost no wars. We have faced no difficulties greater than our neighbors. We have no reason whatsoever for our loss of self-confidence.219

Lord Hailsham’s editorial highlights several key aspects of declinist narratives, as well as the frustrations held by those in the New Right at this time, including intra-party critiques of past Conservative policy. First, Hailsham dismisses the notion that Britain’s troubles have anything to do with world conditions, a common talking point among Labour and (moderate) Conservatives. This, in Hailsham’s view, takes the culpability and agency off the shoulders of the country and onto abstract forces abroad, forces which competitor countries have also had to deal with. Rather, Hailsham outlines in this editorial why Britain herself is to blame for her decline. Joseph’s memo took on much the same tone as Lord Hailsham’s editorial. Joseph made a laundry list of different Conservative failures, in which the Conservatives were, in Joseph’s view, “competing with the Socialists” to perform tasks that the government need not do, nor should have the power to do. The reasons for and markers of Britain’s decline, according to Joseph, included both economic, political, social, and moral reasons for decline:

1. Employment. Undertaking full employment, regardless of wage-levels, productivity and the state of the economy and the world.
2. Education. Over-riding differences of talent with respect to education, which led to a decline in levels of education.

---

219 Copy located at the end of LCC/75/71 – “Notes Towards the Definition of Policy” 4 April 1975.
3. Immigration. “Mass immigration was imposed against the wishes and forebodings of the overwhelming majority of the people. The concept of the nation has been progressively diminished…”220

4. Rule of Law. The Conservatives have been weak on the rule of law, allowing mass defiance of law and order.

5. Values. “For fear of being considered intolerant or old-fashioned, we have stood by and permitted political and moral attacks on society and on values. We have felt ourselves inhibited from denouncing and counteracting the evils of communism without and subversion within.”221

Additionally, in speeches made throughout the period in which the Conservative Party were in the opposition, Joseph pointed to indicators and causes of British decline that were both economic and non-economic, including: “a demotivating tax system, increasing nationalization, compressed differentials, low and stagnant productivity, high unemployment, many failing public services and inexorably growing central government expenditure; an obsession with equality and with pay, price and dividend controls; a unique set of legal privileges and immunities for trade unions; and, finally, since 1974, top of the Western league for inflation, bottom of the league for growth.”222 In a separate important discussion paper produced in 1976 by Joseph for the Steering Committee, entitled “Our Tone of Voice and Our Tasks,” Joseph further pushes the notion that economic issues need not dominate the Conservative agenda or message, but rather, at least equal attention should be paid to non-economic issues such as patriotism, violent crime, and immigration.223 The lack of metrics evoked by proponents of declinism during this period is particularly interesting and says something interesting about how they

220 LCC/75/71 – “Notes Towards the Definition of Policy” 4 April 1975.
221 LCC/75/71 – “Notes Towards the Definition of Policy” 4 April 1975.
222 Speech given by Joseph on the 5th of February 1979 to members of the Bow Group. Transcript located in CPA PPB 176/6: Keith Joseph
viewed Britain’s decline: decline was so obvious to them that it was taken as a given, and focus should be on fixing Britain’s problems rather than diagnosing them.

The Leader’s Consultative Committee’s response to “Notes Towards the Definition of Policy” was one of skepticism and a rejection of the self-blame Joseph engaged in. Minutes from the meeting describe a skeptical reception. In particular, moderate Conservatives rejected the self-blame—particularly intra-party blame—for Britain’s decline in Joseph’s memo (and by extension Lord Hailsham’s editorial). Moreover, moderate, establishment, Conservatives sought to explain why they chose the path of consensus, a path that was so abhorrent to members of the New Right, in electoral terms: we would not gain power without reaching to the middle. The minutes note that:

Several members, while regarding the policy suggestions as valuable, thought the paper was too critical of the recent past and, in particular of recent Conservative policy. They emphasized that the party should not repudiate its previous attempts to reach a national consensus and to hold the middle ground of public opinion, as this was the key not only to electoral success, on which all else depended, but also governing and staying in power. Conservative policy should be evolutionary, and built on the past, not revolutionary rejecting the past. Stability in approach was also important…” […] “it was generally felt that the Conservative Government of 1970-74 had, on the whole, tried to do the right things, but failed to explain its intentions adequately.

The last sentence in the excerpt is particularly telling. Moderate Conservatives saw the failures of the Conservatives of recent past as merely a communication issue rather than a fundamentally wrong-headed approach to governing the country. This sentiment, contrasted by that of Joseph and other members of the New Right during this time, is at odds with the premise of declinism during this time, that both parties rested on

224 LCC/75 (57th Meeting) – “Leader’s Consultative Committee Minutes” 11 April 1975.
225 LCC/75 (57th Meeting) – “Leader’s Consultative Committee Minutes” 11 April 1975. More generally on Thatcher’s disdain for ‘consensus’—even the word itself—see Green 2006, 29-30.
their laurels and oversaw the decline of Britain without implementing radical change to stem decline.

Additional—far more candid—notes of the meeting in Lord Hailsham’s personal papers suggest that Keith Joseph’s document was hotly contested within the Leader’s Consultative Committee. The notes start with Reginald Maulding flatly stating “I do not agree with one little bit” of Joseph’s report. Much of the criticism centered on Joseph’s suggestion in his report that Conservatives chose the “path of consensus,” which, in Joseph’s view, was a socialist consensus, and made the Conservatives of recent past complicit in Britain’s decline. Ian Gilmour, a soon-to-be Thatcher critic, suggested that the postwar consensus to 1970 was a Conservative consensus, rather than a Labour/socialist one. The Conservatives of recent past, according to Gilmour, were correct in pursuing consensus politics and the middle-ground.

Moreover, those negative of Joseph’s report suggested that pushing away from the center is electorally divisive, ultimately a losing strategy, and that the paper was far too pessimistic. Michael Haseltine argued that “you need to command consensus to get power.” Timothy Raison suggested that there was “too much misery in Keith’s paper.” In terms of the political consequences of Joseph’s memo, Francis Pym argued that Joseph’s paper was “a recipe for disaster” because “society is moving left”—and thus moves to the extreme right would not match the expectations or feelings of the public—

---

228 Cited in Toye 2013. See https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/111134
and that there “must be continuity.” In a separate diary entry, Lord Hailsham noted that Lord Carrington said that the Keith Joseph paper was “a recipe for defeat.”

Keith Joseph replied to critics by again returning to the theme of relative decline so prevalent in his report: “The hundred years of relative decline (since the Great Exhibition) is objectively demonstrable,” Keith said (according to Lord Hailsham), and “There was NOT a Conservative consensus before 1970.” Lord Hailsham’s notes conclude with: “there was hardly a dull moment” in the meeting. The reception Joseph’s report received exemplifies the split within the Conservative Party between the ‘establishment’ and the New Right. The establishment Conservatives had a particular narrative or understanding of the postwar Conservative Party, while the New Right rejected such a view. Moreover, the negative reaction to Joseph’s writing exemplifies the argument I make in Chapter 2 that declinism is not particularly compatible with tinkering at the margins of policy: those rejecting Keith Joseph’s declinist report saw policy fundamentally different than the members of the New Right. For mainstream/moderate Conservatives during this time, policy was seen as an incremental, evolutionary, process that was not predicated upon radical changes to the way the economy functioned, how the country was governed, or indeed how the Conservative Party should reach out to the British public.

---

230 https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/111129
Stepping Stones

Stepping Stones was a “communications programme” that emerged from the right wing of the party as, ostensibly, a response to the trade union problem. However, the Stepping Stones report was much more than just a policy report on the ‘union problem;’ the report, delivered to Thatcher in 1977, and kept very secret for the Conservative Party inner leadership’s eyes only, urged the next Tory government to undergo a “sea-change in Britain’s political economy,” to reject socialism, to stall and overcome continued economic decline, and develop a communications program for the public that persuades them that they want more than just ‘material results,’ but also a ‘healthy society.’

According to historian Andrew Taylor, Stepping Stones “was originally conceived … as a communications strategy to convince the electorate of the need for change, to provide a common theme for the party in opposition, and to persuade the shadow cabinet of the seriousness of the situation facing the country.”

In Stepping Stones, the Conservatives point to downward trends in Britain’s share of world trade, industrial production, and per capita GNP as indicators of Britain’s problems, but also social dimensions in other advanced democracies as well. This intersection of social, cultural, moral, and economic considerations of Britain’s decline is illustrated in the Stepping Stones report; the Conservatives saw moral and cultural values as key messages alongside economic messages to convince the electorate that Britain’s

---

232 For the historical context of the Stepping Stones Report, see Taylor 2001; Smith and Morton 2001.
233 https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/111771
ills require deep change. If change does not come soon, the Conservatives warned in 1977, “inch by inch, by our behaviour, we turn ourselves into the sort of people (eg. More like the Italians, less like the Germans) who no longer have what it takes to solve our own problems.”

The authors of the *Stepping Stones* report fully embraced the notion of Britain’s decline. In the report, they spoke of Britain as *potentially* becoming “an under-capitalised, under-developed country whose political expectations make it impossible to bootstrap our economy back to west European status…until the point, which must eventually come, where we start again as a low-wage, second-world economy, trying to keep up with Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore.” As evidenced by Figure 1, the authors of *Stepping Stones* saw Britain’s economic problems as threefold: declining profits as a percentage of GNP, balance of payment problems, and a declining share of world trade. However, these indicators of Britain’s decline were manifest symptoms of deeper problems; they were caused, in large part, by industrial disputes, but the industrial disputes were themselves a function of “social and political sickness. As the authors noted: “Members of the Steering Group know how intractable the UK problem is, and how its array of social, industrial and economic symptoms/causes interact together to accelerate the process of decay. There is also general agreement that North Sea oil could simply mask this decay process, so that when the oil runs out the underlying damage has

---


reached the point where recovery to what might be called “full west European status” is no longer possible.”237

These passages from the report illustrate a number of aspects of declinism. First, the passages drive home the point that declinism is at odds with tinkering at the margins of policy. Second, the authors make clear what members of the New Right thought could be Britain’s fate: a so-called “a low-wage, second-world economy” that did not meet the standards of “full west European status.” This underlines the position from which they thought Britain was declining, as a high-wage first-world west European economy, to something far less and contemptable, in their view.

“Why is it that so few people understand that Britain may actually be “finished” already, as far as regaining that economic status is concerned?” the authors pondered. Their answer would form the basis of their subsequent election strategy; the authors’ answer to their question centered on the difficulty Britons have conceiving of national decline as “a single systemic process; a process too complex ever to be fully understood; and one which generates its own momentum.”238 The communication program to tackle such failures of national understanding centered on things like dismissing North Sea oil as a temporary band-aid—at odds with some in the Conservative Party who thought there was reason to be optimistic on this front—linking the issue of trade union leadership and the Labour Party to the corruption and economic distress Britain has felt, and communicating to the public that the promise of short-term material improvement, so

common during elections, was settling for second-best, whereas the Tories were
advancing a vision of a healthy society more broadly.

While Thatcher’s 1979 electoral rhetoric was wide-ranging and multi-causal with
respect to the causes of Britain’s purported decline, the Conservative electoral message
was far simpler than their behind-the-scenes causal diagrams of Britain’s decline, as
evidenced in Figures 16 and 17. The authors of *Stepping Stones* focused on Britain’s
economic decline, not because they did not find other aspects of Britain’s decline
important, but because they believed the economic medicine required to cure an ill
Britain was less palatable to the British public than some of their other positions, such as
tighter immigration, a stronger handle on the unions, more law and order, or a restoration
of national patriotism.
Figure 16: Diagram 1 in Stepping Stones
Figure 17: Diagram 2 in *Stepping Stones*
The Steering Committee met on the 30th of January 1978 in order to discuss the *Stepping Stones* report. During the meeting, John Davies, Shadow Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and holdover from the Heath era, remarked that he thought that *Stepping Stones* was overly pessimistic, arguing that “the prospects for the British economy were better than for a number of our competitors, such as France and Germany…”239 He argued that the Conservatives should “not exaggerate the arguments as to the inevitability of our decline…Our investment, growth and balance of payments were all likely to improve considerably. He preferred us to emphasize the great opportunity that improving circumstances had given us…”240 Upon hearing that Thatcher disagreed with his analysis of Britain, Davies replied “a major company with which he was connected had suggested that the three most promising areas for investment were the USA, Canada and the UK, in that order.”241 This assessment of Britain’s position and her relative prospects, while not justified explicitly in the meeting minutes by Davies, was likely due to Davies’ belief that North Sea oil would solve balance-of-payment problems and give Britain a leg-up on her competitors.242 Lord Thorneycroft agreed with much of Davies’ intervention and reaction to *Stepping Stones*. Such sentiment—that North Sea oil may cure Britain’s ills—is at odds with the message, and the belief, of many in the New Right that Britain’s wounds were deep, were multifaceted (economic, social, political,

242 I make this inference because he explicitly references balance of payments.
etc.), and required a sea-change in governance and the relationship between government, the people, and the economy.

The disagreement over the implications arising from *Stepping Stones* shows the extent to which there can be intra-party disagreement over decline/declinism. Another example of pushback regarding the thrust of declinism in the *Stepping Stones* report emerges in an important memo entitled “Merging the Strategies” in February of 1978, which sought, as its title suggests, to bring *Stepping Stones* into conversation with the work conducted by the Conservative Research Department. The memo by John Hoskyns notes that “some Shadow members probably think *Stepping Stones* overstates the UK problem … I’m not sure why people persist with such optimism; probably natural reluctance to admit that the problem may be insoluble, tendency to look at the economy as an object, rather than a process with a life of its own; unawareness of positive feedback. This attitude of ‘Oh come on, it’s not that bad!’ explains why governments have been shooting behind an accelerating target for the last thirty years.” Such self-criticism—behind closed doors—highlights the ways in which the New Right narrate their own past failure within the framework of a broader political failure to halt Britain’s decline. This episode suggests two aspects of my argument. First, the leadership, led by members of the so-called ‘New Right’ were far more invested in a message of British decline than some of the more peripheral, or backbench, members who were once more central to party policy and leadership. Once the New Right were in control of the

---

244 CPA CRD 4/30/5/3-6 – “Merging the strategies” February 10, 1978.
Conservative party, their declinist thought and message was able to proliferate within the party, with dissent still emanating from the establishment Conservatives of the past.

Second, and as I argue throughout the dissertation, decline is often ambiguous, or at least contested, even to members of the same political party. Not all Conservatives bought the message of British decline, at least the overly pessimistic variety put forth by Thatcher and members of the New Right.

In sum, I have sought in this section to trace the origins of declinism within the Conservative Party prior to the 1979 general election. Members of the New Right were pushing declinist messages during and in the immediate aftermath of the 1974 election campaigns. They were rebuffed by moderate Conservatives—insiders—who thought the message too divisive, pessimistic, and antithetical to the message they wanted to put forth to the country of competence and stability. Moreover, members of the New Right, discontent with the way the party was run as far back as 1945, sought to criticize their party’s culpability in bringing about British decline. The Conservatives, these critics suggested, played a part in Britain’s economic, moral, and cultural decline because they sought consensus politics rather than keeping true to conservative values. Once the New Right, led by Thatcher, took control of the direction and message of the party, they advanced a message of decline that they had been developing—and arguing with insider, establishment Conservatives about—for years. In the next section, I shift from intra-party, ideological, dynamics to the inter-party politics of declinism in the buildup to the 1979 general election.
IV. Decline as a Theme and Electoral Strategy in 1978/79

“I can’t bear Britain in decline. I just can’t.”
-Margaret Thatcher on the BBC, six days before 3 May 1979 General Election

In this section I demonstrate thatdeclinist ideas—both general sentiments as well as specific policies—percolating within the Conservative Party in the mid-1970s were taken up and strategized as an explicit Conservative electoral message. I show that individuals in the Conservative Party’s departments tasked with research and election strategy evoked the notion of national decline as a potentially winning message for the Conservatives in the buildup to the 1979 general election, in line with the messaging strategy put forth by the ‘New Right’ in Stepping Stones. In order for unpopular policies that the New Right thought were required for national renewal to resonate with the public, they had to be framed in such a way that would resonate. The agenda put forward by the New Right required declinist narratives to advance policies that were markedly different than previous Conservative Party platforms. Finally, I touch upon how Labour sought to deal with Conservative messages of decline as the party in government. They returned to themes that irritated the New Right, including Britain’s susceptibility to world events and conditions and the problems with the global capitalist system that was—in their view—the cause of troubles.

Declinism’s Resonance: Conservatism and the Electorate

Lord Thorneycroft, mulling over the image of the Conservative Party in the aftermath of the 1974 defeat, frankly noted that the Conservatives “are thought to talk about the wrong things in the wrong voices and spend far too much time criticizing ourselves about the most complicated and to the public largely incomprehensible subjects rather than in slamming the Labour Party for their obvious faults or putting our own views on simple terms.”

This section seeks to show how Conservatives used broader messaging than they had done in the past and consciously told a story of Britain’s decline that sought to get the public thinking about the big picture of Britain’s decline rather than the usual nitty gritty statistic swapping and short-term arguments indicative of past campaigns. This shift from talking in “the most complicated” and “largely incomprehensible” ways—in Lord Thorneycroft’s words—to a larger narrative of Britain’s decline which brought together moral, cultural, social, and economic factors and comparisons with other nations came not just from explicit Conservative strategy, but their underlying ideological shift with the arrival of the New Right. Notions of making targeted, narrowly-focused, “problem-solving” appeals were replaced with broader messages regarding British decline and the culpability of Labour and—to a lesser extent publicly—past Conservative governments as well.

“Britain is in decline,” this new batch of Conservatives argued, and only the most unpatriotic and un-British among us would not recognize it and the need for renewal.

Conservative planning memos from the period note that the concept of British decline—and promises of renewal—should resonate with the public. Conservatives thought that declinism would be a winning electoral strategy and a way to unite the country with a renewed sense of vigor and purpose. The “mood should be ripe for a fresh start politics,” a key election planning document argued, “we offer more than a cold shower...a vision of what Britain could and should be like in a moderate and sensible and relevant way.”

Current anxieties among the public, whether it is an absence of law and order, industrial disputes, inflation, or what have you, are, according to Conservative planners, something that can be seized upon: “what the people want is what we want. Their hopes and anxieties find an echo in our policies...The theme—without being apocalyptic—is that Britain isn’t working.”

This is a candid expression of an argument scholars of declinist rhetoric often make: apocalyptic visions are rare in declinism, or as Josef Joffe puts it: “darkness is the prelude to dawn. The gloomy forecast reviles past and present in order to promise the brightest of futures. Start with fire and brimstone, then jump to grace and deliverance.”

General election planning memos from the Conservative Party Research Department to Margaret Thatcher encouraged the theme of decline and renewal as a winning message to the British people to the Leader of the Opposition. The memos noted

---

247 CPA CRD 4/30/50/37-41 – “Planning Meeting” December 15, 1978. Copy 8. It is important, here, to note that such references to the Conservative’s “moderate” stance was emerging from perhaps the most moderate factions within the Conservative Party, its research department. Moreover, there was an attempt, in an era in which Britain’s postwar consensus seemingly vanished, to claim that what one was doing was the commonsensical, middle-of-the-road way that the British people were on board with. The scholarship of Thatcher’s reign suggests that they were anything but moderate.


249 Joffe 2014, 47.
that “while we must avoid big promises, we have still got to offer people hope.”

“There is no reason why we cannot do as well as the French or the Germans” the memo to Thatcher noted, “we have fallen from first to last in the European League in about fifteen years. We can climb back up just as fast. There is hope; there is a better way of doing things; we can end the “slow handclap years” and do better for our children.”

This, ultimately, was a strong current undergirding Thatcher’s campaign message to the British people.

In February 1978, prominent Tory MPs drafted a (secret) report entitled “Themes,” which sought to outline the Conservative message to the British people in a way that was fitting to the political context and mood of the British people. Themes begins by stating that the authors “do not believe that strong political themes – and the phrases that grow out of them – can be constructed in mid-air. They must flow from a single, fundamental message which is itself based on analysis of the present political situation and the mood of the people.”

The message would turn out to be “Let’s get back to common sense!,” with sub-themes including “look what has been lost” and that Britain was better than what it was becoming, drifting “towards the East European

---

250 The push to avoid ‘big promises’ by some in the party was due to the pessimism that existed within the party at the time regarding Britain’s short and long-term economic prospects. Some were worried that big promises would be met with big punishments in terms of party approval if the Conservatives were not able to turn things around immediately. Moreover, in preparation for what the Conservatives imagined would be fairly unpopular policies, such as cuts to public spending, they wanted to tamper expectations. CPA CRD 4/30/5/5: “General Election Planning” Memo, date unknown.
251 CPA CRD 4/30/5/5: “General Election Planning” Memo, date unknown.
State.”253 *Themes* also notes that the Conservatives should show patriotism, should stop apologizing for British colonialist history, and push matters of defence, since “people dislike the feeling of national impotence. We must show that strong defences could really matter -- that it is humiliating for Britons to rely solely on the Yanks, Frogs, and Krauts for their survival.”254 The authors, including Nigel Lawson and Angus Maude, noted the nostalgic inspiration for their paper, one which they thought would resonate with the public:

In our discussions we kept coming back to the phenomenon of the Jubilee: the extraordinary manifestation of *unity* in celebration; the *orderliness* of it all; the friendliness and affection shown towards the Queen; the way in which the whole concept seemed to transcend in everyone’s mind the problems and discords of our society.255

The authors of *Themes* wanted to push back against what they saw as the conventional wisdom of party politics of the time—that parties “must always appear forward-looking, never backward-looking.”256 Instead, they believed that the “‘change’ that people want today is much more a change back to known standards than a leap forward into the unknown … People will be more attracted by a promise … to restore some of the valued things they have *lost* than promises of a vague, bright, tomorrow.”257


257 It is worthwhile to contrast this perspective with the 1970 general election campaign slogan, “A Better Tomorrow,” or the 1974 implicit themes of continued growth, fairness, and stability. Thatcher Foundation
Angus Maude, an influential Conservative MP, and others saw the first step as fear, and the second step as hope: “fear is more potent than hope. So the first step is to make clear the threat that under Labour still more will be lost.” This is a common strategy among declinists: splash cold water on the face of the public, and tell them there will be more to come if they don’t heed your call before offering the alternative vision. Indeed, as Ian Budge notes,

Had Mrs. Thatcher campaigned only on the questions of trade union reform, reduction in the government role and income redistribution, the backlash of popular reaction might well have blown her, like Heath, off course in the first two years of her government. It was the way these reforms could be presented as the only way to check an otherwise irreversible decline in Britain's economic and international position which persuaded enough people that 'there is no alternative' to carrying them through.

Angus Maude, along with other top Conservative Party leaders such as Nigel Lawson, believed that the public had a long memory, and that Conservatives could play to both their memory of Labour failure as well as Britain’s glorified past. “People vote at General Elections on the stored memories of the whole period of office of the outgoing government.” Research on retrospective voting suggests otherwise (Achen & Bartels, 2016; Brug, Eijk, & Franklin, 2007; Hetherington, 1996), but key leaders of the Conservative Party seemed to subscribe to this belief in the 1970s. The writers of the report wanted voters to focus on double-pronged memories of the past: (1) the recent past, in which Labour was said to have a horrifying record; and (2) the glory days of the


259 This is asserted by Budge, but the nature of the claim is counterfactual. (Budge 1993), 17-18.
past, something to look back on and seek for the future. The *Themes* report argued that the Conservatives needed to get the British public to the polls “…remembering the horrors of 1974-77 rather than by any current improvement” before, “having loosened people’s attachment to the present Labour programme, we proceed to our own constructive alternative.”

The Campaign Planning Group met in March 1978 to discuss, among other things, what policies the Conservatives would advance, as well as what Alan Howarth described as “the strategic context” of the campaign—its themes and tone, and in particular the suggestion that people missed the Britain of old. Howarth, someone who was described as part of the “backbone” of the party pushed back against some of the grandiose claims in the *Themes* memo, and argued that “while admittedly among some young people there may be a kind of romantic yearning for a more “natural existence,” I doubt if the young in general do in fact feel “nostalgia” and a longing for a more settled, “civilised” existence.” He went on to say that “And, while elderly council tenants may feel nostalgic for old standards of discipline and for the days when Britain was a great power, I would be surprised if they were nostalgic for the social conditions of the 1930’s, or particularly amenable to sentimental appeal on the part of the Party that presided over them.”

---

relative from absolute decline. His pushback is also indicative, again, of the tension between those in the moderate camp of the Conservative Party and those reframing the party’s message to the public (Howarth, in 1995, would cross the aisle and join the Labour Party).

The Tories seemed less concerned with Howarth’s strategy of appealing to different subgroups of the electorate on demographic terms—say, age, gender, etc.—than they were about comparing different kinds of voters that they categorized as “feelers,” “thinkers,” and “doers.” This strategy stems from the *Stepping Stones* report. The Conservatives defined “thinkers” as elite members of society, as well as the media, “feelers” as the “emotional majority” of the electorate, and “doers” as those who are “only convinced by measures which have already been found to work in real life.”

*Stepping Stones* argued that, in order to get each of these groups on the Tories’ side: (1) thinkers needed proof against false dawn messages from the incumbent Labour Party of success where success fleeting; (2) feelers needed to feel shame and disgust at the failures of socialism and union power, of the erosion of order and values; and (3) doers needed messages tailored about the success of similar policies in other countries as an alternative to the economic suicide of socialism (e.g. from the Germans). This focus on these different types of Brits suggests that Conservatives were keen on their message resonating with different groups. Moreover, the strategy emerged from *Stepping Stones*,

---

264 They did recognize that younger voters were not particularly fans of the Tories, but those discussions didn’t settle on an explicit strategy to reach out to them. Their attempts to understand young voters began back in the early 1970s.


which makes the link between the writings of the New Right earlier in the decade and the Conservative strategy in 1979 explicit.

Labour’s Response as the Party in Power

As for the Labour Party, party documents preparing for the election noted the difficulty of striking a positive tone and sounding oblivious to the struggles of the country. In other words, the Labour Party, in preparing for the election as incumbents faced certain constraints that made “meeting declinism with declinism” difficult for them. The Labour Party shifted blame to the stuttering economy on the capitalist system as well as world economic conditions rather than something necessarily wrong with Britain. This position made it difficult for Labour to navigate electoral pressures to seek the middle ground, give agency to the government to fix things, and also pose deeper critiques that may not resonate with the average Brit, all the while keeping some focus on what the party had accomplished in power.

These tensions arose in top Labour Party meetings during this period. A key meeting of Members of Parliament from Cabinet officials and Labour Party members of the National Executive Committee (NEC) demonstrates this tension inherent in trying to balance accomplishments, hope for the future, and a recognition of the struggles the country faces. The National Executive Committee and the Cabinet Working Group for Labour’s election manifesto decided that the manifesto “should reflect the international constraints upon us in an uncertain world.”267 In the meeting, Denis Healey, Chancellor

---

of the Exchequer, noted the need to stress “our vulnerability to international things. It is not just the oil prices. We have an unsettled monetary situation all over the world – unemployment all over the world.”

Yet, in many ways the Labour leaders and the Conservatives were operating on different terrains with different goals and goalposts. The Conservatives wanted to make arguments about Britain’s decline in a macro perspective—focusing on Britain’s decline over the long haul, as a result of failed socialist/welfare state policies and ambivalence on Labour’s part to Britain’s place in the world—while Labour, as the party in government, was much more narrowly focused on narrating a story about their present situation that attempted to shift blame off the party. In some ways, Labour was committing the same mistakes as Conservatives did earlier in the decade (according to the New Right) which might be a facet of governing and the difficulty of crafting messages to respond to declinism.

This blame-shifting on the part of Labour was frustrating to the Conservatives, and an appealing argument for Labour. In a Conservative Party internal memo mulling over potential responses to Labour attacks, the party officials offered ways to bite back that touch upon this notion of Labour bearing responsibility for the nation’s decline: “It would be wrong to blame everything that has gone wrong in this country on Labour. But they have been in power for pretty well nine out of the last twelve years…” or “Their failure isn’t a matter of dispute. Everyone knows that they have done x, y and z. What is

---

now important is to get on with the job of saving something from the ruins.”

Meanwhile, internal memos from the Labour Party tried to balance between their success, bad world conditions, and a dystopic picture of what the country would look like with a Thatcher-led government.

The Conservatives were not having it. “We have done much worse than other countries in exactly the same situation, but with advantages (gas and oil) which most of them do not possess,” a memo noted in 1978, echoing previous New Right critiques of the world conditions argument. They went on to note the importance of rebutting the “world conditions argument.” “This argument is exceptionally important given the credibility of the proposition-already referred to-that Labour have done as well as could be expected given world conditions.” How did this messaging reach the public? A Conservative Party-Political Broadcast (PPB) in April 1979, about three weeks before the election, portrayed the globe as having a bit of a cold, a cold it was recovering from. Yet, Britain (pictured below in Figure 18) was far sicker than the world. Holding constant world conditions, then, Conservatives suggest, Britain still is declining.

Figure 18: ‘The World had a bit of a Cold, but Britain has Double Pneumonia!’
Screenshot: Conservative “Party-Political Broadcast” (Television), 19 April 1979

During the same meeting, Labour’s top brass also discussed how their message would be received by the electorate, and how to offer hope in a future Labour government. Tony Benn, a prominent Labour MP, Secretary of State for Energy, and boogeyman of the Right, remarked “The thing is people want to pick up what we say, and recognising something that we say that conforms to what they themselves feel. People know there are things to be done. In general, I think Denis [Healey] has hit the nail on the head – that we must start with the possible future of Britain unless we make changes.”

Joan Lestor, ex-Labour Party Chairwoman, added “I would be the last person to suggest that we write a manifesto to say you only have to vote Labour and everything will be well. I think we have to say how we can solve them. We can lose on pessimism alone – we do not believe that we can do it any more.” Lestor’s intervention supports the notion that it is easier for the opposition than the governing party to be doomsayers. Peter

---


Shore, Secretary of State for the Environment, responded, “I take the point. We must not present these so that we weaken the general will. On the other hand, we must face the fact. The fact is that we are far less strong as an opinion in economic terms than a number of other things. We have to take that aboard and relate it to the things we need to do. Why is France more productive than we are? Why do we see a British car manufacturing company taken over by the French? The country has to take all this in.”

Peter Shore’s intervention in the meeting certainly suggests a whiff of declinism was in the air during the meeting and in the buildup to election preparations. Yet, Labour’s campaign simply did not reflect these internal musings by some members. To the contrary, Labour did not seem to accept Thatcher and the Conservative Party’s notion of Britain’s decline and provide prescriptions to solve Britain’s problems. Rather, the Labour Party stressed in public campaign documents—newsletters and speaker’s notes for MPs on the campaign trail—that the Conservatives left Labour a mess in 1974:

“When the Tories were kicked out in 1974, they left behind a build-up of inflation which was out of control, a massive balance of payments, and a nation on its knees… FOUR YEARS OF GOVERNMENT PROVE THAT LABOUR HAS BEEN GOOD FOR BRITAIN.”

The Labour rejection of Conservative declinism may, in part, be a function of different goalposts. The Conservatives were deeply concerned about Britain’s defences as well as her standing internationally—as more than a mere ‘footnote’ in the history books,

---


276 LPA Judith Hart Papers (HART) 9/17 -- “Good for Britain” Pamphlet. (Emphasis in original).
as Thatcher put it. On the other hand, as I noted in Section II, the Labour Party seemed fundamentally uninterested in questions of Britain’s place in the world, as commonly understood in terms of power and prestige. Rather, party documents from the 1970s stress Britain’s role as a “medium-sized power.” “We acknowledge,” a Labour Party campaign guide for party members noted, “the fact that Britain is now a medium-sized power and therefore reject grandiose notions about our role in world affairs.”277 Thus, international decline was not a theme that would have resonated with Labourites of the time within the party, and potentially, their base either.

A postmortem thirteen days after the 1979 general election by Labour leaders stressed the difficulty of campaigning against the backdrop of the horrible “winter of discontent.” A later postmortem from the research department in September of 1979 stressed that the party’s manifesto—and the broader election strategy—“should be firmly in tune with the underlying mood of the nation at the time of the election. On this count, certainly, the Manifesto was not a success: the people – and particularly working people – clearly felt the need for a change in direction.”278 Labour MP John Horam, who would later switch parties twice in his long political career, “thought the radical element of the Party had been missing for some 3-4 years and this had enabled the Tories to present themselves as the party of hope.”279 While the Labour Party’s leadership debated back and forth about the different minutia of party policies in the buildup to the election, this broad theme surfaced regularly in their postmortems and discussions. This suggests that

278 Document: RD58; box “Labour Research Department General Election Manifesto 1979”
the Labour Party themselves reflexively understood they missed the mark in terms of the broadest of electoral themes and narratives that would resonate with the public. They were the party in power and seemed content to center the debate around particular policies rather than broader messages and paid more attention to the trade unions than the broader public—an audience that was moving away from the trade unions over time.

In sum, this section has focused on the Tory and Labour electoral strategies in the buildup to the 1979 general election. The Labour Party, as the party in power, did not have a response to Conservative declinist narratives, and certainly did not meet declinism with declinism. This is, I suggest, because declinism is an easier message for the opposition to take up than the party in government, as the Conservatives earlier in the decade found. But it is also because, ideologically, the Labour Party at the time did not see British international decline from great power status to be that much of a problem. They wanted to reshape Britain’s role in the world to be a medium-sized power.

V. Thatcher’s Electoral Coalition and Her Outsider Status

My theory of declinism’s emergence stresses not only that declinism is likely to come from the opposition, but that declinism is more likely to be associated with “brokers,” or actors who are able to use their positions and access within parties, in the sense that they have access to traditional party apparatuses, and outsiders, who appeal to
voters, parties, and organizations/movements who are otherwise unconnected. In this section, I assess Thatcher’s victory and her outsider status.

Thatcher and the Conservative Party re-constituted (or reborn) by the ‘New Right’ won a 71-seat advantage over Labour, the largest shift between Conservative and Labour since 1945. According to Joel Kreiger, Thatcher won—at least in part—by sowing the seeds of division rather than bringing the country together. Indeed, Evans describes Thatcher’s victory in negative terms: “considerably more had voted against Labour than had voted positively for the Conservatives.” In this sense, the project of Thatcher and her fellow New Right politicians was one of fragmentation. As Goddard and Nexon write, logics of fragmentation “…involve efforts to disrupt or prevent joint action. They usually involve similar mechanisms and processes, [as logics of integration] but are oriented toward breaking apart or inhibiting the joint action of others.” The divisions were based on racial divisions, such as anti-immigrant appeals that would bring in National Front voters, and anti-union appeals which sought to pit unions and organized Labour against working-class voters, among other appeals.

More generally, Thatcher—and other members of the New Right—was not interested in “consensus” politics, as I have noted in this chapter. However, despite focusing on policies and rhetoric one might call fracturing, Thatcher also sought to forge an electoral coalition based on appeals to National Front members, and voters who were

---

280 Kreiger 1986, 79.
281 Kreiger 1986, Chapter 4.
282 Evans 1997, 16.
283 Goddard and Nexon 2016, 8.
284 See Green 2006, 128. See also Kreiger 1986, 80-83.
skeptical of immigration more generally. For example, 1978 Thatcher expressed concern that Britain was being “swamped” by people from different cultures.286 Thatcher linked anti-immigrant sentiment to Britain’s international decline: Britain was purportedly losing her identity, values, and what made her great. Such appeals drew support away from the National Front and voters who expressed concern over immigration, immediately after Thatcher’s “swamped” comments, turned favorable toward the Conservatives. Additionally, the Conservatives sought to “jump the class barrier” and did so, particularly—but not exclusively—among the skilled working classes as well as voters in the South.287 The Conservatives had a distinctive inter-class appeal which led to Conservatives gaining the votes of working-class voters, who, historically, were much closer to the Labour Party.288

Thatcher was an outsider in many respects.289 Despite serving in the Heath cabinet as secretary of state for education and science, she was held in disdain by many in the Conservative party, seen as “strong on first principles, weak on understanding of the complexities” and having a “lack of political and intellectual sophistication” which, coupled with her “abrasive, direct style.”290 Such assessments were, no doubt, influenced by Thatcher’s gender and sexist tropes. Thatcher was the first woman to serve as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, indeed, the first woman to lead a major western democracy.291 Even her greatest political (and personal) admirers, like Alan Clark,
resorted to sexism when disagreeing with Thatcher, moaning that an argument with Thatcher was “a prototypical example of an argument with a woman—no rational sequence, associative, lateral thinking, jumping the rails the whole time.”292 As such, it was not only her style, but who she was, that represented something new, something different, and made her an outsider at the beginning.

Perhaps Thatcher’s main source of outsiderness came in her approach to her own party. As Evans notes, Thatcher “aspired not to be absorbed into that [party] hierarchy but to dismantle it. This was not the Conservative way. Conservatives were expected to work with the grain…”293 Thatcher cultivated an image of a new kind of leader, someone who was strong and ready for change, and Thatcher’s politics and image typifies the notion of political entrepreneurship. Thus, according to Andrew Gamble,

The way in which her [Thatcher’s] image came to be formed can be traced through the major interventions she made between 1975 and 1979. She focused on those areas where the authority of the state had been weakened. The solutions she favoured and the attitudes she struck defined a new role for the Conservative party, but it was a very different role from the one envisaged by Harold Macmillan. Instead of cleaving to the centre and rebuilding an image of soundness, competence, and moderation, Thatcher provided something much more exciting and risky—a radical assault on the assumptions of the postwar consensus on domestic policy in the name of Conservative principles.294

Moreover, and, according to Gamble, more importantly, was Thatcher’s break with the policy of détente and her encouragement of arms buildups and anti-communist efforts, which I go into in more detail in the next section.295 This gave her the famous moniker of “Iron Lady” and cemented her image as a tough leader. In short, Thatcher

292 Cited in Evans 1997, 42.
293 Evans 1997, 42.
294 Gamble 1988, 87.
295 Gamble 1988, 87.
went to great lengths not only to pull away from those Conservatives she saw as towing the consensus line, but also to cultivate an image as a fighter for freedom, an unapologetic believer in the individual and in the power of the free market, and as someone ready to shake up the British political scene in an effort to reverse Britain’s long decline. She represented something new, not more of the same. She was able to use this image to appeal to disgruntled white Britons fed up with immigration, working-class British voters who were weary of the Union bosses, and traditional Conservative voters. I next turn to the consequences of Thatcher’s declinism.

VI. The Consequences of Declinism: Thatcherism and Decline

“There we know that the restoration of the confidence of a great nation is a massive task. We do not shrink from it. It will not be given to this generation of our countrymen to create a great Empire. But it is given to us to demand an end to decline and to make a stand against what Churchill described as the “long dismal drawing tides of drift and surrender, of wrong measurements and feeble impulses”. Though less powerful than once we were, we have friends in every quarter of the globe, who will rejoice at our recovery, welcome the revival of our influence, and benefit from the message and from the example of our renewal.”

-Margaret Thatcher, 6 July, 1979

In this section, I focus on the ways in which Thatcher and members of her Cabinet used the prospect of British decline to advocate for policies of renewal at home—policies that were not popular—after gaining power in 1979. There is little evidence of blowback or rhetorical consistency constraints in this case. Instead, Thatcherites doubled down on declinism as a way to push forward their ideological agenda, particularly when it came to

296 https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104107
difficult domestic policies of spending cuts and monetarist policies which led to further unemployment. Further, in the area of foreign policy and defense, at the same time in which the government was making the case for increased cuts on domestic spending they were asking the British people to foot the bill for the Trident missile system. Declinism was indicative of deep-seated beliefs. Thatcherites believed that the only way to restore British greatness was a tough economic policy at home which stressed public expenditure cuts, austerity, and anti-inflationary monetarist policy. Only after securing further electoral gains in 1983 and achieving victory in the Falklands in 1982 did they largely abandon declinist rhetoric.

This section proceeds as follows. I first discuss the early years of Thatcher’s premiership and her attempts to radically change domestic policy at home. After detailing the ways in which Thatcher’s rhetoric of decline continued early on in her premiership, I discuss the key foreign policy moment under Thatcher: the Falklands War in 1982. I show how victory in the Falklands was used by Thatcher as a rallying cry for domestic reform. Importantly, Thatcher used victory in the Falklands to tell a story of British decline and renewal. Behind the scenes, I show that victory in the Falklands was understood as a perfect moment to lean into the question of British international decline and renewal and couple international success with domestic change. Finally, I conclude by discussing Thatcher’s rhetoric in the 1983 General Election, whereby Thatcher painted Britain as on the up.

*Thatcher’s Early Years: 1979-1982*
Thatcher’s rhetoric is consistent with the “domestic overextension” narrative outlined in Chapter 3. As I noted earlier in this chapter, Thatcher and the New Right claimed that, in order to reverse Britain’s decline, especially relative to peer European powers like Germany and France, Britain should undergo a series of reforms to open up the market—to make it more free—and unshackle British business and industry. These policies were aimed at what Thatcherites believed to be unnecessary overspending and were not popular. However, in pitching the policies as a means to an end—a resurgent Britain—Thatcher was able to present the policies as a last-ditch path for Britain out of decline. For example, Ian Budge argues that “had Mrs. Thatcher campaigned only on the questions of trade union reform, reduction in the government role and income redistribution, the backlash of popular reaction might well have blown her, like Heath, off course in the first two years of her government.” In other words, Thatcher’s policy proposals were not largely popular. Instead, according to Budge, it “…was the way these reforms could be presented as the only way to check an otherwise irreversible decline in Britain’s economic and international position which persuaded enough people that ‘there is no alternative’ to carrying them through.” In other words, Britain’s decline was a message that resonated with the British electorate, and was used by Thatcher to legitimate hard-to-swallow policies that harshly affected the British public.

Thatcher entered Downing Street committed to reversing British decline. However, the first few years of her time in government were especially difficult. Renewal did not occur simply with the Iron Lady at Britain’s helm. Britain, like many others,

---

experienced economic hardship coming into the 1980s. There was a recession from 1980-
1981. However, Thatcher would press on with her agenda of renewal.

Consistent with the promises made by the New Right during the election
campaign, the government underwent major—radical—changes to its economic policy,
specifically its monetary policy. The government was singularly focused on bringing
down inflation, which was seen as the major obstacle in reviving the British economy and
her international competitiveness. Thatcher often invoked inflation as a leading cause
of economic, and more broadly international, decline. To get Britain on the road to
recovery, inflation had to be brought under control.

Other main leaders of Thatcher’s ideological movement followed Thatcher’s lead
in reasserting the prospect of British decline as a fundamental reason for enacting tough
measures. In his speeches unveiling the budget for 1979 (only 6 weeks after the election)
and in 1980, where he released a “Medium Term Financial Strategy,” Chancellor of the
Exchequer Geoffrey Howe blamed past Labour Governments for the situation the present
Conservative government found itself in. Consistent with the New Right’s campaign
narrative that British decline was a result of “a growing series of failures on the supply
side of the economy,” Howe outlined in his major budget speech in 1979 the broad
contours of Conservative economic policy moving forward, which included remedying
failures stemming from interventions into the economy by the government, regulations
that stifled enterprise, and taxation. Rather fitting for a declinist narrative, the speech was

299 Gamble 1988, 98.
marked by several headings, including “The years of decline,” “The causes of decline,” and “A new beginning.”

Howe would follow-up with similar language in his budget proposed in 1980, noting that “it would take time to check, and then to reverse, Britain’s long-run economic decline.” Government had grown addicted to deficit spending, according to Howe.

Howe proclaimed that

Some commentators seek to blame our present difficulties on the pursuit by Government of unnecessarily tough policies. That is totally to misunderstand the position. Britain's present difficulties are so deep-seated and serious as to make tough policies inescapable. Relaxed monetary and budgetary policies might bring higher output – even higher living standards – in the very short run, though even that is questionable, but in reality they would simply fuel fresh inflation.

Howe, in other words, again recast Britain’s decline as a long-term phenomenon, one in which blame was externalized, and in which the cure would be short-term pain for long-term gain. Similarly, Secretary of the Treasury John Biffen externalized blame and recognized the difficulty of the economic program when he remarked after the budget proposal that he did not “deny for one moment that this is a severe package. The severity is made necessary by the situation we inherited.”

In short, the economic program put forward by Thatcher’s ideologically-aligned members of her cabinet sought to carry out tough measures—measures they themselves thought harsh—as the only path out of economic decline.

---

300 https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/109497
301 https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/109498
302 https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/109498
303 Holmes 1985, 25.
Declinism in this case was indicative of deep-seated belief in Britain’s decline as well as an ideological commitment to monetarist, neoliberal, policies. Thatcherites could have taken the path of least resistance and not enacted such tough measures on the economy during the recession. The popularity of Thatcher and her government steadily declined from 1979-1982, driven by the state of the economy and internal dissent from Conservative “wets” who did not prescribe to Thatcher’s focus on reducing inflation and reducing public expenditure amidst the recession. The Conservatives could have, like previous postwar British governments, embraced at least some demand-side policies to soften the pain of the recession on the British people. Instead, Thatcher and her inner circle stuck to a heavy dose of monetarist, supply-side, policies which placed them at odds with decades of political conventional wisdom in Britain that the electorate cared most about unemployment. In other words, Thatcher and members of the New Right did not seem to feel encumbered or entrapped by their declinist rhetoric once in power. Instead, they doubled down on their policy preferences and beliefs: who was to blame for British decline (the Labour Party), what was to blame (too much state intervention and centralization in the economy which led to inflation), and what was to be done (monetarist policies, cutting public expenditure, etc.).

In short, Thatcher’s early years in power were both unpopular—from the perspective of her own party as well as the electorate—and riddled with economic strife as a result of increasing unemployment and a two-year recession. British renewal did not seem as though it was on the doorstep. To the contrary, there was an atmosphere of “cut-

---

backs, closures and retrenchment” which “pervaded the public and private sectors” and was a result not just of the economic conditions of the time, but also the government’s insistence that it was going to carry out radical (albeit painful) change. I next turn to the Falklands War, and the role that Thatcher’s rhetoric during this period played in Thatcher’s thinking about British decline and the policies of renewal at home.

_The Falklands Factor_

There are many factors that led to the 10-week war between Argentina and the United Kingdom in 1982, which cost over 900 lives and wounded over 2,000. My focus here is not on the causes of the war, nor do I intend to suggest that Thatcher’s declinism led her to retake the Falklands by force. Rather, my aim is to examine how, at a moment in which Britain was seemingly ready to let go of the Falklands, shedding commitments which were financially and militarily burdensome, the invasion of the Falklands was legitimated, and later narrated, by its chief protagonist as a rallying cry for Britain’s standing in the world and as justification for neoliberal policies at home. I first establish that the British government was willing to shed the burden of defending the Falklands, which was consistent with the government’s rebalancing of defense away from costly outposts and toward new weapons systems like Trident. I then discuss how the invasion of the Falklands by Argentina and Britain’s subsequent victory was used by Thatcher to double-down on policies at home meant to forestall British decline.

---

305 Gamble 1988, 102.
Thatcher was not particularly interested in the Falklands, nor was she interested in maintaining costly outposts while trying to increase defense spending elsewhere, such as in Britain’s nuclear deterrent. Prior to the Argentinean invasion of the Falklands, Thatcher’s government was in the midst of negotiating a ‘lease-back’ of the islands to Argentina. In general, Thatcher’s early years as Prime Minister were marked by a series of pullbacks from vestiges of empire, such as in Rhodesia. As Simon Jenkins writes, “While a vigorous opponent of communism as “the iron lady”, Thatcher had shown no interest in foreign affairs and conceded post-imperial retreat in both Hong Kong and Rhodesia. The Falklands changed that...”

More broadly, Thatcher, while increasing defense spending in her premiership by 18 percent in real terms between 1979 and 1985, wanted to do so in ways that cut spending on some aspects of Britain’s defense—such as steep cuts to the Royal Navy’s number of frigates and destroyers—and increased spending in other areas. Thatcher tasked then-Minister of Defense John Nott to review the United Kingdom’s defense policy in times of economic uncertainty and recession. Nott presented the findings of his analysis of the UK defense program in a report entitled “The UK Defence Programme: The Way Forward” in 1981, which suggested that the government should cut conventional forces and equipment while increasing spending toward the Trident missile program. The report made clear that there was no intention or desire to “cut our defence effort,” but rather, the Nott report aimed to “establish how best to exploit a

307 https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/apr/01/falklands-war-thatcher-30-years
308 https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/121307
substantial increase, which will enable us to enhance our front-line capability in very many areas.”309 In short, while the Thatcher government was interested in scaling back spending and British presence in certain areas, it was coupled with a desire for more spending in others.

Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands on April 2, 1982. After the Argentinean invasion, voices in parliament were in near unison: action must be taken to restore British sovereignty over the islands and to push back the Argentineans. The invasion of the Falklands by Argentina was seen by many as a slap on the face, of a sign of Britain’s inability to deter adversaries and part and parcel of Britain’s decline internationally. For example, Conservative MP Alan Clark said in his diary at the time of the invasion that “we’re a Third World Country, no good for anything.”310 Clark’s views were echoed in public sentiment. Early on in the crisis, polling showed that 50 percent of the British public thought that the crisis had worsened Britain’s standing in the world.311

Few dissenters of the dominant sense that Britain should retake the Falklands emerged, though there were many critics of the government’s handling of the affair, particularly in the government’s seeming lack of readiness for an Argentinean invasion.312 Perhaps most notably, The Guardian newspaper’s editorial board noted that the Falklands offered little strategic or commercial value to British interests, much to the

---

310 McCourt 2014, p. 156
311 Freedman 1988, 94.
312 Freedman 1988, 85.
chagrin of Members of Parliament who saw such statements as insulting to the Falkland Islanders who were ‘of British stock.’ 313

In a key speech to Conservatives in Cheltenham shortly after the end of hostilities in July of 1982, Thatcher claimed that Britain had “ceased to be a nation in retreat:”

We have instead a new-found confidence—born in the economic battles at home and tested and found true 8,000 miles away. That confidence comes from the re-discovery of ourselves, and grows with the recovery of our self-respect. And so today, we can rejoice at our success in the Falklands and take pride in the achievement of the men and women of our Task Force. But we do so, not as at some last flickering of a flame which must soon be dead. No—we rejoice that Britain has re-kindled that spirit which has fired her for generations past and which today has begun to burn as brightly as before. Britain found herself again in the South Atlantic and will not look back from the victory she has won. 314

For Thatcher, the Falklands war showed that “Britain has not changed and that this nation still has those sterling qualities which shine through our history.” Notice how Thatcher linked victory in the South Atlantic and domestic struggles at home together to claim newfound confidence. Thatcher was sounding triumphant, and rightly so given the precarious nature of the mission in the South Atlantic. Thatcher used the victory as a launch pad for discussing Britain’s renewal.

Thatcher used the victory over Argentina to rally political support and tied victory in the Falklands to her domestic political agenda as well as British renewal. In her Cheltenham speech, the ‘Iron Lady’ linked domestic political problems, such as the railway strikes that were occurring, or NHS pay disputes, to the victory in the Falklands. If only those troublesome Brits who engaged in labor disputes and cries for better pay

313 https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2012/apr/03/falklands-war-invasion-leading-article-1982
314 https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104989
would realize the sacrifices that were needed to bring Britain back from the brink, if only they would take lessons from those who fought in the Falklands, then Britain, according to Thatcher, would find her way again.

For Thatcher, victory in the Falklands—what she called “the Falklands factor”—represented the best of Britain, a Britain that “had no illusions about the difficulties” of the tasks at hand, a Britain that had “re-kindled that spirit which fired her for generations past and which today has begun to burn as brightly as before.” According to Simon Jenkins, “Constantly citing "the Falklands spirit", she [Thatcher] tackled the miners and industrial relations generally. She took on the IRA at great personal cost. She savaged the GLC [Greater London Council]. She embarked on privatisation, of which she had previously been a sceptic.” In other words, for Thatcher, the Falklands was not just a story of Britain claiming a victory in the South Atlantic, it was a story of the beginnings of Britain’s renewal at home as well.

Behind the scenes, Thatcher was informed by her Chief Press Secretary Sir Bernard Ingham that, post-Falklands, she was viewed as firm, consistent, determined, frank, and energetic. “You are respected and admired rather than liked,” Thatcher was told, “but real affection could come later if you persuade us to reform our bad habits and attitudes and lead us, as a revivified nation, to economic as well as military success.” Ingham went on to argue that Thatcher had proved her capacity for leadership in peace.

---

315 https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104989
317 https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/122990
318 https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/122990
and war, and now was the time to “convince the people that your cure really does work, is turning the country round and that you are building a Britain to their liking.” 319

Another aspect of the post-Falklands narrative that emerged stressed how important the victory was for Britain’s standing in the world and Britain regaining its place as a major power. For example, Alan Clark, a Conservative MP, argued that victory in the Falklands had “…enormously increased our world standing…I mean bugger world opinion—but our standing in the world has been totally altered by this…” 320 The Times of London argued that the reason for reestablishing the Falkland Islands had been “…to re-establish the evidence of British willpower, because the whole structure of this country’s standing in the world, her credibility as an ally, as a guarantor of guarantees, as a protector of her citizens, depends on that willpower existing and being seen to exist.” 321

To return to the prewar debates over the future of the Falkland Islands, an alternative response to the invasion, as difficult as it would have been, would have been to cool tensions and work out a resolution that would have seen Britain shed such military and financial commitments. Put another way, Britain handing over the Falklands to Argentina would have made good sense, absent the provocative actions taken by the military junta. Thatcher, as I noted, was interested in reconfiguring Britain’s defenses and defense spending. Part and parcel of such reconfigurations could have been to pull back so that Thatcher’s government could restore the balance of government spending, taxation, and priorities at home. Instead, the Islands became, in Thatcher and her

319 https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/122990
320 Sharp 1997, 68.
321 Sharp 1997, 68.
supporters’ eyes, a symbol of British greatness, not, as the Guardian portrayed them, as “an anachronistic remnant from a former colonial age” of little-to-no strategic value.322

1983 General Election: An Ongoing Victory Against Decline

Thatcher’s campaign in 1983 centered on the notion that Britain should adopt a resolute approach and stick with the domestic policies advanced over the past four years while continuing to maintain Britain’s nuclear capability and increased spending on defense3. The 1983 Conservative Party manifesto began by declaring “in the last four years, Britain has recovered her confidence and self-respect. We have regained the regard and admiration of other nations. We are seen today as a people with integrity, resolve and the will to succeed” and continued to argue that “Britain is once more a force to be reckoned with. Formidable difficulties remain to be overcome. But after four years of Conservative government, national recovery has begun.”323 Thatcher’s rhetoric, while not declinist, did raise the specter of British decline and emphasized the need to maintain the current course—if not go further—to fully renew Britain. Thatcher repeatedly referenced the state of decline that Britain faced when she entered Downing Street in 1979. Importantly, she painted Britain’s renewal as an ongoing process. Personally, as her memoirs indicate, she still felt there was still “too much socialism in Britain” and that the job was not yet done.324 For example, in a speech in Cardiff a month before the election Thatcher argued:

---

322 https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2012/apr/03/falklands-war-invasion-leading-article-1982
323 https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/110859
It was a bleak inheritance, perhaps the bleakest any newly-elected British Government had faced since the War. But you elected us to face it, and face it we did, squarely. No fudging. No dodging. No muddling along. No making do with second best, because second best so quickly turns into third best, and third best into a downward spiral of decline. This Government was determined to restore Britain’s health and Britain’s pride. To halt the decline left by Labour. To revive our economy. To lift the nation and reawaken its spirit. That is the task you gave us. That is the task in which we are succeeding. And that is the task that, with your support, on the 9th of June we shall carry through to completion…. We do not keep on looking to see whether recovery is round the corner. We set to work to bring about that recovery. We do not wait for the future. We go out and make it.325

Butler and Waller argue that the 1983 election victory for the Conservatives was more than an improving economic situation or victory in the Falklands, though those were the two key factors. Rather, it was a broad sense that the Conservatives could deliver and make good on their promises: “The government’s success in selling its economic policy was part of a much wider triumph in persuading the people that it represented a new idea of what Britain stood for. At its core was ‘the resolute approach’ and at the core of that as a credible doctrine was the Falklands War. What began as one of the biggest British humiliations of the present century turned into a triumph; and with that came governmental confidence that as long as they were determined in what they were doing they would carry the day…”326 Thatcher’s main opponents, Labour, on the other hand, saw heavy losses in large swaths of the country, leading The Sunday Times to argue that “Labour is now the party of declining Britain…Overall Labour did badly… but

325 https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105332
in relatively prosperous Britain—southern, home-owning, white Britain outside the cities—it performed catastrophically…”^{327}

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, I have argued in this chapter that 1970s Britain highlights key aspects of my theory of declinism’s emergence. First, the early 1970s exemplifies that declinism is easier to pick up if you are in the opposition rather than the party in power. Second, because both Labour and Conservative leaders in the early 1970s were of the establishment, they were unlikely—indeed unwilling—to pick up a declinist narrative. Labour’s leaders at the time were long-serving members of the Labour Party leadership, including Harold Wilson who was Prime Minister. Therefore, my theory expects that declinism would be less likely to emerge in this context, because there was no outsider or newcomer who gained control of the party and who could serve a brokerage role to forge a new political coalition. Moreover, and relatedly, as I argue in Chapter 3, declinism emerges as a result of the political desire to undo the status quo rather than out of a need to tinker with policies at the margins, and it is therefore more likely to emerge from outsiders or newcomers. The emergence of declinism among members of the so-called “New Right” within the Conservative Party exemplifies this argument. Moderate Conservatives who had been in charge of the party wanted to make evolutionary—rather than revolutionary—policy changes and were resistant to declinist discourses, while the New Right’s declinism was brought on by their feeling that the Conservative Party had,

---

^{327} Cited in Holmes 1985, 194.
in a sense, lost the plot and were partly responsible for the decline of Britain. Thatcher, a quintessential outsider, was able to engage in heavily declinist rhetoric because she represented a new brand of conservatism and was able to appeal to voters who were fed up with what she decried as ‘consensus’ politics.
Chapter 5

“The America We Must Not Be:”

Missiles, Prestige, and Kennedy’s New Frontier

“Are we up to the task--are we equal to the challenge? Are we willing to match the Russian sacrifice of the present for the future--or must we sacrifice our future in order to enjoy the present? That is the question of the New Frontier. That is the choice our nation must make--a choice that lies not merely between two men or two parties, but between the public interest and private comfort--between national greatness and national decline--between the fresh air of progress and the stale, dank atmosphere of "normalcy"--between determined dedication and creeping mediocrity.”

-John F. Kennedy, 1960 Acceptance Speech during Democratic National Convention

“Tonight I say to you no criticism — no criticism — should be allowed to obscure the truth, either at home or abroad, but today America is the strongest nation, militarily, economically and ideologically, in the world; and we have the will and the stamina and the resources to maintain that strength in the years ahead.”

-Richard Nixon, 1960 Acceptance Speech during Republican National Convention

I. Introduction: The Years the Locusts Have Eaten

In a series of speeches in 1959 across Wisconsin, Indiana, and Kansas, then-Senator John F. Kennedy was raising the alarm about the state of America while challenging for the Democratic nomination for president. The series of speeches, entitled “The Years the Locusts Have Eaten,” stressed the decline in the United States’ defenses, agriculture, education, and space capabilities relative to the Soviets. Kennedy drew upon Winston Churchill’s pleas to the British House of Commons not to ignore the threat of

---


Nazi Germany in 1936. He drew parallels between the Britain that Churchill was trying to alarm and the state of America in the late 1950s: “it seems to me tonight that this nation has, since January 1953, passed through a similar period. When we should have been decisive, we, too, were in doubt. When we should have sailed hard into the wind, we, too, drifted. When we should have planned anew, sacrificed and marched ahead, we, too, stood still and sought the easy way, and looked to the past.” Kennedy strongly critiqued the previous seven years of Republican government under the Eisenhower/Nixon Administration:

I do not say that all was perfection in 1952, under the last Democratic Administration. But we were in 1952 the unchallenged leaders of the world in every sphere – militarily, economically and all the rest. We were building strength and friendships around the world. We were successfully containing the spread of Communist imperialism. And we were the leaders of a free world community that was united, dynamic and growing stronger every day. And now it is 1959. The Russians beat us into outer space. They beat us around the sun. They beat us to the moon. Half of Indo-China has disappeared behind the Iron Curtain.

Kennedy’s rhetoric in the late 1950s, especially during his presidential campaign of 1960, was declinist. As I noted in Chapter 2, Kennedy’s campaign was particularly declinist in nature; then-candidate John F. Kennedy evoked decline—i.e., advanced declinist messages—more than any other candidate in the dataset, drawing upon the notion of American decline in at least 28 campaign speeches between September 1 and the election in 1960. Kennedy focused on two dimensions of America’s supposed

---

international decline: a decline in capabilities—most famously characterized as “the missile gap”—and a decline in American prestige abroad. The Cold War boogeyman, the USSR, was certain to overtake the United States in military might and global reach if nothing was done to change America’s course, Kennedy argued. However, Kennedy’s declinism, in hindsight, was unwarranted, at least as far as the missile gap is concerned. There was no missile gap. Moreover, as Josef Joffe notes of Kennedy’s declinism, “the United States did not ride off into the sunset, and the Soviets never managed to take that “shortcut to world domination.” Kennedy’s declinist rhetoric was built around myths that, ultimately, could not be sustained, even early on in his presidency.

In this chapter, I trace declinism’s emergence in the late 1950s. The declinism that emerged from JFK—and those in his circle—in the late 1950s highlights key aspects of my theory of declinism’s emergence. First, the late 1950s demonstrates the instrumental uses of declinism, both with respect to why the JFK and his campaign staff thought declinism was a winning message in 1960 and how they used declinism to organize and drive home the messaging of their campaign.

Second, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, declinism is easier to pick up if you are in the opposition rather than the party in power. Republican president Dwight Eisenhower, with Richard Nixon as his Vice President, had been in power for the last eight years throughout much of the 1950s. This gave the Democrats, and the Kennedy Campaign in particular, much fodder from which to feed the declinist narrative and place blame squarely on the opposition.

Third, as I argued in Chapter 3, declinism emerges as a result of the political
desire to undo the status quo rather than out of a need to tinker with policies at the
margins, and it is therefore more likely to emerge from outsiders and newcomers within a
party. The emergence of declinism from JFK, who typified a new generation, a new
frontier, of politics, exemplifies this argument. Kennedy portrayed himself as an outsider,
and in many ways, he was one. He was able to present an image of being a newcomer and
offering something new to the country—even from past Democratic administrations.
Kennedy brought into his campaign those who were most critical of Eisenhower,
including Republicans like Rockefeller.333 Those he brought on were also of a new
generation who had served in World War II but had “become impatient with the
supposedly stagnant national leadership of the 1950s.”334 He was young—and therefore
subject to critique for a lack of experience—and Catholic. His campaign was ready to
counter such charges.335 He was, as Arthur Schlesinger put it, “cool.”336 While Kennedy
was young and a portrayed a new generation, he was also able to tap into his already
existing ties in the Senate and within the Democratic Party.

The consequences of Kennedy’s declinist rhetoric include attempting to ramp up
defense spending in order to close the gap between what he viewed as the objectives of
his Administration entering the 1960s to solve the gaps between the US and the USSR
from eight years of Republican rule.337 Moreover, Kennedy faced political consequences

333 Preble 2004, 144.
334 Giglio 1991, 45.
335 Preble 2004, 111.
337 See e.g., Betts 2007.
for his constant critiques of the Eisenhower defense program and the missile gap. Upon entering office, Kennedy’s insistence that the missile gap existed put him in a political bind, consistent with a “consistency constraint” mechanism outlined in Chapter 3. He felt compelled, in part because of the narrow margins of his electoral victory, and in part because of his ginned-up supporters and intellectual backers, to do something about a missile gap.

I begin by outlining the context surrounding the declinism of the late 1950s, from JFK’s declinist discourse to the metrics that were thrown about to argue that decline was occurring, or to discredit the notion that America was in decline. Second, I demonstrate that the Kennedy campaign had political incentives to ‘talk decline’ by examining the correspondence and memoranda of key figures within the Kennedy inner circle, the Kennedy campaign’s polling apparatus, and Kennedy’s conspicuous abandonment of declinism once he entered office. Third, I explore Kennedy’s role as a politician who represented a new generation of American political leaders, free of the old politics which supposedly hampered the United States. I show how Kennedy’s inner circle thought of the young Senator, what he and his team would bring to the White House, and how Lyndon B. Johnson’s placement on the ticket was controversial in this regard. I then discuss the response by the incumbents—Eisenhower and Nixon—to JFK’s declinism. Finally, I explain the consequences of Kennedy’s declinism.

II. The 1950s: Historical Context and Public Opinion

Perhaps the most salient event of the 1950s that shaped—and shook—American views regarding the US’s place in the world was the launch of Sputnik in October of
1957. The Earth-orbiting satellite challenged American notions of national, military, scientific, and ideological supremacy over the Soviets.338 The setback of Sputnik, as well as reports from the Gaither Committee and the Rockefeller Fund regarding the so-called ‘missile-gap’ between the USSR and US with respect to ICBMs, gave fodder to critics and opened the door for Democrats in the opposition to critique the Eisenhower/Nixon Administration defense, space, and foreign policy.339 In this section, I unpack the historical context in which Kennedy’s declinism emerged and resonated with the American public, with a particular attention on contemporaneous public opinion polling in the buildup and immediately following the 1960 presidential election. I show that, while Sputnik shook the confidence of the American elites and press, it did not do as much to stir up the American people. However, there was certainly a general sense that the Soviets were plowing ahead, and that America was standing still.

Prior to Sputnik’s launch, the Democrats, spearheaded by, among others, Hubert Humphrey, were not confident about their electoral chances during the 1958 midterm elections.340 Yet the launch of Sputnik, coupled with a (short-lived) recession in 1958, turned Democrats from pessimists to optimists in the lead-up to the 1958 midterm elections.341 Their optimism was well-founded: the Democrats gained 49 House and 15 Senate seats in the midterms. The Republicans suffered heavy losses at the hands of the Democrats, thanks to a fledgling economy and events such as Sputnik.

---

340 I thank Christopher Preble for discussions surrounding the 1958 midterms, Humphrey’s pessimism, and his optimism post-sputnik. See also Preble 2003, 61-63.
341 Divine 1974, 188
Sputnik ultimately proved to shake the confidence of America’s elite, who, upon seeing Sputnik’s launch in October of 1957 took the Eisenhower Administration to task for its approach to defense and military spending. Elites, from Robert A. Lovett, Secretary of Defense under Harry Truman, to Thomas J. Watson, CEO of IBM, voiced concern that the US was falling behind its rival the Soviet Union in economic and military terms. Importantly, from the perspective of elite opinion, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund Special Studies Project, conducted throughout the second half of the 1950s and ultimately published as a book in 1961 under the title *Prospect for America*, voiced strong concern about the direction the nation was headed in, particularly with respect to national purpose and defense priorities. Influential American elites contributed to this report, from Henry Kissinger to Dean Rusk, from Henry R. Luce to John S. Dickey.

One section of the Rockefeller report, Panel II, headed by Kissinger and published in July 1958, blamed the Eisenhower Administration for privileging the domestic economy over military spending and the defense budget. The report argued that “Unless present trends are reversed, the world balance of power will shift in favor of the Soviet bloc.” The panel proposed sharp increases in offensive and defensive capabilities, as well as fostering an increased political and psychological readiness on the part of the public. These findings echoed, in many ways, those of the Gaither Report, which was classified but was circulating around the same time as Panel II was published.

342 Andrew III, 539.
343 Divine 1974, 188
344 See e.g., Andrew III, 1998.
345 Cited in Andrew III, 540-541.
346 Andrew III, 541.
Beyond specific critiques lodged against the Eisenhower Administration regarding space and military policy, Sputnik represented what Eisenhower’s speechwriter William Ewald characterizes as a turning point in the Eisenhower presidency, whereby Sputnik offered a symbol, or reference point from which to organize “the multitude of petty political grievances that the Democratic party had against the lame duck president.”

Yet the extent to which Sputnik shook the American public is questionable. Polls taken post-Sputnik did not show the American public as concerned about Sputnik as the media and politicians seemed to be. Or, put another way, politicians realized that Sputnik was an event worth seizing upon as a reference event that could organize critiques of the Eisenhower Administration. As Mieczkowski notes, even Lyndon Johnson publicly expressed as much two weeks after Sputnik, stating: “I am not trying to scare you today because I am not very scared myself. I don’t believe you are either. There have been no signs of panic that I have detected among the great mass of our people.”

For example, “Polls conducted after the launch of Sputnik suggested that Americans took the event calmly. For the standard query about “the most important problem” facing America, only 6 percent cited Sputnik or missiles, while another 7 percent mentioned defense and preparedness…”

348 For a detailed examination of this mismatch, see Mieczkowski 2013, especially 20-23.
349 Mieczkowski 2013, 21.
350 Mieczkowski 2013, 21.
A remarkable 95 percent of respondents polled by Gallup between November 7 and 12, 1957 reported not having seen Sputnik 1 or 2 with their own eyes. Yet Sputnik did have some effect on the American public when it came to their beliefs about missiles and military technology in particular. As Figure 19 below shows, Americans prior to the 1960 election were pessimistic when it came to who was further ahead in the field of long-range missiles and rockets. Yet this flipped when Kennedy was elected: when asked which country “do you think is farther ahead in the field of long range missiles and rockets” in December of 1960, 54 percent of respondents polled by Gallup responded that the US was farther ahead, while 21 percent had no opinion.

Figure 19: Gallup Polling on Missiles-August 1958 to February 1963

![Graph showing poll results]

---


353 This question was asked sporadically.
Eisenhower’s response to Sputnik was to attempt to get the American people to understand the context of Sputnik, to downplay the threat inflation that was going on among elites at the time and in the pages of magazines and newspapers.\footnote{See Payne 1994.} If Eisenhower he thought could reassure the public that America was not vulnerable, that America was strong, and America was moving forward, Eisenhower thought, the public would not panic and those that are panicking would come to their senses: “we must get the American public to understand that we are confronting a tough problem that we can lick,” Eisenhower remarked at a National Security Council meeting.\footnote{Payne 1994, 96-97. See also Andrew III, 540.} In an interesting contrast to Kennedy, who was attentive and responsive to public polling, Eisenhower sought to change the public’s mind, rather than see public opinion as something to respond to politically. As I demonstrate later in the chapter, especially with questions of prestige, incumbents find it difficult to mount a response to such critiques in ways that are politically expedient.

While Eisenhower sought to calm the country down post-Sputnik, the discussions in elite circles and public sentiment at the time created a sense that America was not doing her best. Beyond missiles, a slim majority of Americans in December of 1959 reported feeling that Russia will increase her power in the world in 1960 (54 percent). Meanwhile, 24 percent of respondents polled by Gallup reported believing that Russian power in the world will decline, and 23 percent reported not knowing whether Russian
power would decline or increase in 1960. The same poll reported an overwhelming lack of declinism among the American public. When asked by Gallup “which of these do you think is more likely to be true of 1960? A year when America will increase her power in the world, or a year when American power will decline,” 73 percent of respondents reported that America would increase her power, while only 10 percent reported that American power would decline. Two years into the Kennedy Administration, the anti-declinist number would rise to 84 percent, while 45 percent of Americans thought that Russian power would decline in 1963.

Interestingly, despite Kennedy’s major focus on declining US prestige, no Gallup—or other—polling, to my knowledge, was conducted during the late 1950s that directly asked Americans about US or Soviet prestige. However, there are some telling findings from tangential questions that make it clear that the US public became increasingly skeptical that the US was winning the “propaganda war” with Russia in the late 1950s. When asked whether the US or Russia was doing a better job of winning people around the world to its point of view, 44 percent of Americans in 1955 thought the US was doing a better job, while only 23 percent thought Russia was. This finding was
replicated in 1956.360 Yet, beginning in 1958, there seems to have been some doubt creeping in: when asked the same question in August of 1958, while 45 percent of respondents thought that the US was winning people around the world to its point of view, more respondents—38 percent—thought that Russia was winning than in previous decades.361 In other words, more people reported feeling that Russia was winning than were not sure or did not have an opinion in earlier years. By June of 1960, Americans were split regarding who was winning the “propaganda war:” 38% of respondents polled by Gallup believed the US was winning, while 36 percent believed the Russians were winning.362 In short, there is tangential evidence that the American public began to come around to the idea of declining US prestige during the presidential election and the last two years of Eisenhower’s presidency.

Domestically, while the recession of 1958 was troubling, there was not an overwhelming sense of negativity among the American public. Unfortunately for Nixon, there was a minor recession in May of 1960, which did not help the incumbent. For example, the pre-election ANES asked respondents “During the last few years, has your financial situation been getting better, getting worse, or has it stayed about the same?” Thirty-five percent of respondents thought their situation was getting better, while 46

---

percent reported that their financial situation had stayed the same. Only 19 percent reported that their financial situation was getting worse. Eisenhower’s job approval numbers were dipping post-Sputnik, but Eisenhower managed to recover his approval rating throughout the last year or so of his presidency. After the 1960 election, 66 percent of Americans polled by Gallup thought that Eisenhower would go down in history as a great or good president, while only 7 percent reported believing that Eisenhower would go down in history as a poor president.

In this section, I have sought to paint the historical context related to declinism’s emergence in the late 1950s and on the campaign trail in 1960. While Sputnik shook the confidence of the American elites and press, it did not do as much to stir up the American people. “There was concern, but not panic,” noted Newsweek after the launch, per their polling. However, there was certainly a general sense that the Soviets were plowing ahead, and that America was standing still. As I show in the next section this sense of decline relative to the Soviets was pounced upon by Kennedy, both in his rhetoric around the “missile gap” as well as declining US prestige abroad.

III. Evoking, Measuring, and Debating American Decline

366 Mieczkowski 2013, 21.
“He [Kennedy] thinks foreign policy will be the main electoral issue in the sense that the Republicans will be attacked for letting the United States slip backward in the power race.”
-Cyrus Sulzberger, personal diary, December 1959

“I have premised my campaign for the Presidency on the single assumption that the American people are uneasy at the present drift in our national course, that they are disturbed by the relative decline in our vitality and prestige, and that they have the will and the strength to start the United States moving again.”
-John F. Kennedy on the Campaign Trail

Kennedy’s declinist message to the American people centered on two key dimensions: declining American prestige and the so-called “missile gap”—declining capability relative to the Soviets. Yet, Kennedy’s declinism—and the declinists who surrounded Kennedy at that time—also took an even broader view of what was wrong with America, which encompassed everything from a decline in science, education, and physical fitness to a decline in the American spirit and national purpose. In this section I outline Kennedy’s declinism in his campaign speeches and behind the scenes in his inner circle. Additionally, I highlight the different metrics upon which JFK and the campaign made the case that America was in decline, both with respect to declining American prestige and the so-called missile gap. In each instance, I show how the incumbent (Eisenhower) and JFK’s challenger (Nixon) responded to the claims made by the opposition during this time.

---

367 Quoted in Divine 1973, 191.
368 Quoted in Schlesinger 1965, 68.
369 See, for example, Dean 1998.
Kennedy’s speeches throughout his presidential campaign touched upon multiple issues, some local or domestic, but often he focused on questions of foreign policy and defense. Even though he touched upon a variety of issues—in almost every speech there was a new subject or combination of subjects, according to his speechwriter and adviser Ted Sorensen—the speeches always came back to “the single theme he pressed throughout the fall: the challenges of the sixties to America’s security, America’s prestige, America’s progress.” Sorensen describes Kennedy’s speeches as packed with facts and figures, aimed at expressing Kennedy’s dissatisfaction with the way the country was headed, the way the country was not living up to expectations, and the ways in which the country was losing ground to her competitors.

Kennedy’s speeches, and his broader campaign message, has notable gendered dimensions as well which connected American international decline to the decline of masculinity in the US. Kennedy was concerned that the United States was “in danger of losing something solid at the core,” and that the US was missing the “Spartan devotion to duty, honor, and country” that, Kennedy thought, characterized the American spirit. As is often the case with declinism, the threats and causes of declinism are linked discursively, connected—albeit in often contradictory or unclear ways—to the broad theme of decline. Consumerism, conformist “organization men,” homosexuality and “sexual ambiguity” were all posited by commentators, as well as those in the inner circles of the JFK campaign, to negative changes in the US economy, sense of national purpose,

and, as JFK put it, “Spartan devotion.” According to historian Robert Dean, best-selling works such as *The Ugly American*, published in 1958, contributed to and resonated with a sense that masculine Republican virtue was on the decline, and, consequently, so too was America’s ability to fight communist subversion. To take one example, a Gallup poll conducted in December of 1956 asked respondents whether young people in the United States were getting more or less physical exercise than young people in Russia. A plurality of Americans, 44 percent, thought Russia’s young people were getting more physical exercise than young Americans, while 32 percent thought the opposite. America, Kennedy claimed—and country seems to have believed—was softening up. Kennedy characterized Nixon as less masculine as well; referencing Nixon’s famous “kitchen debates” with Khrushchev, Kennedy noted that “I [JFK] want to be ahead in rocket thrust…Mr. Nixon may be very experienced in kitchen debates, but so are a great many other married men I know.” In short, Kennedy’s declinism was multifaceted, but it was certainly gendered.

Kennedy was inspired by famous works on decline, including from the likes of Edward Gibbons and Oswald Spengler. For example, in a speech in the Senate in 1958, Kennedy cited Gibbon’s “contention that the Romans maintained the peace by constantly preparing for war, Kennedy said that the United States should use all elements of national protection.  

---

373 Dean 1998, 34
374 Dean 1998, 36.
376 Cited in Sorensen 1965, 183.
power—economic, military, and diplomatic—to prepare for “the most serious test in our nation’s history, which will be impending in the next five years.”\textsuperscript{377} His world-view, more broadly, can be characterized as Spenglerian in its focus on the lifecycles of civilizations: “nations grew strong in their youth and declined with age, just as men’s bodies did…Kennedy retained the conviction that the European empires were degenerate and declining and that Asia represented a threatening “wave of the future.””\textsuperscript{378}

Behind the scenes, the JFK campaign noted, how difficult it is to define, measure, and ultimately claim the country is in decline. For example, Chester Bowles, writing to Archibald Cox (then-speechwriter for JFK) noted that one difficulty in campaigning on foreign affairs, including the prospect of American decline, mishaps abroad, a corrosion of our national prestige, etc., is that it is easier to distort foreign affairs than it is to distort what is happening at home.\textsuperscript{379} Cox struck a frustrated tone, arguing that “American prestige may be falling, our position around the world deteriorating, NATO undergoing new stresses, the Congo crises deepening, and Communist strength from Cuba to Laos increasing, but if Mr. Nixon decides to say with fervor and practiced sincerity that none of this is happening, substantial numbers of people are reassured.”\textsuperscript{380}

Others within the campaign pointed to the Republican strategy of attempting to paint an optimistic picture of the US situation. For example, William Atwood, a speechwriter for Adlai Stevenson and JFK, argued in a June 1960 memo entitled “Memo

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{377}{Shaw 2013, 113.}
\footnote{378}{Dean 1998, 46.}
\footnote{379}{DNC 1960 Campaign-Research Materials-Cox- Box 198. Memorandum from Chester Bowles to Archibald Cox. 18 October 1960. JFK Library.}
\footnote{380}{DNC 1960 Campaign-Research Materials-Cox- Box 198. Memorandum from Chester Bowles to Archibald Cox. 18 October 1960. JFK Library.}
\end{footnotes}
on the 1960 Campaign” that the likely Republican strategy would be to make use “…of deceptive statistics showing that more people have jobs, and more purchasing power, more kids are in college and more miles have been logged by Ike before millions of cheering crowds than ever before. These will provide that we are doing fine at home and in the world and that the Democrats are carping critics and “prophets of gloom and doom.””381 This sentiment echoes that of the Conservatives in 1970s Britain, who were angered and annoyed by the Labour Party’s insistence on using metrics that painted the party in a positive light. Of course, neither the Conservatives nor the Democrats in this case expressed self-reflection, considering that their own metrics were potentially misleading, not painting a full picture, etc. Rather, declinists see ‘glass half full’ portrayals as misleading or deceptive, while their ‘glass half empty’ portrayals as objective and justified. I next turn to the question of missiles and defense and prestige specifically.

Missiles and Defense

The Democratic National Platform in 1960 argued that: “When the Democratic Administration left office in 1953, the United States was the pre-eminent power in the world. Most free nations had confidence in our will and our ability to carry out our commitments to the common defense. Even those who wished us ill respected our power and influence. The Republican Administration has lost that position of pre-eminence.

Over the past 7 ½ years, our military power has steadily declined relative to that of the Russians and the Chinese and their satellites. This is not a partisan election-year charge. It has been persistently made by high officials of the Republican Administration itself. Before Congressional committees they have testified that the Communists will have a dangerous lead in intercontinental missiles through 1963—and that the Republican Administration has no plans to catch up. They have admitted that the Soviet Union leads in the space race—and that they have no plans to catch up. They have also admitted that our conventional military forces, on which we depend for defense in any non-nuclear war, have been dangerously slashed for reasons of “economy”—and that they have no plans to reverse this trend. As a result, our military position today is measured in terms of gaps—missile gap, space gap, limited-war gap.” 382

On the campaign trail, Kennedy hammered the Republicans for letting US missile supremacy lapse. “We do not have a defense second to none, and we are not in the lead in missiles, and we are not in the lead in outer space,” Kennedy argued in Indianapolis on October 4, 1960. 383 Kennedy thought that American strength was weakened throughout the Eisenhower Administration: “For the harsh facts of the matter are that our relative strength has not increased as fast as the Russians in ground forces, submarines, and missiles, and our seventeen ground divisions are opposed to more than 150 Soviet armored and infantry divisions.” 384 Kennedy decried what he saw as a complacency on

the part of the Republican Party when it came to America’s strength and standing in the world, evoking Harold Macmillan’s famous “you’ve never had it so good” phrase to critique the incumbent Republican Party: “…can you tell me how any citizen can vote for a political party and leadership which permits us to be second in space? In danger of being second in missiles? […] And yet a candidate and party who runs on the slogan, “We’ve never had it so good.” 385

Eisenhower & Nixon’s Response to the Missiles and Defense Claim

The Republicans, on the other hand, saw America’s defenses in an entirely different light. Or, at least it seems that way by reading their 1960 election platform. Behind the scenes, however, the question of America’s defenses proved contentious. Eisenhower’s speechwriter and biographer William B. Ewald Jr. details a contentious confrontation between Dwight Eisenhower and Nelson Rockefeller. 386 Rockefeller demanded that the Republican platform include the following: “The U.S. can afford and must provide the increased expenditures to implement fully this necessary program for strengthening our defense posture. There must be no price ceiling on America’s security.” 387 Eisenhower was incensed at Rockefeller’s insistence that these sentences be included in the platform and went as far as to threaten to pull back any support for Nixon during the campaign. 388

387 Ewald 1981, 238.
388 Ewald 1981, 238.
The platform, ultimately, struck a much more defensive tone with respect to America’s defenses: “Under the Eisenhower-Nixon Administration, our military might has been forged into a power second to none. This strength, tailored to serve the needs of national policy, has deterred and must continue to deter aggression and encourage the growth of freedom in the world.”

This internal back-and-forth exemplifies the ways in which incumbents are protective of their record in office. Nixon was frustrated about having to defend the Eisenhower record, especially as Nixon himself felt removed from much of the record he felt forced to defend. Nixon massaged his message in order to not come across as critical of Ike or his own role in the administration. Nixon faced a difficult task, whereby he had to defend his record and offer something new. He approached the missile gap in his public statements in a rather convoluted manner. For example, in San Antonio, Texas, days before the election, Nixon addressed the missile gap head on and by name:

So, let us look at our defenses just a moment. Let’s see what we have. We know, of course, that we’re strongest on the sea. We know, too, that we have the strongest air force in the world, and with the greatest striking power. But I know a number of people have been concerned by what they call the “missile gap.” In fact, people have said to me: why did we ever allow such a gap to occur? Well now, just to set the record straight, this administration inherited the missile gap. The reason that the Soviets got ahead in missiles in the first place, and ahead in space, was that they started their program immediately after World War II, and we had no program worthy of the name either in space or intercontinental ballistic missiles until after President Eisenhower took over; but then we have really moved since that time. We have been closing the gap…

---

390 Donaldson 2007, 127.
Such a statement by Nixon would suggest that there was a gap, and indeed that the gap continued throughout the Eisenhower Administration. He did not claim, then, that the gap was closed. Yet, just a few lines later in the speech, Nixon remarked that the United States “must take advantage of these new technological discoveries, and we must move forward also because the Soviet [sic] is moving forward, and we must never let this gap, which presently exists between their strength and ours, a gap in our favor, be narrowed.” In other words, Nixon was not entirely clear on whether such a gap existed, but was clear that if there was such a gap, that he would correct it and that it was the result of administrations stretching back to 1945. In general, Nixon was torn between being part of the incumbent administration, his own ambivalence about the Eisenhower presidency, and being put on the defensive by Kennedy, especially during the debates.

Prestige

A core contention by the Kennedy campaign was that American prestige was declining rapidly. What exactly was meant by America’s “prestige” was often ambiguous. Prestige was measured in a myriad of different ways by both sides during the debates over declining American prestige.

Quantitatively, during the presidential campaign between September 1 and the election, Kennedy frequently referenced the notion of declining American prestige.


393 E.g. Preble 2004, 117.
Kennedy referenced “prestige” in 129 speeches across the country, speeches which posited that US prestige was declining rapidly. Nixon on the other hand, referenced “prestige” in 41 speeches during the same time period, speeches which posited that Kennedy was wrong about America and wrong about the world.

Take a few examples from various campaign speeches which highlight how prestige was attached to economic performance and how others view the United States. During a campaign rally in Portland, Maine, Kennedy asked, “Do you think it is any accident that the decline of American prestige relative to that of the Communist world takes place at a time when the United States had last year the lowest rate of economic growth of any major industrialized society in the world?”

For Kennedy, as I describe below in further detail, prestige was linked to a perceived ongoing propaganda battle against communism. Kennedy leaned into his Senate experience and his world travel numerous times in this regard, noting that countries that once looked up to the United States no longer did, at least according to Kennedy. For example, during a speech in California on the campaign trail, Kennedy remarked:

I am Chairman of the Subcommittee on Africa of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I can tell you that in Africa, leaders twenty years ago quoted Jefferson and Lincoln and Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt. Today in many cases those leaders look east to Peking and Moscow. They have lost their confidence in us. They don’t see the United States as a great revolutionary country which is on the move. They see us as a country which has had its high noon, which is now in a plateau, which belongs to the past, not the future. I ask you to join me in this campaign with full recognition of all opportunities to

---

rebuild or strength, rebuild our prestige, maintain our security, and maintain ourselves as leaders of the free world.\textsuperscript{395}

A week later, Kennedy returned to this theme, remarking that “All over Africa and Asia and Latin America I think the prestige and influence and the image of the United States as a revolutionary and free country is diminished.”\textsuperscript{396}

The Kennedy Campaign focused on American prestige in campaign advertisements as well. These short radio segments (with small variation) went like this: “Do you believe with Nixon that America’s world prestige is at an all-time high? Then vote for him. But, if you believe the facts prove our world prestige has suffered under Republican leadership, that new vigorous leadership is needed, then you must vote for John F. Kennedy, who has the wisdom and courage to see and to face up to the real facts.”\textsuperscript{397}

Behind the scenes, the Kennedy campaign looked for evidence of declining US prestige. For example, in memoranda contained within campaign briefing books, research assistants and background staff documented sources from which Kennedy could claim that US prestige was declining abroad. Research assistants who had access to classified material drew upon three studies conducted by the United States Information Agency: (1) “U.S. or U.S.S.R.-Which is the Wave of the Future;” (2) “Image of America;” and (3)
“U.S. Prestige.”\textsuperscript{398} The report notes that Nixon and Lodge were aware of these reports, but insist that US prestige was never higher.\textsuperscript{399} In addition to the USIA report, the Kennedy campaign and its surrogates also drew upon public polling from around the world to bolster the notion that the US was declining with respect to its prestige.

Various campaign folders with compiled information regarding declining American prestige draw mostly upon assertion rather than clear metrics of declining American prestige internationally. In some cases, the statements of Eisenhower Administration Officials, or civil servants, were used against Eisenhower and Nixon. For example, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Livingston T. Merchant said in January of 1960 that “…by being the first to achieve success in space flight, the Soviet Union has reaped great prestige…”\textsuperscript{400}

John F. Kennedy’s 1960 campaign was built around, and responded to, private polling information.\textsuperscript{401} Indeed, the private polling data and analysis behind-the-scenes of the Kennedy campaign stressed which policies were salient to the American people, including America’s international decline. To the extent that Kennedy truly believed that the United States was in decline, his belief in American decline was reinforced by


\textsuperscript{401} Jacobs and Shapiro 1994.
political campaign data and strategy that reinforced the view that Kennedy *should* campaign on the theme of American decline. As Jacobs and Shapiro note, Kennedy was highly responsive to public opinion, committed (scarce) resources to polling, and used the data from the private firms to craft his election strategy.402 Kennedy, according to Larry Jacobs, was ‘preoccupied’ with public opinion.403

Thus, it is not a stretch to suggest that if polling data suggested declinism was a weak or unfavorable message to the electorate, JFK could have dropped the message from his campaign, or deemphasized such factors and focused on others. In support of this contention, Jacobs and Shapiro suggest that

Although partisan cleavages obviously played a role in the 1960 elections, the archival and statistical evidence strongly suggests a causal connection between Kennedy's polls and the positions he took. While partisan division might explain why various issues would be included in the pool of conceivable election issues, the evidence indicates that Kennedy's campaign was quite selective regarding which policies it chose from this pool of party cleavage issues. *Moreover, some of Kennedy's positions (such as his foreign policy stance on the new issue of rebuilding American prestige) were not issues that had persistently divided the parties.*404

This suggests that the issue of declining American prestige was (1) fairly new, something that did not cause cleavages in the past; and (2) was hand-picked as an issue among a plethora of other issues. Why is this the case? Polling reports suggest that the campaign was made aware of how “winning” of a message declining prestige was to focus groups.

402 Jacobs and Shapiro 1994, 536.
403 ”As a close aide recalled, Kennedy was preoccupied with "public communication--educating, persuading, and mobilizing [public] opinion” in Jacobs 1992, 209.
Nixon and Kennedy debated each other four times during the presidential campaign. The debates were important for Kennedy, who “won” the debates against Nixon. Kennedy’s polling numbers against Nixon fared far better after the debates. The debates were historic: the debates were the first to be televised and drew incredible TV audiences. As Donaldson notes, “as many as seventy million Americans watched the first debate—nearly two-thirds of the nation’s adult population, the largest audience for any political event in history. The average adult saw at least three of the debates, while more than half of all adults watched all four.”

The public opinion analysis of presidential debates within the Kennedy campaign represents a good example of the Kennedy campaign taking polling seriously, specifically in the context of declining prestige and how it resonates with the viewing audience. As I note in Chapter 2, the debates between Nixon and Kennedy in the run-up to the election featured questions regarding America’s decline in prestige and capabilities. Once this issue was raised during the debates, Kennedy’s research arm noted how well Kennedy’s arguments about American decline were received by focus groups. The public opinion researchers argued that Kennedy should push this issue in subsequent debates as a means to score more political points.

During the second debate on October 7, 1960, Kennedy was asked “while the main theme of your campaign has been this decline of American power and prestige in the last eight years, you’ve hardly criticized President Eisenhower at all. And in a speech

---

405 Donaldson 2007, 110.
last weekend you said you had no quarrel with the President. Now isn't Mr. Eisenhower
and not Mr. Nixon responsible for any such decline?” Kennedy responded:

KENNEDY: Well I understood that this was the Eisenhower-Nixon
Administration according to all the Republican uh--propaganda that I've read. The
question is what we're going to do in the future. I've been critical of this
administration and I've been critical of the President. In fact uh--Mr. Nixon uh--
discussed that a week ago in a speech. I believe that our power and prestige in the
last eight years has declined. Now what is the issue is what we're going to do in
the future. Now that's an issue between Mr. Nixon and myself. He feels that we're
moving ahead uh--in a--we're not going into a recession in this country,
economically; he feels that our power and prestige is stronger than it ever was
relative to that of the Communists, that we're moving ahead. I disagree.406

An internal report commissioned by the Kennedy campaign immediately
following the second debate indicated that “on the issue of decline in prestige, Senator
Kennedy was not only on the offensive, but he made this point far more effectively than
Nixon did […] point out that the real issue is how to make America strong while the
Russians and Communists are gaining—and fast. The biggest favor that could be done for
Khrushchev is for an American leader to pretend to our people and the world that there is
no urgency, no need, has been no slippage…weakness is appeasement. Strength is
America on the move.”407

Other debate debriefs and analyses highlighted the winning strategy of declinism.
For example, an internal report immediately following the third debate on the 19th of
October 1960 found that the question of American prestige “evoked more interest and

Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.
comment than any other single question… [loss of American prestige in the world] represents a realization of the major theme of his campaign. Most significant is that it represents Kennedy on the offensive almost totally and Nixon on the defensive. The best that Nixon can register through on is that all is well, that we haven’t really lost anything abroad.”\textsuperscript{408} This campaign debrief speaks to a number of dynamics of declinism. First, declinism can envelop many different themes in one neat package. Second, when declinist rhetoric is launched at an opponent, it is difficult, politically, for the opponent to claim all is well; such an argument is a losing argument, as it suggests that change is not coming and smells of complacency.

In addition to post-debate debriefs, Kennedy also utilized state-level surveys with typical political astuteness. Based upon Harris state-level surveys, Kennedy tailored his message to local issues. Louis Harris’s polls and analyses allowed Kennedy to tie local and foreign policy issues together.\textsuperscript{409} For example, Louis Harris urged Kennedy to “awake” the voters of Pennsylvania to the realities of US declining prestige, and Kennedy tailored his message accordingly: “When half of the steel mill capacity in this State is unused and, therefore, half of the steel-workers in this State do not find a good job, then you know that a basic asset which distinguishes us from our adversaries, the productive capacity of the United States, is not being used.”\textsuperscript{410} This tactic was particularly pronounced in Philadelphia, where Kennedy stoked the flames of relative American

\textsuperscript{409} Preble 2003, 144
\textsuperscript{410} Cited in Preble 2003, 125
decline and mocked Nixon for emphasizing consumerism over national strength: “I would rather take my television black and white and have the largest rockets in the world.”\textsuperscript{411} Kennedy would go on to win Pennsylvania, in large part due to incredible turnout in urban areas like Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{412}

In conclusion, Kennedy and his campaign were particularly sensitive to polling data throughout the campaign, tailoring messages to local audiences—yet keeping a rhetorical focus on American decline and foreign issues. Additionally, Kennedy used post-debate polling which indicated that his critiques of Nixon based upon declining American prestige were crucial messages to inform his subsequent performances and speeches. American decline was a winning message.

\textit{Eisenhower & Nixon’s Response to the Prestige Claim}

When faced with declinism, the incumbent finds it difficult to push back against declinist arguments without sounding complacent or defensive. Incumbents are often drawn into defending their record and painting the opposition as doomsayers. Incumbents may choose to reject declinism outright: the opposition has their facts wrong or they are misleading the public. Alternatively, incumbents may critique opponents of putting the country down, of not recognizing its strengths, or of engaging in self-fulfilling prophesies.

\textsuperscript{411} Cited in Preble 2003, 126.
\textsuperscript{412} Cited in Preble 2003, 126.
Eisenhower pushed back against claims that the United States’ prestige was declining. In an interview on the 10th of October 1960, Eisenhower pointed to the fact that, in the United Nations for the past 15 years the US had not lost a vote, as well as that one hundred heads of state wanted to visit the US and that President Sukarno of Indonesia told Eisenhower that the world looks at the US to maintain peace during crises.  

This constellation of anecdotes, told by Eisenhower in a public rebuttal of the declining prestige narrative, exemplify the slippery nature of prestige, how to measure it, and the relative confusion over whether or not it is occurring.

As for Nixon, he similarly denied the claims coming from the Democrats that America lagged behind the Soviets with respect to space, technology, and prestige, but he did so in a cautious—perhaps underwhelming—manner. “In science, sometimes we’re ahead and sometimes they are ahead,” Nixon claimed. On the campaign trail, Nixon compared the US “winning” a vote in the United Nations concerning the Congo, 70-0, to a football game, arguing that such a score shows “the U.S. prestige is pretty good.” In another speech, Nixon claimed that “those who preach this kind of gospel [of military, economic, moral, and spiritual decline] don’t know America and they don’t know the world.” As another example, Nixon punched back about declining prestige by emphasizing his foreign travels, in which Nixon found that the people of the world knew

414 Cited in Mieczkowski 2013, 243.
that America stood for peace, and did not have “designs” for them like the Communists did.417

However, there is political risk in addressing declinist arguments that puts incumbents in a bind. As historian Yanek Mieczkowski notes, “By countering Kennedy’s charge of declining prestige, he gave it credibility. It was as if Kennedy had sunk a hook into Nixon, and each time he twisted it, he elicited a response…Throughout the campaign, Kennedy forced Nixon to react to charges about a slothful administration, and constantly on the defensive, the vice president never mounted an effective attack.”418

Internal reactions to this statement from the JFK camp suggested that Eisenhower’s figures were misleading, asserting that in the most recent General Assembly the US was in the minority 13 out of 21 times on issues in which the US and the Soviet Union differed, including Algerian self-determination and the suspension of nuclear testing.419 Once Nixon evoked UN voting as a measure of US prestige, the Kennedy camp bounced. For example, in a speech on October 9, 1960 in Salem Ohio, Kennedy remarked:

In 1953 85 percent of the General Assembly voted with us. In 1953, it was 81. In 1954 it was 79. In 1955, it was 66. In 1957 it was 63. In 1958, it was 61. In 1959, it was 60 percent. This year it was 56 percent. Two nations in all of Africa voted with us yesterday on Red China. How many nations in all of Asia voted with us? Seven. The remaining either abstained or voted against us. More nations voted

418 Mieczkowski 2013, 248.
against us in Africa and Asia yesterday than voted with us. If Mr. Nixon wants to use that as the test of the United States’ prestige, I will use it.  

Atwood predicted that the likely Republican strategy during the campaign would be to tout America’s prosperity and convey a sense of optimism with “deceptive statistics” that would “prove that we are doing fine at home and in the world and that the democrats are carping critics and prophets of gloom and doom.” Indeed, this was the case. For example, in his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in 1960, Nixon argued that “no criticism — no criticism — should be allowed to obscure the truth, either at home or abroad, but today America is the strongest nation, militarily, economically and ideologically, in the world; and we have the will and the stamina and the resources to maintain that strength in the years ahead.”

During the fourth debate on October 21, 1960, Walter Cronkite asked Nixon whether there was a report by the USIA that showed a decline in US prestige abroad. Cronkite then asked, “if you are aware of the existence of such a report, should not that report, because of the great importance this issue has been given in this campaign, be released to the public?”

NIXON: Mr. Cronkite, I naturally am aware of it, because I, of course pay attention to everything Senator Kennedy says, as well as Senator Fulbright. Now, in this connection I want to point out that the facts simply aren’t as stated. First of

---

all, the report to which Senator Kennedy refers is one that was made many, many months ago and related particularly to the uh—period immediately after Sputnik. Second, as far as this report is concerned, I would have no objection to having it made public. Third, I would say this with regard to this report, with regard to Gallup Polls of prestige abroad and everything else that we've been hearing about “what about American prestige abroad”: America's prestige abroad will be just as high as the spokesmen for America allow it to be.423

Nixon returned to this theme again, arguing that “America gained by continuing the dignity, the decency that has characterized us and it's that that keeps the prestige of America up—not running down America the way Senator Kennedy has been running her down.”424 In response to Nixon’s charge that Kennedy’s declinism weakened the country, Kennedy responded that “what I downgrade, Mr. Nixon, is the leadership the country’s getting, not the country.”425 Yet, this is not entirely true on Kennedy’s part; his criticism did engage in self-blame that implicated the country and her deviation from what he would consider her proper place and purpose.

Outside of the campaign proper, Walter Lippmann responded to Eisenhower’s pushback against the notion that American prestige was declining in the Washington Post, an article which gained attention within the JFK campaign, including among his speechwriters.426 Lippmann presents a (perhaps too nostalgic) view of American power and might after WWII:

AN OBJECTIVE view of the problem of prestige must begin…with the position of the United States at the end of the Second World War. With our monopoly of

the atomic bomb, with our brilliant economy in a world where victors and vanquished alike were on the edge of prostration, we were invincible and invulnerable in war and without an equal in the councils of peace. We were the leading influence in vast new areas of the world which had never before been within the American sphere of influence…427

Once Lippmann has established a benchmark from which to measure America’s place and role in the world, he diagnoses decline by pointing to 1949 and the Soviet acquisition of nuclear weapons and the putatively weak response by the United States in the 1950s to meet the changes of a “wholly new balance of power in the world,” an implicit, if not explicit, critique of the Eisenhower years. Yet, Lippmann himself does not point to evidence for a declining or lack of American prestige abroad, instead pointing to a sluggish economy and defensive foreign policy as a given and as a marker of declining American prestige.

Lippmann ended his op-ed in the Washington Post on declining American prestige by arguing that “[t]he issue of our prestige is surely the overriding issue in this election. But it is a difficult one to explain, as Mr. Kennedy is finding, and it is easy to obfuscate, as Mr. Nixon and Mr. Lodge are demonstrating.”428 This sentiment echoes that of Chester Bowles with respect to domestic versus foreign affairs. There was a frustration—within both the Kennedy and Nixon camps—that each side could simply assert what they wanted with respect to America’s role in the world, her standing relative to the Soviets, and how America was viewed by the rest of the world.

In conclusion, prestige as a concept is complex and difficult to define, and those within the Eisenhower Administration and the Nixon Campaign were keen to paint an entirely different picture of American prestige than those in the Kennedy campaign. There was a lot of back and forth around whether American prestige was declining and what, if anything, should be done about it. Alongside the missile gap controversy, declining prestige was a key claim and contentious subject in the campaign.

IV. Declinism as an Election Strategy

“That is what we have to overcome… [the sense] that the United States has reached maturity, that maybe our high noon has passed, maybe our brightest days were earlier, and that now we are going into the long, slow afternoon.”

John F. Kennedy 429

As I argued in Chapter 3, the political opposition is most likely to cultivate a narrative of decline. Members of the opposition have an incentive to claim that the country is in decline as a result of the incumbent government’s failed policy choices and to portray their preferred policies as promising a return to greatness. Promoting declinism is not politically productive for those in power. In this section, I demonstrate that this was the case during JFK’s campaign. First, I show that those within Kennedy’s inner circle saw decline as a promising electoral message that would resonate with the American public and would put Nixon on the back foot. These individuals include William Atwood, Dick Goodwin, Chester Bowles, and Arthur Schlesinger. These men were in agreement:

429 Joffe 2014, 6-7.
the US was in decline, and JFK should hammer home this point to critique the Eisenhower/Nixon Administration. Second, I examine polling analyses conducted during the campaign, and in particular after each televised debate, and argue that Kennedy’s campaign received “positive feedback” with respect to the declinist messaging in his campaign, and would have otherwise not placed as much emphasis on a message of American decline had the reception been lukewarm or cold.

Those within JFK’s inner circle argued that the American public were both aware of and concerned with the US’s international position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. For example, William Atwood, a speechwriter for Adlai Stevenson and JFK, argued in a June 1960 memo entitled “Memo on the 1960 Campaign” that the American people “are far more concerned about our international situation than they were in 1956. There is growing awareness that US prestige and influence have deteriorated…the people are confused. They trusted Eisenhower and are looking for another leader they can trust. They are ready to admit that we have been on the wrong track…the mounting evidence of Soviet successes and American setbacks has quickened their natural desire for such leadership.”

Others, such as Senator Stuart Symington encouraged Kennedy to “tell the truth” about the state of the country, to set the record straight, against the misleading Republicans: “wherever I go,” Symington noted, “people are interested in the increasing tensions around the world….almost invariably they ask about the relative position of our

---

defenses against the strength of the possible aggressor.” 431 There was a sense within the campaign, among democrats and their intellectual compatriots, that Americans are “waking up and smelling the roses” with respect to the US’s position in the world, and that there is growing frustration that the Eisenhower/Nixon camp has been “sugar-coating” America’s position. 432

In a memo to Senator Kennedy from Dick Goodwin, aid and speechwriter, in May 1960, Goodwin outlines a series of potential major speeches that Kennedy could embark upon, including a speech on the theme “The America we must not be.” In this memo, Goodwin suggests this speech “…would project the current trends militarily, economically, etc. over the next decade designed to show that if we do not act now to reverse these trends we will deteriorate to the position of a second-class power. A sober assessment of the situation and what must be done.” 433 Thus, Dick Goodwin suggested that the Kennedy Campaign should seize upon the unease Americans were feeling and:

…place more stress on attack…in order to stir the uneasiness of our world position stemming from the U-2 incident, the fiasco at the summit, the cancelled visit to Japan and Castro’s Cuba; in many quarters there is a strong sense of shortcoming…arousing this worry need not be inconsistent with our theme of vigor, hope, and confidence…indeed the decline of American prestige abroad is an excellent springboard for the basic theme…why has our position declined? [...]
the remedy is to the resumption of our historic mission. This becomes the campaign theme.434

Arthur Schlesinger wrote a 30-page report entitled “The Big Decision” which was circulated privately within the campaign. Schlesinger, a speechwriter for Stevenson and Kennedy, an unabashed partisan, and member of the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) group, suggested in the report that there was much talk around Washington that it wouldn’t matter who occupied the White House going into the 1960s. Schlesinger strongly refuted this view, and saw the coming decision by the American people as one of “fateful import to our national future.”435

Schlesinger noted that while the US is not yet number two in lots of ways, the only reason that the US was not yet number two was because the US had a head start on the Soviets. However, Schlesinger viewed the Soviet Union as surpassing the United States in new weapons, space, technical education, and the rate of economic growth.436 Why was this the case? Schlesinger viewed the key issue as one of the allocation of resources. Because, Schlesinger argued, the Eisenhower administration prioritized consumer goods over education, healthcare, missiles, etc., the United States’ “fantastic abundance cannot enable us to remain safely ahead of the Communist world in national

power.” The Soviets, on the other hand, Schlesinger argued, focused their national energies under dictatorship and physical control in order to spend 2-3 times their share of GDP/capita relative to the United States on defense and technical education. Meanwhile, the United States spends money on automobiles, cosmetics, and smoking tobacco. Indeed, this sentiment was nicely portrayed in a New Yorker cartoon in September of 1957:

Figure 20: New Yorker Cartoon

“My, it’s a big week for everybody! The Russians have the Intercontinental Ballistic Missile, and we have the Edel.”

---

439 Published September 7, 1957.
In his report Schlesinger engaged in self-blame. “We are not in trouble because of forces beyond our control,” Schlesinger argued, and added “We are not in trouble because we can’t afford to do what must be done to maintain national power.” Instead, we have chosen private opulence over control of our national life, and in doing so, have let the market determine our national priorities. James Tobin, interlocutor and someone who would become part of Kennedy’s council of economic advisers, came to a similar conclusion during this time, arguing that the ideological position of the Republicans that “government intervention is evil” “…cost the United States its world leadership and gravely threatened its survival as a nation.”

Toward the end of the campaign—in October—there was also a concerted effort to articulate a plan-for-action to overcome decline. For example, in a letter to speechwriter Archibald Cox in early October 1960, W.W. Rostow argued that the campaign, and JFK’s speeches, “need to shift in emphasis from what is wrong, from the dangers we face to what the Senator would do, and to the constructive possibilities of the 1960s. The alarm bell has well and truly rung. Now the Senator must make the marginal vote feel that he can handle the problems he has dramatized and achieve positive results….The campaign badly needs a note of Rooseveltian optimism…Americans are not basically gloomy. If they face a tough, expensive problem they want to see light at the

---


end of the tunnel.” Rostow provided concrete advice to the campaign that it was worth providing further detail on what reversing decline would look like. “In whistle stops and major speeches, as well as in the debates, I believe the Senator should shift emphasis from the slide in prestige to what he would do to seize the initiative and move things toward positive American goals,” Rostow argued. Rostow went on to aver that, by painting a picture of American renewal in the face of decline, Kennedy would “[p]ut Nixon in a position of me-tooing.” In sum, the Kennedy campaign, behind the scenes, were convinced that decline was a winning subject from which to attack the Republicans.

V. John F. Kennedy as an Outsider & Free of Old Politics

As I note in Chapter 3, declinist rhetoric comes from a perceived need to break from the past and establish a new set of policies often associated with newcomers or outsiders. Moreover, I argue that particular kinds of actors—brokers—are able to bridge political networks and advance a message of decline. I argue that declinism is more likely to be associated with “brokers,” or actors who are able to use their positions and access within parties, in the sense that they have access to traditional party apparatuses, and outsiders, who appeal to voters, parties, and organizations/movements who are otherwise unconnected. Such brokers present themselves to the public as outsiders or newcomers to

---

politics (whether such characterizations are true), and thus can blame the establishment and past actions of not only the incumbent but also members of their own party.

In this case, Kennedy clearly self-represented himself as a new generation of politics. He was “cool,” as Arthur Schlesinger noted of Kennedy’s image: “His ‘coolness’ was itself a new frontier. It meant freedom from the stereotyped responses of the past. It promised the deliverance of American idealism, buried deep in the national character but imprisoned by the knowingness and calculation of American society in the fifties. It held out to the young the possibility that they could become more than satisfied stockholders in a satisfied nation. It offered hope for spontaneity in a country drowning in its own passivity—passive because it had come to accept the theory of its own impotence.”

Thus, Kennedy’s self-image, and that which he became famous for, was one of a new generation, a change, and, as he would describe his policies, a “new frontier.”

Kennedy represented not only a new generation of politics, but a divergence from a Democratic self-identity of being the party of Roosevelt and the New Deal. He was an outsider, vis-à-vis the Democratic establishment in some crucial respects. His politics were considered not liberal enough. He was also treated with some skepticism for who he was as a person: young and Catholic. Kennedy’s record in office was viewed by the left wing of the Democratic establishment as less than ideal. For example, the left was suspicious in part because of Kennedy’s votes for anticommmunist legislation, support for so-called “internal security” legislation, and his criticisms of Truman’s foreign policy

446 Donaldson 2007, 37.
Moreover, Kennedy’s detractors and doubters pointed to the fact that Kennedy associated with Joseph McCarthy, an association that he would seek to distance himself from and equivocate throughout the campaign, and his family’s record of supporting Nixon in the early 1950s as tell-tale signs that his politics was one of expediency rather than a true commitment to the liberal vision of the Democratic Party.

This skepticism of Kennedy, from being too young, too inexperienced, not liberal enough, and Catholic, made Kennedy the target of intra-party attacks. During the Democratic primaries, nomination, and convention in 1960, “leading Democratic contenders were too busy trying to block John F. Kennedy’s drive for the nomination to pay much attention to Eisenhower’s setbacks abroad,” according to historian Robert Divine. Harry Truman, in a televised news conference in June, called upon Kennedy to step aside (for Symington) to let someone “with the greatest possible maturity and experience” lead the Democratic ticket. Similarly, Eleanor Roosevelt penned a letter which argued that Adlai Stevenson—who was not even in the running—was the mature and experienced candidate which would give the American people what they desired: proven leadership. Lyndon Johnson, in a desperate attempt to wrangle the nomination from Kennedy, went on the attack during the Democratic National Convention. Johnson thought Kennedy was undeserving of the nomination, and sought to discredit Kennedy by investigating Kennedy’s health problems and calling attention to Kennedy’s father, Joe

---

448 Divine 1974, 214.
Kennedy’s putative appeasement of Hitler alongside Chamberlain. Kennedy, while dominant in the primaries, was facing backlash from within his own party around his candidacy, at least as the head of the Democratic ticket. According to Divine, when Kennedy faced attacks from the likes of Senator Symington, Kennedy stressed “his fourteen years of service in Congress,” which he leaned upon to counter his lack of experience, while declaring “It is time for a new generation of leadership to cope with new problems and new opportunities.”

Despite efforts to derail the Kennedy nomination, Kennedy would go on to receive the nomination. Kennedy’s nomination did not necessarily mean a departure from Democratic policies and priorities. His beliefs “would not depart radically from the Cold War positions of Harry Truman or Adlai Stevenson. As the New York Times noted, “His difference seems rather one of tactics, methods, and style.” With his nomination, the party had turned its back on both the big-city bosses and the post-New Deal liberals.” Additionally, Divine notes that “for all the rhetoric of a new generation of leadership, Kennedy offered no new departures in American foreign policy. Instead, he simply expounded the doctrines of Dean Acheson and John Foster Dulles in his constant description of a world divided between freedom and slavery and in his relentless hammering at the need to get the nation moving again in world affairs.”

454 Divine 1974, 287.
On the one hand, Kennedy clearly represents a new generation in the party. He was the first president born in the 20th century, a new, fresh, face in American politics. He also—at least rhetorically—painted himself as part of a new generation and, consequently, a new way of handling affairs, of breathing life into a stale nation. On the other hand, his ideas did not challenge the establishment Democrats in the way that the “New Right” in Britain challenged Britain’s establishment Conservatives.

However, in accepting the Democratic nomination for president, Kennedy painted for the public a new direction, a “New Frontier,” which he would characterize as a decisive turning point in history. As historian Robert Divine notes, for Kennedy to convince the American people that only a Kennedy presidency could deliver redemption for a nation in decline, “he would have to convince the nation that the times demanded such a call to action rather than a continuation of the cautious, restrained, and sober Republican leadership that had kept the peace for the last eight years.”

Kennedy’s advisers, particularly Arthur Schlesinger, saw Kennedy’s personal strength as that of a man free of “old politics,” a strength weakened—in Schlesinger’s view—by choosing LBJ as a running-mate. Schlesinger argued that the Johnson nomination made the Democratic ticket seem “…more old hat.” Schlesinger argued that picking LBJ as JFK’s running mate undercut the new generation argument: “Jack’s source of strength is the belief that he offers a fresh start—that his election would mean

---

455 Divine 1974, 287.
the rise to power of a new political generation, that it will bring about a great release of energy in American life. A dreary vice-presidential nomination will obscure this impression and drack down the ticket.”

Chester Bowles, writing to Archibald Cox—then-speechwriter for JFK—noted that a theme of speeches throughout the campaign should be that JFK will bring a “fresh and dedicated” new team to Washington and the federal government, to rid the country of “tired, frustrated individuals who look on their service with the federal government as a romantic interlude to their business careers…who have become convinced that what most needs to be done, cannot be done.” Kennedy would bring a new group of “whiz kids” to Washington, epitomizing a new, fresh-faced take on governing, especially around defense issues.

Beyond the frustrations with LBJ as an “old hat” candidate on a “new frontier” ticket, Schlesinger was particularly worried about the perception within JFK’s inner circle that LBJ’s focus on local issues, rather than national issues, would steer the campaign in the wrong direction. In multiple letters to JFK and those within the DNC, Schlesinger implored the candidate to return to a “national image” rather than millions of local issues.

In sum, Kennedy portrayed himself as an outsider, and in many ways, he was one. He was able to present an image of being a newcomer and offering something new to the country—even from past Democratic administrations. Kennedy brought into his campaign those who were most critical of Eisenhower, including Republicans like Rockefeller.462 Those he brought on were also of a new generation who had served in World War II but had “become impatient with the supposedly stagnant national leadership of the 1950s.”463 He was young—and therefore subject to critique for a lack of experience—and Catholic. His campaign was ready to counter such charges.464 He was, as Arthur Schlesinger put it, “cool.” While Kennedy was young and a portrayed a new generation, he was also able to tap into his already existing ties in the Senate and within the Democratic Party.

VI. The Consequences Kennedy’s of Declinism

“This nation can afford to be strong—it cannot afford to be weak.”
- John F. Kennedy

“There’s no missile gap.”
- Robert McNamara, 6 February 1961

Kennedy’s declinism, and his vision for a “New Frontier” fits the “domestic decay” and “international re-exertion” narratives outlined in Chapter 3. Kennedy thought that America’s decline was a result of a lack of investment at home and an approach to

462 Preble 2004, 144.
463 Giglio 1991, 45.
464 Preble 2004, 111.
466 Cited in Preble 2003, 155.
the Soviet threat which left America trailing the Soviets. In other words, Kennedy’s declinism was characteristic of the “we’ve not done enough” dimension of my typology of declinist narratives. In this section, I assess the consequences of Kennedy’s declinism with respect to his foreign policy and defense policy in particular. I focus on his foreign policy and defense policy because many of the domestic facets of the New Frontier did not come to fruition until after Kennedy’s assassination and the sweeping electoral victory in 1964 for the Democrats, breaking a deadlocked Washington.

JFK’s rhetoric and focus during the campaign was largely on the conduct of foreign policy and the ways in which America could reassert herself abroad. Kennedy understood American decline as originating from how the Eisenhower/Nixon Administration conducted US foreign policy and their lack of attention on defense-related matters. Kennedy’s campaign, and much of his presidency, was thus focused on the US role in the world. While the New Frontier included domestic and foreign policy ideas and proposals, and Kennedy understood the inter-relationship between domestic policy and foreign policy (e.g. civil rights at home would help American efforts to win over new African nations in competition with the Soviets467), Kennedy’s personal focus and message was on America in the world.468 I begin this section by discussing the continued discourse around the missile gap and Kennedy’s rhetorical entrapment in the politics of the missile gap. I then turn more generally to Kennedy’s defense policy, especially defense spending.

468 See, for example, Preble 2004, especially pages 144-146.
Consistency Constraints: The ‘Missile Gap’

Kennedy’s insistence that there was a missile gap between the United States and the Soviet Union during the campaign came back to bite him. It was not long into his presidency that Kennedy learned that such a gap did not exist. When Kennedy met Eisenhower to hand over the reins on January 19, 1961, they spent most of the time discussing developments in Southeast Asia, but Eisenhower again reiterated his belief that there was no missile gap and the strength of the US nuclear arsenal. However, even after receiving intelligence and briefings that the so-called “missile-gap” was nonexistent in early 1961, Kennedy maintained course, insisting that the defense build-up he promised the people would continue.

Kennedy’s insistence that the missile gap existed put him in a political bind, consistent with a “consistency constraint” mechanism outlined in Chapter 3. Christopher Preble notes that “Kennedy recognized the depts of concern over the state of the nation’s defenses, and he correctly gauged his fellow citizens’ willingness to sacrifice in order to close the missile gap and to address all the gap represented, but there was a downside to his use of the issue. Within a few weeks of the election, the new president came to realize the political costs of having focused on the gap during his campaign.” Historian James Giglio similarly notes that, with respect to the missile gap, “Kennedy became a victim of

469 Preble 2004, 149.
470 Preble 2003, 803.
his own rhetoric. Having promised to act tougher and do more, he limited his options in foreign policy.”472

In consistently decrying the decline of US strength and the supposed inferiority of the United States in the area of missiles, Kennedy had both mobilized a group of journalists, academics, policy advisers, bipartisan politicians, and citizens who believed that Kennedy’s victory meant a revival of America’s strength in the world. This was amplified by the fact that Kennedy had not won a decisive electoral victory.473 As Preble argues, “John F. Kennedy’s political fortunes were uniquely tied to the missile gap, which was a major factor in Kennedy’s rise to political prominence…once Kennedy was in the Oval Office, the public’s lingering concern over the gap influenced Kennedy’s national security policies…Only after his own administration had put a new defensive posture in motion would Kennedy concede that the gap did not exist.”474

Indeed, Kennedy put McNamara in charge of examining the missile gap, and the resulting political mess exemplifies the difficult position Kennedy, his campaign, and his administration had put themselves in. McNamara held an informal briefing shortly after Kennedy had tasked him with looking into the missile gap, during which McNamara told reporters flatly—though likely based on incomplete information, but otherwise correct information—that “There’s no missile gap.”475

472 Giglio 1991, 45.
473 On public misperceptions, the electoral politics of the missile gap, and the patterns of overestimating Soviet strength, see Thielmann 2011.
474 Preble 2004, 177.
475 Cited in Preble 2003, 155. See also, for both an account of McNamara’s investigation and “biased overestimation,” as a potential alternative explanation for the missile gap myth, Renshon 2009. Renshon casts historical accounts that claim that the missile gap was a purely political phenomenon as alternative explanations to biased overestimation. However, in this case the psychological roots of the missile gap are
Defense Spending & The New Frontier

Kennedy’s rhetoric during the campaign and into his presidency focused on the need to ramp up defense spending in order to close the gap between what he viewed as the objectives of his Administration entering the 1960s to solve the gaps between the US and the USSR from eight years of Republican rule.476 His close campaign advisers were of the same mind. For example, behind the scenes during the campaign, Chester Bowles, former Governor of Connecticut, member of congress, adviser to JFK on foreign policy during the campaign, and future Undersecretary of State under JFK, was extremely declinist and encouraged JFK in a memorandum during the campaign to consider how to reverse America’s decline before it was too late.477 “When great powers slip from positions of strength and influence, the point of no return is usually obscure to contemporaries,” Bowles argued. “The United States has slipped precipitously during the past eight years, and we are barely beginning to witness the consequences…” The memorandum to Kennedy suggests a number of policies that can be characterized as expansive and oriented towards stepping up America’s defenses, including increased production of the Atlas and Minuteman missiles, Polaris submarines, and the modernization and expansion of forces for limited war.478

less important to me than the political consequences of the rhetoric around the missile gap, including for public opinion and the sense that one could not walk back claims regarding the missile gap.

476 See e.g., Betts 2007.
Kennedy’s defense budget upon entering office followed up on his campaign promises to increase spending to meet the Soviet threat and increase American prestige. Shortly after coming into office, Kennedy maintained a full declinist mode when he gave his first State of the Union:

I speak today in an hour of national peril and national opportunity. Before my term has ended, we shall have to test anew whether a nation organized and governed such as ours can endure. The outcome is by no means certain. The answers are by no means clear. All of us together--this Administration, this Congress, this nation--must forge those answers.479

Kennedy went on to describe the steps he saw as necessary to overcome decline and set America on the direction again. He argued that,

… we must strengthen our military tools. We are moving into a period of uncertain risk and great commitment in which both the military and diplomatic possibilities require a Free World force so powerful as to make any aggression clearly futile. Yet in the past, lack of a consistent, coherent military strategy, the absence of basic assumptions about our national requirements and the faulty estimates and duplication arising from inter-service rivalries have all made it difficult to assess accurately how adequate--or inadequate--our defenses really are.480

Kennedy put McNamara on the task of assessing what was necessary, as I detailed above. He indicated in his State of the Union Address that several initial steps were required to shore up America’s defenses and stem American decline. Specifically, he outlined three steps:

First, I have directed prompt attention to increase our air-lift capacity…[Second,] I have directed prompt action to step up our Polaris submarine program. [Third,] I have directed prompt action to accelerate our entire missile program.481

By the end of 1961, Kennedy increased the defense budget by over 15 percent. The Kennedy campaign pushed for programs that were left in the dust by Eisenhower, such as the B-70 strategic bomber and US conventional forces. As such, once in office he “doubled the number of combat-ready divisions in the army’s strategic reserve, and expanded combat units in the navy and marines.” By 1962, defense spending was accounting for “over 9 percent of projected GNP.” In short, Kennedy stayed true to his campaign promises to build up US defenses by spending far more than his predecessor envisioned needing. From General Maxwell Taylor to Republicans like Rockefeller, or media personalities like Joseph Aslop, Kennedy had convinced many that America needed extra defense spending and a concerted effort to overcome decline. And Kennedy would follow through on his promises.

In conclusion, Kennedy won the election by a narrow margin—49.72% to Nixon’s 49.55% percent of the popular vote—and given that one of his core messages during the campaign was the decline of American power and prestige, which were both intimately connected to the idea of a missile gap, he could not do an about-face without paying political consequences. He thus was entrapped in the rhetoric he proffered during the campaign. His predecessor had no love lost for such comeuppance. Eisenhower referred to the missile gap as a “useful piece of demagoguery.” During his final State
of the Union message to Congress in 1961, Eisenhower referred to the missile gap as a fiction, arguing that:

Since 1953, our defense policy has been based on the assumption that the international situation would require heavy defense expenditures for an indefinite period to come, probably for years. In this protracted struggle, good management dictates that we resist overspending as resolutely as we oppose under-spending. Every dollar uselessly spent on military mechanisms decreases our total strength and, therefore, our security. We must not return to the "crash-program" psychology of the past when each new feint by the Communists was responded to in panic. The "bomber gap" of several years ago was always a fiction, and the "missile gap" shows every sign of being the same.488

In his farewell address he famously decried the military-industrial complex, not just as a warning for the impact of the complex on the future of the United States, but also as an explanation for why he was being ganged up on politically.489 Cartoons from the time, like the cartoon below, suggested the nakedly political nature of the missile gap. Whether such sentiments were wholly fair or accurate is another question.

---

489 Roman 1995, 145.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have traced declinism’s emergence in the late 1950s. The declinism that emerged from JFK—and those in his inner circle—in the late 1950s highlights key aspects of my theory of declinism’s emergence. First, JFK and his campaign staff thought declinism was a winning message in 1960 and they used declinism to organize and drive home the messaging of their campaign. Second, the

emergence of declinism from JFK, who typified a new generation, a new frontier, of politics, exemplifies the outsider/newcomer aspect of my argument. Kennedy was at once able to project an image as a newcomer to politics while using his political machine that he assembled throughout his time in the Senate and through his family’s past involvement in politics. He brought into his circle Republicans dissatisfied with the perceived stagnation of the United States under the Eisenhower Administration. He was viewed with skepticism by many in the Democratic Party as being too young, not liberal enough, and Catholic. His message of American decline and the promise of a new frontier swept him into the White House.

The consequences of Kennedy’s declinist rhetoric include attempting to ramp up defense spending in order to close the gap between what he viewed as the objectives of his Administration entering the 1960s to solve the gaps between the US and the USSR from eight years of Republican rule. Moreover, Kennedy faced political consequences for his constant critiques of the Eisenhower defense program and the missile gap. Upon entering office, Kennedy’s insistence that the missile gap existed put him in a political bind, consistent with a “consistency constraint” mechanism outlined in Chapter 3. He felt compelled, in part because of the narrow margins of his electoral victory, and in part because of his ginned-up supporters and intellectual backers, to do something about a missile gap.
Chapter 6

From Malaise to Morning in America:

The Declinism of Ronald Reagan

“If told the truth, the American people will support a foreign policy reflecting their pride and patriotism. A foreign policy that is a charter for our nation’s great future, not an installment plan for America’s decline.”
–Ronald Reagan to the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (March 17, 1980)

“Only a nation of idiots could look at the events of the last fifteen years… and say, ‘Gee, isn’t all terrific.’”
–Everett Ladd, Jr.

I. Introduction

In his acceptance speech for the Republican nomination for president in July of 1980, Ronald Reagan painted a bleak picture of the state of the union: “Never before in our history have Americans been called upon to face three grave threats to our very existence, any one of which could destroy us. We face a disintegrating economy, a weakened defense and an energy policy based on the sharing of scarcity.” Reagan critiqued what he saw as Carter’s mediocrity and his lack of leadership, arguing that he would “…not stand by and watch this great country destroy itself under mediocre leadership that drifts from one crisis to the next, eroding our national will and purpose.”


239
We have come together here because the American people deserve better from those to whom they entrust our nation’s highest offices, and we stand united in our resolve to do something about it.”494 This sense that the nation was suffering a crisis of confidence against the backdrop of “stagflation” fueled one of Reagan’s most impactful slogans, “Let’s Make America Great Again.”

In this chapter, I trace the declinism of the late 1970s and early 1980s in the United States. While, in Chapter 5, Nixon—as the incumbent vice president—rejected JFK’s declinism, both Reagan and Carter engaged in declinist rhetoric. On its face, this case then challenges my theory of declinism, as I expect declinism to emerge from the opposition. Yet, Carter’s declinism did not succeed. It provided fodder for Reagan’s campaign, who used Carter’s speech as a launch pad for a different kind of declinism, and as a way to critique Carter’s presidency. Moreover, as my theory would expect, Carter did not blame his administration for what he perceived as a crisis of confidence. Instead, he blamed events that spanned decades past, and a spiritual drift in the nation. In short, Carter’s declinism offers both confirmatory evidence of key dynamics in my theory of declinism and provides additional analytical leverage through the use of a “failed case” of declinism.

Reagan’s rhetoric of decline took the Carter administration to task for what Reagan believed were weakened defenses and an increased threat by the Soviet Union economically, militarily, and ideologically. Reagan famously moved from détente to confrontation and ramped up defense spending. His Strategic Defense Initiative in

---

particular exemplifies how the specter of American decline, and the promises of restoration and renewal, were used rhetorically by Reagan to justify increases in defense spending and the development of new technologies to render the homeland secure. Reagan’s declinism, and his prescription for national renewal, resonated with a public out of confidence and looking for leadership.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, I begin in Section II by outlining the historical context surrounding the declinism of the late 1970s and early 1980s in the United States by focusing on Carter’s “Crisis of Confidence” speech (popularly remembered as the “malaise” speech) and the political thinking in the Carter Administration at the time. In Section III, I examine the 1980 Reagan campaign strategy. Section IV explores Reagan as an “outsider” or as an “experienced novice.” In Section V, I unpack the content of Reagan’s declinism and trace the consequences of his declinist rhetoric, in particular by examining Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) and the role of the Committee on the Present Danger. In Section VI, I offer conclusions, returning back to my theory presented in Chapter 3.

II. A Crisis of Confidence and Carter’s Campaign

Historians often refer to the 1970s as “the long 1970s” or as America’s “post-confidence era.” “FUD” or “fear, uncertainty, and doubt” characterized the decade. Oil crises and recession were coupled with declining competitive advantages in relation

495 Notaker, Scott-Smith, and Snyder 2016, 1.
496 Zeiler 2016, 10.
to Germany and Japan. The country was still reeling from the deaths of prominent leaders the decade prior. Watergate and Vietnam continued to shake the country’s confidence in its institutions and ability to shape events as it pleased. Despite these challenges facing the United States, and the mood around the country, “the United States remained the pre-eminent military force and the most productive world economy.”

Yet, decline was certainly in the air. As historian Thomas McCormick put it, the late 1960s and early 1970s was characterized by a loss of “legitimacy, economic dominance, exclusivity, and self-confidence.”

It was in this context that Reagan emerged as the Republican nominee for president in 1980 claiming that he would make America great again. However, unlike the Nixon campaign in 1960, which argued—and believed—that things were better than Kennedy was asserting, many in the Carter Administration recognized that decline was in the air. In other words, both sides of the aisle recognized the sense of crisis that was facing the country. However, as I showed in Chapter 2, my measure of declinism in presidential speech data shows that Carter was not a declinist: a small number (less than 10) of speeches reference American decline and in half of those speeches Carter is explicitly rejecting American decline. Carter’s crisis of confidence speech, and the circumstances around it, are unique, but offer a window into what it would look like for an incumbent to be a declinist, what the political consequences of an incumbent asserting that not all is right with America would be, and the relationship between incumbents and oppositions when it comes to recognizing

---

497 Kreiger 1986, 130.
498 Kreiger 1986, 130.
and acknowledging that the country is feeling as though it is on the wrong track. Moreover, Carter’s declinism can be understood as responding to declinism in the air—both among his political opponents but also the country more generally—rather than Carter attempting to generate declinism for political gain.

Carter and Reagan’s approaches to dealing with this sense of malaise in the United States were different, as were the political consequences of their declinism. In this section I examine Carter’s infamous ‘crisis of confidence’ speech, from what he diagnosed as the problem to his solutions, and from the political logic of the speech behind-the-scenes to the political reception of the speech.

Prior to the summer of 1979 when Carter delivered his infamous “crisis of confidence” speech, the Carter Administration clearly understood that the American people believed the country was headed in the wrong direction. Polling data confirmed as such, and behind the scenes—prior to the crisis of confidence speech—it was acknowledged that Carter was struggling politically among Carter’s key advisers. “The President is now widely perceived to have no “vision of the future.” Therefore, people are afraid to entrust him with the task of leading the country into the future,” wrote one of Carter’s speechwriters, Rick Hertzberg, to close Carter confidant and Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan a month before Carter’s speech.500

In many respects the originator of the ‘malaise’ speech was Carter’s chief pollster, Pat Caddell, who encouraged Carter to think in less technical terms (as Carter was prone

to do) and more on the psychology behind what was happening in the country. 501

Caddell’s memo, entitled “Of Crisis and Opportunity” argued that “The American people want to restore greatness to America” and implored Carter to “deliver a jeremiad to the nation, to tell his fellow countrymen how they had fallen from better times but could return to national greatness.” 502 “At the moment, the American people are suffering a collective frustration, depression, confusion, hurt, and distance that is alarming. Knowing they deserve better than they have received from their collective leaders, despair is building,” Caddell averred. 503 Caddell believed that Americans had lost their sense of greatness. For example, he noted the extent to which America, in his view, had become humiliated: “Yet besides the Vietnamese we have been humiliated by Mexico and Cuba, held hostage by Arabs, taken to the trading cleaners by Japan and Germany (two nations we defeated and rebuilt and who now “abuse” us). The dollar is in disrepute; viewed as a carrier of the flag it is humbled everywhere. On and on.” 504

Importantly, Caddell’s memo pointed to the “natural result of historical forces and events” as the blame for the sense of crisis in the nation and the blame for Carter’s poor polling. 505 On the first page of his report, Caddell repeats twice that the crisis is “not of

501 Mattson 2009, 22.
505 Link and Glad 1994, 470.
your (Carter’s) making.”506 This sense that Carter could/should distance himself from the blame, as I further detail below, made its way into Carter’s speech.

For Caddell, the sense of malaise sweeping the nation presented Carter with “…the opportunity, so rare in American history, to reshape the structure, nature, and purpose of the United States in fundamental ways which your predecessors could only dream…”507 Caddell’s report, while certainly gloomy overall, had an earnest optimistic streak within it, because Caddell thought that the opportunity existed for Carter to lead the United States through a period of national renewal and elevate Carter to the historic heights of past presidents like Lincoln and FDR.

Consistent with my contention that declinists do not believe in tinkering at the margins, Caddell thought that one of the biggest mistakes Carter could make would be to focus on small policy changes:

Too many well meaning people keep saying that the President “must provide leadership,” or they recommend incremental limited steps which appear salutary at first but which risk only heightening awareness of the problem or intensifying the crisis without solving it… if we pursue goals of massive “real” change speaking to the higher needs and aspirations of the American people, then we have the opportunity to accomplish several fundamental changes of great magnitude.508

What was to be done, according to Caddell, was a fundamental altering of the country’s agenda with the goal of reinvigorating America’s national purpose and her citizens. The president, Caddell argued, should wage “institutional warfare” against

507 Cited in Link and Glad 1994, 471.
institutions and leadership elites who are “insensitive to the larger crisis or unwilling to support a larger agenda.” Though Caddell did not engage in specifics, the solutions to the country’s problems were on a “higher plane” than tinkering at the policy margins, according to Caddell.

Carter was impressed by Caddell’s memo, though it took the First Lady, Rosalynn Carter’s blessing before he would commit to delivering a speech in-line with what Caddell wanted. Eventually, Carter came to call Caddell’s memo (all 75 pages) a “masterpiece.”

A year before the presidential elections that would determine whether he had another term to right the ship, Carter embarked on a retreat to Camp David in July of 1979 to speak with spiritual, political, and cultural leaders. At the time, confusion reigned: what was Carter up to? Rumors spread that Carter was in ill-health or had even fled the country. Carter was, in reality, working behind the scenes to grapple with the sense of crisis that had swept the nation and to listen to various government, spiritual, and civic leaders in order to get a handle of the situation.

After 10 days, Carter emerged from Camp David to give a speech on Sunday, July 15, which infamously became known as his “malaise speech,” in which Carter spoke to the nation and accepted that a crisis of confidence was sweeping the nation: “The threat is nearly invisible in ordinary ways. It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in the

510 Mattson 2009, 54-55.
511 Mattson 2009, 54-55.
growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation.”512 According to presidential historian Theodore White, “no President since Abraham Lincoln had spoken to the American people with such sincerity about matters of the spirit.”513

Carter’s approach in the speech was to acknowledge the crisis of confidence he thought the American public suffered from and offer a prescription—albeit a fairly vague one—to shake off the uncertainty and doubt. “It’s clear that the true problems of our nation are much deeper -- deeper than gasoline lines or energy shortages, deeper even than inflation or recession,” Carter acknowledged. Self-indulgence and consumption were the culprits. The symptoms of this crisis of confidence, according to Carter, were many: “For the first time in the history of our country a majority of our people believe that the next five years will be worse than the past five years… the productivity of American workers is actually dropping, and the willingness of Americans to save for the future has fallen below that of all other people in the Western world…there is a growing disrespect for government and for churches and for schools, the news media, and other institutions.” Many of the symptoms are public-oriented, whether it is the beliefs of Americans or how Americans are performing and feeling more generally.

As the incumbent, Carter was careful not to trace the origins of the crisis in the nation’s confidence directly to himself or the past four years of his administration. While, in the opening of the speech, Carter reads quotations from notes he took during the summit

513 White 1982, 268.
at Camp David, including one which said that “you are not leading the nation, you’re just managing government” and one which claimed that “there is not enough discipline among your disciples,” the speech largely focuses on blame outside of Carter himself. “These [negative] changes did not happen overnight. They’ve come upon us gradually over the last generation, years that were filled with shocks and tragedy,” Carter claimed. He pointed back to the murders of John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as the damage that Vietnam and Watergate caused to the nation. “These wounds are still very deep,” Carter stated, and “they have never been healed.” His blame was diffuse and rested on the nation as a whole: “In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities and our faith in God, too many of us now worship self-indulgence and consumption,” Carter said. In other words, for Carter, the problem was deeper, with origins in the missteps and tragedies of years past as well as a cultural and spiritual shift within the nation. His speech was an effort to respond to the feelings of the nation and provide an assurance that he had solutions in mind for four more years.

Carter’s prescription for the crisis of confidence was to “face the truth… to have faith in each other, faith in our ability to govern ourselves, and faith in the future of the nation.” Only then, Carter argued, could this crisis of confidence be shored up. Consumerism and materialism needed to make way for a cultural change that emphasized America’s core values, including human rights and equality.

In one sense, Carter’s malaise speech worked: Carter’s approval rating jumped 11 points, and many of his core constituencies agreed with him that there was a crisis of
History, however, has not looked fondly at Carter’s speech, especially after his electoral trouncing at the hands of Reagan in 1980, but initial impressions suggested that the speech resonated. Over 65 million Americans watched the speech, and the polling immediately following Carter’s address to the nation showed that it resonated: “Midwesterners whose cable televisions were equipped with two-way communication devices registered instant approval of the speech. Sixty-one percent said that the speech had left them optimistic. Forty-three percent expressed confidence in the president’s ability to lead the nation, and seventy-two percent were willing to make personal sacrifices in order to deal with the energy crisis.”

However, when looking at Carter’s approval rating, the speech did little to change the broader picture of his popularity in 1979. A New York Times article from July 18, 1979 points to additional polling data that showed that Carter’s speech did resonate with the American people, at least insofar as Americans were willing to accept there was a crisis facing the nation: “77 percent of those polled said that they agreed “that there is a moral and spiritual crisis, that is, a crisis of confidence, in the country today.” The speech did not change Carter’s political fortunes, and as I detail below, provided an opening for conservatives to go on the attack.

---

514 Kreiger 1986, 10. See also Strong 1986; Mattson 2009.
515 Strong 1986, 647.
516 Data from American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/presidential-job-approval
Several factors led Carter’s speech to ultimately fall short of its intended goal and which demonstrate why declinism is more effective for the opposition. First, the firing of cabinet members two days after the speech immediately caused controversy and confusion, quickly erasing any gains Carter made in the speech, and history remembers the “malaise” speech, as shorthand for Carter’s difficulties in office, rather than as a successful political moment that was eventually squandered. This act renewed confusion around how Carter was guiding the country through a crisis of confidence, something that I show below the Reagan campaign seized upon.

---

Data from American Presidency Project [https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/presidential-job-approval](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/presidential-job-approval)
Second, the speech provided fodder for Carter’s political opposition, particularly because Carter’s speech focused blame on all Americans as part of a shared political community. Conservatives turned this against Carter, arguing that “the problem wasn’t the people. The problem was the government.” Or, as it was put in memos behind the scenes in the Reagan camp, Carter’s failure (at least according to the Reagan team) was “to recognize that Americans had confidence in themselves, but not the institutions that are supposed to serve them and their expectations for the future.” Carter’s crisis of confidence speech, in a declinist mode, and coming from the incumbent, played into the hands of the opposition. Richard Wirthlin, Reagan’s chief pollster, looks fondly back at Carter’s crisis of confidence speech. “I remember the exact moment I know Ronald Reagan could beat Jimmy Carter,” Wirthlin recalls, “The date was July 15, 1979,” which happens to be the date of Carter’s speech.

It was not only conservatives who used Carter’s speech against him. Ted Kennedy, who was attempting to primary Carter and lead the Democratic ticket into the 1980 election, decried Carter’s speech as well, painting it as proof that Carter had accepted America’s decline. In announcing his candidacy for the Democratic nomination, Ted Kennedy argued that the nation was rudderless. “Conflicts in direction confuse our purpose. Government falters. Fears spread that our leaders have resigned themselves to retreat,” Kennedy declared. Instead, Kennedy put forward his vision of the future for

519 Mattson 2009, 204.
520 Memo from Richard Wirthlin to Ed Meese and Bill Casey on May 12, 1980, “Identification of Some of the Thematic Elements to be Used in a “Leadership” Speech to be Delivered Prior to the Republican Convention.” SERIES III: Ed Meese Files SUBSERIES B: Campaign Planning. Box 103.
521 Mattson 2009, 167. See also Wirthlin 2005, 35.

251
America, one of renewal: “this country is not prepared to sound retreat. It is ready to advance. It is willing to make a stand. And so am I.”

The speech, in blaming everyone, gave every Carter opponent fodder for critique, opening the door for politicians from the left and the right to argue that Carter was defeatist and directionless. Instead, these opponents painted pictures of their candidacies as offering hope of renewal. Pat Caddell, in his “Of Crisis and Opportunity” memo, predicted that Kennedy would pressure Carter immensely during the primary season, because Caddell saw Ted Kennedy as “as a symbol of Hope, of a past which was America’s high water mark; a period most remembered and cherished.” Carter’s speech played into the hands of the likes of Ted Kennedy, who offered a different narrative of the crisis, one focused on a lack of political leadership rather than of collective guilt. Caddell was right. The United States, according to Ted Kennedy during the primary campaign, was “adrift, buffeted by events, tossed like a cork on uncertain and stormy seas. America’s prestige is at its lowest point since we became a world power…Constantly, we seem to be reacting to events that take us by surprise.”

Third, while the speech provided Carter with a much-needed boost in the polls, he did not offer the same leadership to guide the country that Reagan did. Once the cabinet dismissals occurred, Carter’s leadership was once again questioned. One of the key

525 Ward 2019, 191.
architects—if not the architect of the Crisis of Confidence speech, Patrick Caddell,526 implored Carter to “move out of this personnel pit and back to the broad high ground of themes begun on Sunday and Monday.”527 Others within Carter’s cabinet, who opposed the advice of Caddell, rightly pointed their finger on what the conservatives would use as an attack-line against Carter: there was much talk about diagnosing the problem, but where was the leadership? “People don’t want to hear Jimmy Carter talk about our problems,” Greg Schneiders argued from Camp David, “…they want to perceive him beginning to solve the problems inspire confidence by his action, and lead.”528 According to Schneiders, “you inspire confidence by being confident.”529 Carter, however, was sold on the Caddell approach.

In this section I have focused on Carter’s crisis of confidence speech in order to demonstrate several key aspects of my argument, and to provide—through Carter’s rhetoric—the historical context in which Reagan was able to so effectively campaign on a theme of American decline. As I noted at the beginning of this section, Carter’s speech on July 15, 1979 was not indicative of his broader rhetoric as president. However, it is worth focusing on this speech as a unique historical moment in which, if not an explicit articulation of American decline, certainly a feeling of crisis emerged and was the focus of an unprecedented speech in modern American rhetoric.

526 Caddell has since went on to advise Steven Bannon. See https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/jordanmichaelsmith/the-man-who-predicted-the-rise-of-donald-trump-in-1976
527 Mattson 2009, 171.
528 Link and Glad 1994, 473.
529 Link and Glad 1994, 473.
The episode is illustrative for a few reasons. First, the speech had some immediate, if short-lived, positive effects for Carter. In the long term, however, the speech was used as part and parcel of a broader effort by conservatives to take the Carter administration to task over its handling of the economy and the US’s position in the world. In short, the speech played into Reagan’s hands as Carter’s opponent, as I further elaborate below. Moreover, conservatives used the speech as a rallying cry against pessimism and Reagan offered, in retort, an optimistic outlook to the nation’s future—if only the country could shake off the decay and disillusionment of the Carter administration. Finally, perhaps, to speculate, Carter’s speech would have been more successful in the long-term if Carter was more specific in his assessment of America’s malaise and the route out of malaise. Unlike declinists who are successful in having their declinist appeals resonate, Carter’s diagnosis and prescription was vague. Not only did Carter disperse blame widely, he did not, per my typology of declinist rhetoric, diagnose the domestic and international sources to any degree of specificity. Nor did he, on the whole, suggest that too much or too little had been done.

Second, this episode of declinism represents an off-the-equilibrium path outcome with respect to declinism. As the incumbent, Carter assigned blame widely, both on the part of the public (critiquing consumerism or self-indulgence) and on decades past. However, in doing so, he exemplified the ways in which declinism is so difficult for incumbents, and much more easily picked up by the opposition. Conservatives heaped criticism on Carter for blaming the country rather than Washington and ‘big government’

---

530 I thank Nisha Fazal for drawing my attention to this formulation.
for the problems of the nation. This is consistent with the notion that incumbents find it difficult to “own” decline, and that declinism is far easier when in the opposition. Indeed, Carter made an effort in his crisis of confidence speech to return to a theme that he used in the 1976 election campaign: that he was an outsider to Washington, a city which he referred to as an “island cut off from the concerns of everyday Americans.” However, as Steven V. Roberts noted in the *New York Times* the day after the speech, the sense in Washington was “that Mr. Carter was using last night's speech to revive a proven theme and renew his campaign against the capital. But there was much skepticism about his chances for success. As the White House adviser said, Mr. Carter, for better or worse, has become an islander himself.”

III. Declinism Runs Rampant: The 1980 Presidential Campaign

In this section, I examine Reagan’s campaign strategy, his ‘outsider’ status, and what issues drove Reagan’s victory in 1980. The Reagan campaign understood the pitfalls of incumbency, and their role as offering a different kind of leadership. The campaign understood, moreover, that Americans were feeling downtrodden, and that a message that focused on both “pocketbook” issues as well as questions of the nation’s standing would resonate. After unpacking the campaign strategy, I explain Reagan’s ‘outsider’ status, and how such appeals led him to reshape the Republican Party in 1980.

---

531 Ward 2019, 140.
1980 Presidential Campaign Strategy

Behind the scenes, the Reagan Campaign explicitly articulated a campaign strategy built on declinist themes. The campaign recognized that the country was in a bad mood:

Since the quiet, relatively passive years of the Eisenhower period, the American public has been severely battered by political events. The New Frontier and Great Society strategies of the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, the racial revolution of the 1960s, the most unpopular war in American history; Vietnam, the alienation of American youth, Watergate, the near-impeachment of an American President, the resignation of President Nixon, and the pardon have exhausted the public politically. This feeling is reflected in the national mood. From 1973 to 1980 fewer than 20% of the country felt the nation was on the "right track; seventy-five out of every one hundred Americans thought the country was misdirected and in disarray."533

Moreover, individuals within the campaign, including Reagan’s pollster Richard Wirthlin, noted that the debate in 1979/1980 was not “whether there is a crisis or even how upset Americans actually are. As Everett Ladd, Jr. [a prominent political scientist and pollster at the time] has observed, “Only a nation of idiots could look at the events of the last fifteen years… and say, ‘Gee, isn’t all terrific’”…it is apparent that the Carter Administration has been unable to serve its morale-building function to lead the country out of a condition of self-doubt and timidity…”534 In short, the Reagan campaign were fully aware—and accepted—that Americans were feeling the crunch of the oil crisis, of a lack of confidence at home and abroad. The matter was not up for debate. What was up

for debate between Carter and Reagan, however, was Carter’s complicity in the nation’s problems, the extent of the problems, and what sort of message to take to the American people.

The mood was not much better within the Reagan campaign with respect to the direction of the country. With respect to foreign policy, the campaign decried Carter’s “tragic legacy” of the past 4 years. According to campaign documents, it was important to highlight that Carter inherited a good economy at home and an improving international situation abroad. Yet, Carter had “squandered that inheritance thru policies that are inconsistent, incoherent, and inept.” This led campaign strategists to decry Carter’s “tragic legacy” of decline of US respect and power, of a growing soviet threat, “rising tide of violence and warfare” abroad, and a world that was “slipping towards chaos.”

Most notably, the campaign saw the American hostages in Iran as a “stark symbol of U.S. impotence.”

The Reagan Campaign highlighted the incumbency logic behind declinism: incumbents are prone to attacks on their record. Incumbency, one campaign document argued, “for all of its advantages, also has the disadvantage of there being a record for the Carter administration to have to defend. The Carter campaign strategy will be to create the public expectation that policies will come to fruition in the next term. The Reagan for President Campaign strategy must be to force the White House to defend its record, and

---

to point out consistently and regularly the failures of the Carter policies and the impossibility that anything significant could come in the next term.”\textsuperscript{538} The campaign noted throughout that they envisioned the Carter strategy as one of biding ones time, and to let the seeds planted in the first four years of Carter’s presidency sprout in the second term. \textsuperscript{539} The Campaign speculated that Carter would ‘go positive’ during the election and run on themes such as ‘‘turning the tide…’’ ‘‘don’t change horses…’’ ‘‘the experienced and known is better than the inexperienced and the unknown.’\textsuperscript{540} These conditions are slightly different, than, say, Nixon’s position in 1960, whereby he was part of an administration that had governed for eight years. Carter, unlike Nixon, could plausibly put forward that he had planted the seeds of recovery, and, as his crisis of confidence speech indicated, had given much thought to how best to proceed, unlike his competition, who was often labeled as simplistic and fast-and-loose with facts.

Moreover, and consistent with how incumbents confront declinism, the Reagan campaign was weary of Carter’s attacks on Reagan’s criticism of his Administration. Specifically, the Reagan campaign noted that Carter can turn criticism of his administration into a question of “running down America,” similar to claims lodged against Kennedy by Nixon in 1960. In other words, the Reagan campaign expected Carter and his surrogates to play “to people’s sense of “patriotism and realism,” and by doing so

hope that “voters will realize that one cannot blame the landlord and bang on the pipes when in trouble or when something goes wrong.” This, again, is a common strategy employed against declinism, but in the context of a suffering nation and a dampened national mood, would not play well.

The Reagan Campaign for President used polls to understand what animated the American public, and to inform the campaign’s messaging. Memos across the Reagan campaign pointed to an issue which was animating the public: the United States’ influence in the world. In preparing for the debate with Carter, aides suggested that one of the top priorities for Reagan would be to focus on Carter’s record in office with respect to both the economy and the United States’ decline in the world, which were, according to aides, “the areas of principal Carter vulnerability... that comprise Carter’s greatest weakness – weakness that is widely recognized and that the Carter record simply cannot rebut.” One of the influential polls that drove home the idea that Reagan should speak decisively about the linkages between the economic problems, world competitiveness, and declining American strength and power in the world was commissioned by the New York Stock Exchange, the Senate Subcommittee on Foreign Trade, and Harvard University for a conference in early 1980. The results of the survey led participants and close friends of the campaign to push the issue:

The results indicate that there is a dramatic political issue below the surface that no political candidate has staked out for himself in the public’s mind. [...] 70% of the people say the U.S. influence in the world is declining. [...] Finally, 84% of the people surveyed said they would be more willing to vote for a candidate who was in favor of “strengthening business to restore power and influence in the world.” [...] 544

The poll further found that 62% of the sample believed that the US was losing strength to most other countries and that 50% of respondents believed that the issue was both an economic and military issue, rather than solely an economic or military issue. 545

This led James R. Fuller, Senior Vice President of the NYSE and who went on to serve on the Board of Directors of the Securities Investor Protection Corporation (SIPC) under the Reagan Administration to implore William Casey, Reagan’s campaign manager, to focus on this issue: “the poll indicates that Governor Reagan would be well advised to discuss the rebuilding of American influence as a multifaceted problem involving our economic strength as well as our military strength. [...] Sometimes there might be one or two important issues in the public’s mind lurking just below the surface that are not being discussed widely, and therefore, are not being tracked continually.” 546 While the lack of attention to the international dimension of American decline is certainly overstated by James Fuller, such arguments about strengthening the campaign’s message about

American international competitiveness did not fall on deaf ears, and was circulated widely in the campaign. The question would be, what to do about it?

Reagan’s Campaign understood that Carter had lost the confidence of the American people as their leader and used this as a line of attack and as an opportunity to tout Reagan’s leadership abilities and the perceived loss of control Americans felt. Campaign documents argued that the campaign must “convey the clearest possible message that Reagan stands for leadership and control” and seize upon the sentiment that Carter’s Administration has lost control: “The prevailing view in America is that no one is in control; the prevailing impression given by the White House is that no one can be in control; and, the prevailing view abroad is that the will to be in control is gone.”\(^547\)

Moreover, campaign documents noted that voters “are firm in their belief that the problems facing the United States are the result of poor leadership and are not the inevitable result of uncontrollable economic and political forces.”\(^548\) Behind the scenes, the Reagan campaign pointed to the dismal second half of Carter’s presidency, with respect to his ability to inspire confidence among the American people. For instance, in one of the main campaign documents, the document notes that the American public no longer see Carter as a leader:

But for a narrow margin of Americans Carter created the expectation that his leadership could alter the mood of the country and restore to Americans the confidence in their country and its institutions that had been misplaced. In early 1977, more than 365 days after the beginning of the Carter Administration, there was an 11\% increase in the proportion of Americans who thought the country was moving on the right track again. A year into the Carter Administration over half of the country thought Carter was at least as good, if not a better President, than

they had expected. In 1976–1977, Carter, the man, inspired the public’s trust; Carter, the President, was initially perceived to be able to restore to the country its sense of mission in the world and direction in domestic affairs. But by mid-term the attitude changed. The mood of the country dropped to its pre-1976 Presidential election level; and the President's popularity fell off from the honeymoon highs above 60% to 43% in early 1978. Carter’s popularity was lower than every American president since Roosevelt (except for Ford who does not have a mid-term approval rating) at the mid-term point. The public continued to see Carter as likeable, religious, moral and believable, but not too sure of himself, uncertain, indecisive and lacking in strong leadership qualities.549

The Reagan campaign understood Patrick Caddell’s (Carter’s pollster) theory of the crisis of confidence and how it would play out politically, but they thought Caddell had made a strategic mistake. The strategic mistake, according to the Reagan campaign’s chief pollster Wirthlin, was that the Administration did not conceive of the crisis of confidence as something that could be controlled, managed, and solved. Blame was to disperse, and President Carter did not offer an optimistic route out of the nation’s ills. According to Wirthlin, “the implication of the Administration’s view of the crisis of confidence is that the President and his Administration was not the cause of the crisis, nor was it possible for this President, or indeed any President, to significantly change the mood of the country and restore, in the near future, the public’s confidence.”550 This approach by the Carter Administration, Wirthlin contended, was a double-edged sword: “the political implication was that Jimmy Carter could not be solely blamed for the

nation’s ills, nor exclusively responsible for the nation’s recovery.” 551 Countless documents raised the issue of strong leadership and drove home this notion that Carter’s presidency—and his malaise speech specifically—opened the door for an appeal to the nation on the basis of strong leadership and a depiction of America as a “problem-solving country.” 552

In other words, Carter’s speech, while it attempted to deflect blame away from the Administration, also did not give Carter, in Wirthlin’s view, room to claim credit for recovering the nation’s purpose and confidence. Carter’s opponent, however, was waiting in the wings, claiming that the nation’s decline was a function of Carter’s mal-administration, and more broadly big government, and that he could lift the country out of this sense of malaise and decline and restore America’s purpose. In short, Reagan was claiming that his political movement would make America great again. This was articulated in stark terms in campaign documents. For example, one campaign document noted that, “one response to the feelings of personal normlessness [prevailing mood of the country] is to seek out and follow some authority figure. The resurgence of religious fundamentalism is one manifestation of this response. In the political sphere, voters are looking for a leader who can take charge with authority; return a sense of discipline to

---


our government; and, manifest the willpower needed to get this country back on track.”

Declinists, with their doom and gloom on the one hand and with promises of renewal on the other, are often characterized or frame themselves as ‘messianic’-type figures, often achieving some form of cult or ‘strong man’ status.

However, one of Reagan’s strengths—his decisive leadership capability—clashed with another trait which voters saw as potentially alarming: that Ronald Reagan was war-hungry, while Carter was a man of peace. One approach to counter this claim came from campaign handbooks which suggested that Republicans could counter claims of “peace” under the Carter administration by “dramatizing the loss of American power and prestige abroad suffered since 1976.”

Moreover, the Reagan campaign had data to show that on the one hand, the public believed that Reagan would be a “strong and decisive leader in foreign affairs,” and yet, on the other hand “he would be too quick to push the nuclear button.” For example, a Gallup poll released on May 3, 1980 reported that 46% of Americans believed that Carter would do a better job keeping America out of war, while 31% of Americans believed that

Reagan would do a better job. This was a matter of balancing rhetoric that was, on the one hand, strong and, on the other, reasoned. “Americans heavily back improving our defense position…they yearn not necessarily to be “liked in the world community, but to be respected again.” Wirthlin contended. Yet, Wirthlin pointed to the delicate balancing act when claiming that one would increase the US’s defensive position and gain the world’s respect (but not love) again: to do so would, potentially, be perceived as threatening, and as hawkish. Americans, Wirthlin contended, would want a dash of the strong rhetoric and a dash of the reassuring rhetoric when it came to the prospects of continued peace against the backdrop of nuclear war. To “pull the sting out of the “dangerous charge,”” Reagan would have to speak explicitly of a “peace posture” rather than a “defensive” posture and affirm the need to re-establish a margin of safety but avoid using the term “arms race.” In other words, there was a certain irony to the concerns within the Reagan campaign regarding the negative perceptions of Reagan’s calls for renewal through strength: the campaign wanted to have their cake and eat it too. By stressing Carter’s inadequacies, and the return to American strength, Reagan was being assertive, and of course aggressive in his rhetoric. But the campaign did not want to spook the American people, and therefore tried to tamper negative associations with

---


declinism—that of increased threat and ‘punching back’ against the Soviet threat—with gestures toward peace through strength.

While the Reagan Campaign saw Carter as an easy punching bag—whether it was based upon his “Crisis of Confidence” speech or the nature of the American economy at the time—they believed that Reagan needed to (1) articulate a vision of the future and (2) that such a vision of the future must be, ultimately, optimistic. Richard Nixon wrote Reagan on the 22 of October 1980 with his thoughts on how the campaign should proceed in the closing stages. Nixon reiterated common themes that emerged throughout the campaign, including the need to question Carter’s character, competence, handling of the economy, and his naiveté about defense and foreign policy. At the same time, Reagan should, according to Nixon, punch back against notions that Reagan would lead the country into war. According to Nixon, in the final weeks of the campaign Reagan should:

…come across as a man with a mission—as the leader of a “crusade,” as Eisenhower was both portrayed and perceived in 1952…the Reagan “crusade” has two aspects. One is the negative view of what these next few years will bring if we don’t get rid of Carter. The other is Reagan’s own positive view of America and its future…the positive view is one of unlocking the nation’s—and the people’s—potential, of renewing the upward climb, getting us back on track, enlisting our energies and energizing our hopes, fulfilling our dreams, restoring our strength and ensuring our security.561

wrong…to constructive possibilities of the 1960s.” Declinism, as I argued in Chapter 3, typically has a sunny side. Otherwise, the doom and gloom sounds fatalistic, and politicians do not provide the public with a way out of decline and toward renewal.

In sum, the campaign, informed by public opinion, pushed themes of declining American economic competitive and declining American prestige abroad. Moreover, they concentrated effort on linking these issues to questions of Carter’s leadership, while trying to stay away from claims made by Carter’s campaign that they were ‘war hungry’ compared to Carter. The campaign clearly understood that the American people were suffering a crisis of confidence but wanted to move blame away from the citizenry to the Washington ‘big government’ elite. Furthermore, they felt it important to emphasize an optimistic potential for the country, if the country chose Reagan, and tie this back to strong leadership.

My theory expects that declinism is more likely to find voice in the opposition. While Carter’s malaise speech, in this regard, represents a case in which declinism (or, something close to it at least) finds voice in the incumbent, the Reagan campaign understood the challenges of incumbency, and thought that Carter had made a strategic mistake in the summer of 1979 and used Carter’s crisis of confidence speech against him.

My theory expects declinism to be instrumentally deployed by oppositions. This appears to be the case in Reagan’s 1980 campaign: the Reagan campaign felt that public opinion was on their side with this issue, and sought to couple arguments regarding economic decline, military decline, and declining prestige together, as I further highlight.

---

below. My theory also expects declinism to emerge from *outsiders* or *newcomers* to a party. I discuss that aspect of my argument—Reagan’s outsider status—next.

IV. “An Experienced Novice:” Reagan’s Outsider Status

While Reagan understood that he would win if he could contrast himself with Jimmy Carter, essentially occupying the space of “not Jimmy Carter,” Reagan still portrayed himself as an “experienced novice,” someone without the baggage of Washington but the track record in California to show that he was no lightweight. According to American historian Michael Kazin, “Reagan depicted himself not primarily as a Republican but as an insurgent outsider who fit none of the preconceived categories of American politics.”

Reagan’s outsider status depended upon him capturing the imagination of the nation as someone who could breathe new life into the country, but also as someone who was a political outsider. I address each facet in turn.

Reagan’s pitch to the nation was not one of tinkering at the margins of policy, of tweaking or building upon Carter—or even Ford or Nixon’s—successes. He was going to bring fundamental change to Washington, he believed. As one example, Reagan’s campaign advertising strategy noted during the primary campaign that “all the other candidates are “business as usual.” They’re for the continuing the same basic policies that are killing our country today…and even they say our future is austere. Reagan is the only one with the confidence, the capability and the vision to stop America’s erosion and

---

restore America’s greatness.”\footnote{RONALD REAGAN 1980 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN PAPERS, 1964-1980. SERIES III: Ed Meese Files. SUBSERIES B: Campaign Planning. Box 101. Ronald Reagan Library.} The memo noted that the mood of the country suggested that there was a “desire for “JFK” spirit.”\footnote{RONALD REAGAN 1980 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN PAPERS, 1964-1980. SERIES III: Ed Meese Files. SUBSERIES B: Campaign Planning. Box 101. Ronald Reagan Library.} The reference to JFK’s spirit here is important, because it shows a desire on the part of the campaign to tap into an image, persona, and “outsiderness” that JFK, as I show in Chapter 5, exhibited effectively as well. In other words, the campaign understood themselves to be offering something fundamentally different than the other candidates, who they saw as maintaining the status quo. They understood their goal as a complete overhaul of the relationship between people and their government as well as, I show below, a fundamental shift in how the US conducts its foreign policy.

Second, Reagan had long developed an image of a principled outsider, or of a concerned citizen who was “simply speaking his convictions.”\footnote{Ritter and Henry 1992, 11.} In the 1976 Republican primary, Reagan put real pressure on the incumbent Republican president Ford. Joel Kreiger notes of Reagan that “the fundamental stock line of the Reagan candidacy for more than 20 years” was the portrayal of Reagan as an “anti-party populist—a citizen-leader reluctantly performing his civic duty and not a professional politician relentlessly pursuing personal ambition…”\footnote{Kreiger 1986, 156.} Reagan was, at once, a Republican and “not a Republican.” He could straddle the space between access and disavowal of particular strains of the Republican party.
Reagan sat in a peculiar place in Republican Party politics: he was at once, “one of them,” but also occupied the Goldwater strain of the Republican Party which had failed in 1964. Reagan’s base was cultivated over the years through grassroots organizing and existed in some ways “outside” of the party. This allowed Reagan to fend off pressure from within the Republican Party, as well as brush off those within the Republican Party establishment that mocked the actor-turned politician. Reagan was not someone with a “long Washington apprenticeship” such as Johnson, Nixon, or Ford.

Reagan won the election in a landslide, accumulating 489 electoral votes to Carter’s 49. Exit polling of 37,606 voters across the country suggested that Reagan’s mandate was to regain control of the economy and halt American decline: “When asked to identify one or two issues that most stirred them, 47 percent of those who voted for Reagan said it was “controlling inflation,” and 45 percent said it was “strengthening America’s position in the world. Of those who voted for Carter, only 20 percent mentioned America’s position in the world… by contrast “insuring peace weighed far more heavily on the minds of Carter’s voters (36 percent).” In other words, Reagan’s rhetoric during the campaign matched those issues for which voters expressed most concern: American economic and international decline.

In sum, this section has focused on the 1980 presidential campaign and how the Reagan campaign in particular sought to use declinism to their political advantage. I

568 Kreiger 1986, 156.
570 Kreiger 1986, 158.
571 White 1988, 416.
demonstrated that the Reagan campaign understood the pitfalls of incumbency, and Reagan wanted to offer a different kind of leadership. The campaign responded to feelings circulating in the public at the time, that Americans were feeling downtrodden and were not confident in their political leadership. The Reagan campaign thought that a message that focused on both “pocketbook” issues as well as questions of the nation’s standing would resonate. Reagan, moreover, painted himself as an ‘outsider,’ which helped lead him to reshape the Republican Party in 1980.

V. The Consequences of Declinism: Ending Détente, the Strategic Defense Initiative, and the Committee on the Present Danger

Reagan’s declinist rhetoric included domestic arguments that government was too big and had done too much. Central to these arguments, and in ideological rhyme with Thatcher (see Chapter 4), were critiques of the Keynesian welfare state, concern over the decline in productivity (coupled with negative peer comparisons) and critiques around inflation. Abroad, and in contrast, Reagan saw the dangers American decline posed to America’s leading role and status in the world relative to the ideological threat of the USSR and thought that détente was a dangerous approach to the Soviets. In other words, that America had not asserted herself enough abroad. In this section, I briefly illustrate Reagan’s declinism in key speeches, campaign advertisements, etc. and then turn to the consequences of Reagan’s declinism.

Reagan’s declinist rhetoric posited that American decline was the result of domestic policies that overreached. For example, in a television address to the nation

572 See, broadly, Brands 2015; Kreiger 1986; Wapshott 2007; Cooper 2012.
on the eve of the election, Reagan asserted that “many Americans today… feel burdened, stifled and sometimes even oppressed by government that has grown too large, too bureaucratic, too unresponsive, too uncaring about people and their problems.”\textsuperscript{573} He went on to chart a vision for what he called “an era of national renewal.”\textsuperscript{574} As another example, in a stump speech from the campaign, Reagan made clear that he thought the cause of America’s decline was largely a function of domestic policies that undercut industry and made America less competitive globally:

\begin{quote}
Nowhere is this problem more evident than in the states which form the industrial heartland of America. The economic disaster that grips this region didn’t just happen. The industries of this heartland have been weakened by shortsighted taxation policies, by inattention to problems created by dumped and subsidized foreign goods and by excessive government regulation. In this century, America achieved economic strength second to none. But now, in a few short years, the American people have seen this strength undermined. They are worried about the weakness of the nation’s industrial base, about the inability of industry to support the nation’s military strength, about the decline in productivity, about the erosion of the value of the dollar. In a word, the American people fear their country is drifting, unguided, away from world leadership to the point where our jobs, our lives and our institutions are at the mercy of others.\textsuperscript{575}
\end{quote}

Reagan latched on to the energy crisis and stagflation. For example, in a speech delivered in September of 1980 in California, Reagan focused on the issue of declining American productivity.\textsuperscript{576} Reagan argued that “the statistics tell us that American

productivity is declining,” and placed blame squarely on the Carter Administration, “But what these statistics do not tell us is that much of the reason for this decline can be traced to the failure of imagination and vision of the present.”Instead, Reagan would point to a new vision for America, supported by free-market activity, the reduction of taxes, and of centrist postwar Keynesian economics.

Though, as historian HW Brands notes, Reagan was most effective at skewering Carter on the state of the economy, Reagan took Carter to task for not standing up to the Soviet Union. In their debate on October 28 1980, Reagan critiqued Carter’s foreign policy for being “hypocritical:” the United States was, according to Reagan, going about admonishing nations for not upholding human rights while at the same time engaging in détente with “the one nation in the world where there are no human rights at all.” More broadly, Reagan attempted to paint himself as a ‘man of peace,’ as I suggested earlier, while at the same time claiming that Carter had let the strength of the nation abroad slip. Peace, for Reagan, came through American strength abroad. In a television address to the nation on October 19, 1980, Reagan made this point explicitly: “Peace is made by the fact of strength—economic, military, and strategic. Peace is lost when such strength disappears or—just as bad—is seen by an adversary as disappearing…and the cold, hard fact of the matter is that our economic, military, and strategic strength under President Carter is eroding.” Most broadly, Reagan, like declinists who came before and after him, pointed to a loss of status and prestige as a core concern.

578 Brands 2015, 220.
In short, Reagan’s rhetoric, with respect to my typology of declinist prescriptions, fits both within the “we’ve done too much” narrative with respect to domestic policy and the “we’ve done too little” foreign policy narrative.

Next, I address how Ronald Reagan brought about shifts in American grand strategy and foreign policy before addressing his policies at home. Consistent with my expectations outlined in Chapter 3, Reagan’s declinism was met with policy prescriptions for spending cuts at home and attempts—almost immediately upon entering office—to cut taxes and regulation. Abroad, Reagan, though undercut by Carter’s late move to increase defense spending, sought to ramp up defense spending and affirmed his stance that détente was bad policy. I then focus particular attention on Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative, especially his speech to the nation on March 23, 1983, in which Reagan outlined his plans for missile defense as well as increasing defense spending.

Ronald Reagan’s ascendency to the White House brought about a dramatic shift in American grand strategy and, relatedly, American foreign policy and defense spending. As Posen and Van Evera noted in 1983, the Reagan Administration’s grand strategy “depart[s] from original Cold War strategic ideas and toward a more ambitious and more dangerous grand strategy.” In this section, I trace the consequences of Reagan’s declinism, particularly during the early stages of the first term of his presidency. Reagan pushed détente to the wayside, adopting an approach that was different from, and critical of, past Democratic and—crucially—Republican
Administrations (especially Nixon). As I noted above in Section IV, Reagan was critical of both Democratic and Republican approaches to containing the Soviet Union, including his Republican predecessors Nixon and Ford.

*The Campaign’s Vision for a Reagan Grand Strategy and Foreign Policy*

Behind the scenes, the Reagan campaign thought the time was ripe for a more ambitious grand strategy on the part of Reagan, driven not only by Reagan’s firm belief that the Soviet Union was an evil monster that needed to be tamed, but also polling data that suggested to Reagan’s advisers that this was a winning political issue:

Voters perceive the international prestige of the United States has slipped considerably under the Carter Administration. They feel that the United States has not only lost respect abroad, but has lost ground in the world community, both militarily and economically. Voters are dissatisfied with the U.S. slippage in world leadership and are willing to take a firmer stand in foreign policy…The vast majority (71%) even support taking some risks to restore United States’ leadership in the world. The apathetic new-isolationism of the post-Viet Nam era is fading as voters see the United States losing ground militarily and economically in world affairs. Of course, voters would be forced back into their shell by proposals which were overly inflammatory. Still, they are willing to take minimal risks to be restored to a position of leadership in the world which has been lost during the Carter term.

Reagan’s declinism throughout his campaign touted the need for greater defense spending and warned of the threat posed by what was perceived as a strengthening Soviet Union and a weakening United States. Restoring American greatness meant not only a dose of Reaganomics but a resurgent United States, a United States that committed a

---

582 Zakaria 1990.
584 RONALD REAGAN 1980 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN PAPERS, 1964-1980. SERIES IV: Richard Wirthlin—Political Strategy. SUBSERIES A: Planning and Strategy Files. Box 177. Ronald Reagan Library. “[Reagan for President Campaign Plan, 6/29/1980 (Draft)](2), p. 56. Interestingly, the campaign noted that “those voters most likely to support taking risks to restore world leadership are very conservative voters and very liberal voters. Strongly ideological voters of both persuasions are distressed by Carter’s inability to maintain a strong United States leadership role in the world.”
great amount more to her defense, unlike under Carter, and who challenged the Soviet Union militarily, economically, and ideologically head-on, in sharp contrast to the détente of past Administrations, most notably past Republican administrations.

At its root, the call for defense buildups came from the belief, and the rhetoric, that the Soviets were gaining on the United States militarily. The United States, the Reagan campaign—and Administration believed—committed the double-edged sin during the Carter administration of stagnation when it came to inputs into defense and failure to act on increasing Soviet capacity. The Reagan campaign noted “the military posture continues to decline. With this decline, the national diplomatic position has weakened. The deterioration of the military capability relative to the Soviet Union must be reversed.”

I next turn to Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative and the accompanying unveiling of the speech to the American public in March of 1983.

Reagan in Office: Reagan’s “Grand Vision,” the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), and Decline

In this section, I focus on Reagan’s “Grand Vision” Speech of March 23, 1983, in which Reagan addressed the nation regarding his plans to make nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete and advocated for a tremendous increase in defense spending. As one of Reagan’s signature policy moves in the first term of his presidency, one of the dominant security policy debates of the decade, and as one of Reagan’s most famous

---


speeches, the speech illustrates the ways in which the specter of American decline and vulnerability continued in Reagan’s rhetoric into his presidency. Moreover, the widespread acceptance on the part of the American public of Reagan’s vision illustrate the ways in which Reagan’s words carried immense power in legitimating his vision of American military power. Reagan kept blame focused on past Administrations for letting America’s defenses slip and advocated for huge increases in defense spending. He then transitioned from typical Cold War rhetoric to present an imaginative vision of a defense system that would render the US homeland immune to the consequences of nuclear weapons and that would leave nuclear weapons obsolete. Both aspects of his speech—the ramping up of defense spending and his vision of a missile defense system—contained themes common in his declinism during the presidential campaign a few years earlier: decaying American military might relative to the Soviets and nostalgic visions of an America unmatched in the international system and the shaper of its own destiny.

Reagan approached the nation at a time in which his approval rating was hovering around 35%, a two-year recession, and growing unemployment. This was hardly the time to ask the American people to front the bill for more spending on defense and cutbacks in spending in other venues. His speech began by promoting his plan to increase defense spending to the tune of 1.6 trillion USD over five years. Eighty percent of the speech—the first part of the speech—focused on the restoration of US military strength against the backdrop of a lack of parity between the United States and the Soviet Union.

---

587 Boyer 2011, 200.
588 B Boyer 2011, 197.
which was said to have “enormous military might.” Reagan linked his proposal for increased defense spending explicitly to perceptions of decline:

This is why I'm speaking to you tonight—to urge you to tell your Senators and Congressmen that you know we must continue to restore our military strength. If we stop in midstream, we will send a signal of decline, of lessened will, to friends and adversaries alike.  
Of course, Reagan—as the incumbent—was unlikely to enter a full declinist mode. Rather, Reagan painted the first few years of his presidency as one of significant progress on the defense front, but progress that needed to be expedited in order to meet the threats posed by the Evil Empire. In the speech, Reagan blamed past administrations for the decline in US military strength:

Unfortunately, a decade of neglecting our military forces had called into question our ability to do that. When I took office in January 1981, I was appalled by what I found: American planes that couldn't fly and American ships that couldn't sail for lack of spare parts and trained personnel and insufficient fuel and ammunition for essential training. The inevitable result of all this was poor morale in our Armed Forces, difficulty in recruiting the brightest young Americans to wear the uniform, and difficulty in convincing our most experienced military personnel to stay on.  

When it came to the tension between balancing the budget and defense spending, Reagan was more than willing to cast aside balanced budgets for defense priorities. Reagan had promised the American people tax cuts, increased defense spending, and a balanced budget. As Fareed Zakaria notes, “But for all its novelty, Reagan's approach toward economic resources was depressingly familiar. He frittered away a unique opportunity to "bring into balance," in Walter Lippmann's famous phrase, ‘the nation's

591 See, e.g. Hemmer 2015, 99.
commitments and the nation's power.”  

The Administration’s first five-year defense program pitched an average real budget increase of 8.1 percent per year, with a net real increase totaling 59 percent.  

After asking the nation to tighten its belt and yet increase defense spending, Reagan pivoted to America’s nuclear defensive strategy and his opposition to MAD: his “Strategic Defense Initiative” otherwise known (derisively) as “Star Wars.”  

The concept of a missile defense shield was, according to historian Edward Linenthal …perceived by the president has having both restorative and transformative power. Through it, technological achievement in the present would bring about the resurrection of an Edenic past. Reagan’s vision became a crucial element in the program of cultural restoration of the New Right, for it promised to bring to life to the peaceful, secure “Main Street” America whose passing he had decried. It would restore an invulnerability that would, in turn, allow the nation to chart its own destiny; it would transform the nature of international conflict and promised, eventually, to bring within reach the vast riches of space…  

In other words, the missile defense shield proposed by Reagan was part of Reagan’s hope to renew America while, at the same time, restoring something that was lost. Reagan long understood technology and technological progress as fundamental to American strength. He often looked nostalgically back to “the era when the linking of strength, technology, America, and virtue seemed least problematic” than it did with nuclear weapons. According to Jeff Smith, “on more than one occasion Reagan has mistily invoked the period of nineteenth-century industrial development when “we were becoming the great economic power that we are in the world today.’’”  

Such language

---

592 Zakaria 1990, 374.
593 Posen and Van Evera 1983, 3.
595 Linenthal 1989, 10.
596 Smith 1987, 21.
597 Smith 1987, 21.
was used by Reagan in his speech to the nation on March 23, 1983. “Let us turn to the very strengths in technology that spawned our great industrial base and that have given us the quality of life we enjoy today,” Reagan implored the nation when announcing his vision to “embark on a program to counter the awesome Soviet missile threat with measures that are defensive.” According to Smith, “that “spawning” period serves as a touchstone for popular belief — not simply that the United States must be number one in the world, but also that such status is justified by the nation’s benevolence and ability to lead.”

Reagan’s speech made a big splash across the country. In his diary, Reagan fondly wrote about “the biggest return—phone calls, wires, etc., on any speech so far and running heavily in my favor.” A vast majority of Americans reported hearing Reagan’s speech (84% when polled in 1985), 80 percent of Americans backed the proposal put forward by Reagan and a majority also thought that the missile defense system would work (62% in 1985). According to Linenthal, SDI “seemed both appealing and revolutionary to a public unfamiliar with the history of ballistic missile defense and uncomfortable with what appeared to be the increased risk of nuclear war. Certainly, it was this particular vision of missile defense, one designed to make the nation invulnerable, that captured the imagination of many.”

---

599 Smith 1987, 21.
600 Boyer 2011, 196.
601 Boyer 2011, 196.
602 In a September 1984 Survey cited in Boyer 2011, 213.
604 Linenthal 1989, 10.
Reagan’s speech, and his vision for the Strategic Defense Initiative more generally, highlights how the specter of American decline, and the promises of restoration and renewal, were used rhetorically by Reagan to justify increases in defense spending and the development of new technologies to render the homeland secure. Such investment came at the same time that Reagan was, in the domestic sphere, touting efforts to decrease the size and spending of the federal government, to decrease regulation and taxation. In the next section, I look more closely at a key group who mobilized around Reagan during his campaign and who, I show, made their way into his administration: the Committee on the Present Danger. This group, and its members, were declinists par excellence, and are part of the broader mechanisms through which Reagan’s, and the New Right’s, declinism impacted policy.

Reagan’s Declinism: Committee on the Present Danger and His Broader Coalition

In this section, I explore the relationship between the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD) and Ronald Reagan. Their declinism influenced each other, and the CPD worked to elect Reagan and place key declinists in positions of power. The CPD represents one of many organizations that Reagan brought together under the banner of making America great again, and which influenced the course of American policy in the 1980s.

The Committee on the Present Danger (the second iteration of the committee, which was originally founded in 1950) was founded in 1976 as a response to the Carter campaign and presidency and is generally understood as part of the broader New Right
movement in the United States. The CPD wanted to counter Carter’s “promises of reduction in military expenditures, self-determination for other nations, emphasis on human rights, and arms control.” Boies and Pichardo note that a driving force in the creation of the CPD was the exclusion they experienced from the Carter Administration, who shunned many of the Cold War warriors from positions within his administration. Reagan was a member of the CPD but had to de-affiliate in order to run for office and to provide the CPD with some level of non-partisanship.

Crucially, the CPD was a bipartisan organization. Neoconservative Democrats and conservatives were brought together by the unifying sense of doom they felt if Carter was allowed another four years in office. Reagan made explicit overtures to the CPD’s members during his campaign, and indeed before his campaign when he hosted his radio program. In other words, the CPD sought to lobby Reagan, but Reagan also sought to lobby them. Reagan’s declinism appealed to the CPD, and he was able to capture neoconservative democrats who were fed up with the Carter administration.

Once in power, Reagan appointed many members of the CPD to top posts: at least 32 of its 182 members obtained posts in the administration. However, it was not always smooth sailing between the CPD and Reagan. The CPD continued to push hard for their Cold War agenda. The Committee was critical of Reagan’s defense program, producing reports entitled “Is the Reagan Defense Program Adequate” and “Has America

---

605 Boies and Pichardo 1993, 57-87. See also Joffe 2014, 55-57.
608 Sanders 1983, 282.
Become Number Two?” The answer to the former was “no,” while the answer to the latter was “yes.” The CPD pushed for more spending and capability, while Reagan had to balance his own convictions that the Soviets were posing a threat to the United States’ position as number one with the realities of governing, including the politics of budgets and the economy.

The CPD was, importantly, cognizant of the role of public opinion and support for the CPD’s agenda both before and after the 1980 election. They drafted reports concerning public opinion over the US nuclear program and the US defense effort against the Soviets. Moreover, as Edward Linenthal notes regarding the Strategic Defense Initiative, “the Committee on the Present Danger must be given credit for skillfully manipulating the recognizable contours of the cold war world view in order to raise the spectre of an America endangered by a Window of Vulnerability.” Many of the other groups mobilized in the Reagan coalition, including conservative think tanks, grassroots advocacy groups, and evangelical churches added further credence behind Reagan’s SDI efforts and the promise of an America protected from the Soviets.

As I noted in Chapter 3, declinists bring together different coalitions through both their position and their rhetoric. In particular, I identify two types of coalitions that may be mobilized by declinists: popular coalitions and elite coalitions. While the CPD represented an elite coalition, Reagan’s popular, electoral, coalition was brought together

---

613 E.g. The Coalition for the Strategic Defense Initiative, Concerned Women for America, and Citizens for America.
614 Linenthal 1989, 64.
by Reagan’s promise to make America great again. With respect to popular coalitions, Reagan’s electoral support in 1980 consisted of most conservatives and a majority of self-proclaimed independent voters. Reagan also “cut deeply into the traditional New Deal Coalition that gave Jimmy Carter his narrow win in 1976.” Reagan won the election in a landslide, accumulating 489 electoral votes to Carter’s 49. Exit polling of 37,606 voters across the country suggested that Reagan’s mandate was to regain control of the economy and halt American decline: “When asked to identify one or two issues that most stirred them, 47 percent of those who voted for Reagan said it was “controlling inflation,” and 45 percent said it was “strengthening America’s position in the world. Of those who voted for Carter, only 20 percent mentioned America’s position in the world… by contrast “insuring peace weighed far more heavily on the minds of Carter’s voters (36 percent).” In other words, Reagan’s rhetoric during the campaign matched those issues for which voters expressed most concern: American economic and international decline.

VI. Conclusion: Make America Great Again

The late 1970s was a period of some turmoil in the United States, as I have discussed throughout this chapter: stagflation reigned, there were lines at the gas pumps, and the country was indeed facing a crisis of confidence. Oil crises were coupled with aftershocks of political assassinations. There was a lot of FUD: fear, uncertainty, and doubt. Perhaps, then, declinism during this time was “overdetermined.” I opened this

---

617 White 1988, 416.
chapter citing political scientist and pollster Everett Ladd, Jr., whose writing made its way into Reagan campaign discussions: “Only a nation of idiots could look at the events of the last fifteen years… and say, ‘Gee, isn’t all terrific,’” Ladd wrote. What, then, can we learn from this case?

First, this chapter has outlined a case of “failed” declinism in Carter’s “crisis of confidence” speech. The speech, and the political discussions around the speech, represent a case of declinism emerging from within the incumbent’s camp. Yet, the way the declinism manifested itself opened the door for critique from both the left and the right. However, there’s also evidence that the speech may have worked, albeit temporarily. As I noted earlier in this chapter, Carter’s declinism was vague. Perhaps if he was more specific or engaged in a more traditional declinist framework like the other declinists in Chapters 4-7, he would have been successful. It is hard to know, but history has not looked back on his speech kindly.

Second, the Reagan campaign clearly understood that their declinist messaging would resonate with the public and they sought to play up declinism as a political message. They emphasized Reagan’s outsider status. They sought to use Carter’s declinism against him. And, they thought that declinism broadly opened the door for fundamental policy changes.

Third, the consequences of Reagan’s declinism include pursuing the Strategic Defense Initiative, increasing defense spending, moving away from a grand strategy of

---

détente, and encouraging policies of scaling back domestic welfare spending and regulation at home. His SDI speech exemplified how the specter of American decline, and the promises of restoration and renewal, were used rhetorically by Reagan to justify increases in defense spending and the development of new technologies to render the homeland secure. His connections to, and work with, the Committee on the Present danger shows how bipartisan critiques of the previous administration’s foreign policy and grand strategy could be brought to the fore in the campaign and in the new administration. Reagan was intent on making America great again, according to his own vision of what American greatness meant.

Finally, once Reagan was in power, he would refer back to the days of the Carter Administration as dark days of decline. It was “morning in America.” As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, Reagan’s campaign in 1984 (and in the intervening period) rejected the premise of American decline but used the theme to remind the public that Reagan lifted the country out of the dark times of the Carter years. This was a common refrain in Reagan’s 1984 campaign and overall discourse: 25% of his speeches on the campaign trail in 1984 referenced American decline under the Carter Administration and Reagan’s renewal of the country.

Reagan’s advisers and top Republicans were aware of the disadvantages of incumbency in 1988, and drew historical parallels to Eisenhower’s Administration, Nixon’s failure, and Kennedy’s success in 1960.

The closest historical parallel to the situation our nominee will face was the 1960 election. Richard Nixon was seeking to succeed Dwight Eisenhower, who had served two successive terms marked by peace and general prosperity. Yet the public perception was that the Eisenhower Administration had run out of gas, was essentially negative in domestic affairs and much too passive to foreign threats.
This perception of a spent administration afforded John Kennedy the opportunity to seize the initiative by declaring “It is time to get the country moving again […] we must have a credible 8-year record, not just a six-year record, and the President must not appear to be a spent force on the national scene.”

It turns out that Reagan did not suffer the same electoral consequences as Nixon/Eisenhower in 1960, as I detailed in Chapter 5. Instead, Reagan—and his then-vice president Bush—would go on to lead the country for many years to come.

---

Chapter 7

Brokers of Declinism: Declinism in France and Japan

Debates, as well as doom and gloom, about a country’s decline are common not just in the United States and United Kingdom. Indeed, scholars have noted that declinism arises in great powers stretching back to the Roman Empire.\footnote{Lachmann and Rose-Greenland 2015.} Leaders in the Ottoman Empire, Imperial Spain, and Ming dynasty were all concerned with decline.\footnote{Elliot 1992; Atwell 1988; Lewis 1962.} In short, declinism is not a strictly Anglo-American phenomenon, nor is it necessarily a contemporary phenomenon either.

In this chapter, I test my argument presented in Chapter 3 in two additional country-contexts: France and Japan. Scholars have pointed to “lost decades” in both countries, whereby an acute sense of relative (and absolute) decline was felt. The term “lost decade” has most famously been used to describe Japan’s economic experience from 1991 to 2001, where Japan was economically stagnant and failed to live up to the expectations itself and the rest of the world put on the country. In France, such a “lost decade” was said to occur during the two Chirac presidencies, between 1995 and 2007.\footnote{Cole, Le Galés, and Levy 2008, 2.}

In this chapter, I examine the declinism of Nicolas Sarkozy during 2007 French Presidential election and his early tenure and, in Japan, I trace the declinism of Tōru Hashimoto of the Japan Restoration Party and Shinzo Abe of the Liberal Democratic Party in 2012.
In both cases, key declinists like Sarkozy and Hashimoto portrayed themselves as outsiders who were fed up with the status quo, a status quo they thought bred national decline. Sarkozy and Hashimoto sought large-scale changes, from neoliberal policies put forward by Sarkozy to trade liberalization and deep political reform by Hashimoto. However, there are key differences between Sarkozy and Hashimoto when it comes to their political fortunes. Hashimoto was a true outsider and someone who, while campaigning on Japanese decline explicitly, was unable to build a coalition which would have brought him a sweeping victory. On the other hand, Sarkozy made strategic choices in focusing much of his electoral appeal on aspects of declinism which would appeal to the far right in France, pulling votes away from Le Pen. With a foothold already in the UMP—serving in the Chirac cabinet and cultivating a following since the early days of Chirac—Sarkozy was also able to pull votes from the centre-right of France. In other words, Sarkozy is an example of a declinist who was able to build a broad coalition under the idea of French decline and renewal, while Hashimoto did not have the institutional clout, nor the message, that would forge a coalition.

The cases also highlight other aspects of my argument. One of my arguments is that it is difficult for parties and their leaders who have been in power for large swaths of the immediate past to credibly claim decline is occurring. In the Japanese case, Shinzo Abe, as a one-time Prime Minister and leader of a party which was in control for roughly (and nearly continuously) 56 years prior to the election. Instead of a declinist narrative, one which would have blamed the ruling DPJ party of malpractice leading to Japan’s decline, Abe opted for a different tone, stressing the innate ability of the Japanese nation to overcome decades of negative growth and dismissing declinists and offering a new
outlook without focusing on the past. When Abe did look back to the past, it was to put a nationalist spin on Japanese history, rather than to take stock of Japan’s failures under the LDP.

Yet, while there is suggestive evidence that my theory can help explain the emergence of declinism in cases outside of the US and UK, other factors are also present in these cases that must be addressed in future research. For example, in Japan, contextual factors appear important in explaining declinism: Hashimoto’s declinism in 2012 followed from a particularly troubling year in Japan (the 2011 “triple disaster” of a tsunami, mega earthquake, and nuclear incident) and, more broadly, 20 years of slowed economic growth. In other words, perhaps declinism in this case was both overdetermined and reflective of real pain experienced by Japan.

In France, declinism came from a member of the incumbent party, Sarkozy. This would suggest that declinism is not always used a tool to beat up the incumbent from the opposition party. However, as I show throughout this chapter, Sarkozy was clever in the way he sought to distance himself from the incumbent president Chirac and re-align the incumbent UMP to bring about victory.

My goal in this chapter is not to provide, as I do in the other chapters, a fine-grained tracing of the emergence and consequences of declinism in individual cases, nor do I measure declinism over time in a systematic way, as I did in Chapter 2. Rather, my goal in this chapter is to examine a few examples from France and Japan as a plausibility probe that will, in future iterations of the project, be more fully examined theoretically and empirically.
There are several limitations to my approach. Most notably, language barriers mean that all of my sources are from translated primary sources or secondary sources. This is a challenge on two levels. First, most simply, the representative quotes I obtain from secondary sources may not be representative of the whole. Second, if declinism is a particularly Anglo-American phenomenon, it could be the case that scholars and journalists “project” onto particular discourses declinism in ways that skew understandings of the narratives of decline that may emerge in these country-contexts. In other words, there is a threat of an Anglo-American bias creeping into the secondary literature on French and Japanese declinism. Additionally, because I do not measure declinism over time and against measures of ‘objective decline’ as I did for the UK and US cases, my analysis is particularly impressionistic for the time being, an issue that I consider at-length in Chapter 2.

With these limitations in mind, the chapter proceeds as follows. I first examine the case of postwar France. After outlining in broad terms “déclinisme” in France, I explore a particular instance of declinism: the early 2000s through the 2007 election of President Nicolas Sarkozy. I then shift my focus in Section II to Japan, where I examine declinism in the 2012 Japanese general elections. In particular, I examine the ways in which Shinzo Abe was—and was not—focused on Japanese decline and the contemporaneous emergence of the Japan Restoration Party under Tōru Hashimoto. In Section III, I conclude by summarizing the broad insights gleaned from these cases and unpack future directions for research on declinism in these cases.

I. French Déclinisme
There is said to be an obsession with decline in France. In 2016 déclinisme (declinism) entered the Larousse dictionary: 623 “Pointing to France’s loss of its position as a global power, its weakening role within Europe, its failure to integrate its immigrant population, its exhausted public services and its stumbling industry, the exercise has been imbued with a nostalgia for a lost era of French greatness.” 624 However, while the French have been known to dwell on French decline—or the prospect thereof—several historical moments have, according to scholars, been particularly declinist. 625 For example, Emile Chabal points to the late 19th century and post-WWII France as periods in which the French have felt “an acute sense of comparative decline,” especially relative to other periods in French history. 626 Charles de Gaulle would emerge as a figure bent on restoring French grandeur following the collapse of the Fourth Republic. In contemporary France, scholars have pointed to the period around the mid-2000s (including the 2008 financial crisis) through 2014 as periods of French déclinisme.

There are a number of important ways in which the French case differs from the US and UK cases which are worth developing theoretically from the outset. First, France’s political system, unlike the US and UK, is a distinctly more multi-party system. My theoretical framework presented in Chapter 3, while not restricted to two-party systems, does lend itself to thinking about two-party systems insofar as the incumbent and opposition are most often treated as two fairly unitary actors. Additionally, the

---

625 For accounts of declinism in French thought over time, see Chabal 2015; Hazareesingh 2015.
626 Chabal 2015, 226.
Presidency in France represents a unique blend of powers, especially in the context of French defense and foreign policy. As I show in the context of Sarkozy’s election victory, this does enable contenders to the Presidency to advance “great man” political messages which stress the ability of these personalities to lift France from decline.\textsuperscript{627}

As I note above, for the French déclinisme is often in the air. This nicely parallels what Josef Joffe says of American declinism: declinism is as “American as apple pie.”\textsuperscript{628} However, impressionistic accounts of déclinisme often focus on déclinisme within academia.\textsuperscript{629} In the 2000s, déclinisme spilled over and bubbled in French political discourse, culminating, as I show below, in the electoral rhetoric of Nicolas Sarkozy during the 2007 French presidential election. In this section, I focus on the election of Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007 as a period of heightened discourse around French decline and test my explanation for declinism’s emergence in this context. I conclude by briefly reviewing France’s most recent presidential election, which culminated in Emmanuel Macron becoming President of France, as a case in which declinism—at least on the part of Macron—was not employed.

Nicolas Sarkozy’s election campaign and victory in 2007 is consistent with many aspects of my theory of declinism’s emergence. As I detail below, Sarkozy campaigned on a message of French decline and renewal. Sarkozy’s message was one of “rupture” from the past, to create a renewed France. Sarkozy also painted himself as an outsider to politics, despite having held posts in government: Sarkozy believed that he alone could

\textsuperscript{627} See Hewlett 2017, 41.
\textsuperscript{628} Joffe 2013.
\textsuperscript{629} On declinism and academia, see, e.g. Gentleman, Amelia. 2004. “Summertime, and Living is Not Easy for French Racked with Self-Doubt” \textit{The Guardian} (August 9, 2004).
lift France out of decline and self-doubt. Sarkozy’s message to the French people was consistent with the “domestic overstretch” narrative that I outline in Chapter 3: France was too bloated with civil servants, too inefficient, and needing a kick of neoliberal policies. In addition to these domestic overstretch arguments, Sarkozy constantly decried the loosening of French morals and character as well as a decline in “law and order,” a message that was overtly aimed at France’s immigrant populations.630

Sarkozy as a “Rebel Within”

In one crucial sense Sarkozy’s declinism does not fit well with my theory of declinism’s emergence: Sarkozy was not a member of an opposition party, but instead was a member of the incumbent party, the Union pour un mouvement populaire, or UMP. Yet Sarkozy went great lengths to cultivate an outsider image and sought to distance himself from his predecessor in the UMP, Jacques Chirac.631 Their relationship was strained, and Sarkozy in many ways stole the spotlight from then-president Chirac during Chirac’s own presidency.632 “I’ll be in politics in a different way,” Sarkozy claimed when asked about Jacques Chirac’s legacy and his ties to the incumbent, “I am different from Jacques Chirac.”633

Sarkozy faced an uphill battle electorally. Cautrés and Cole note that presidential election campaigns in France typically do not favor those running on behalf of an

630 See Marthaler 2008.
incumbent. Nicolas Sauger puts it starkly: “French electoral history since 1981 has been the repetition of a unique principle: the incumbent government loses.” The incumbent Chirac was highly unpopular, with an approval rating of only 16 percent. More broadly, the French public seemed fed up with politicians from the left or the right, with two-thirds of respondents reporting that they did not trust either side to govern France.

However, Sarkozy did not feel the effects of this pattern in French politics, and/or was able to navigate around such obstacles:

Sarkozy’s carefully cultivated image—as a man of governmental responsibility with a good record over five years, while not being fully of the government—allowed the UMP leader to escape the opprobrium of government unpopularity. This point is worth noting. Sarkozy managed to be perceived not as an incumbent, though his governmental experience allowed him to retain the rewarding part of the incumbent effect. He positioned himself ostensibly as an outsider, a challenger to the largely discredited Chirac regime…Sarkozy was able to position himself, in a very skillful manner, not as an opponent but as a rebel within his own camp.

Many scholars have noted that Sarkozy painted himself as an outsider in his 2007 campaign, despite the dubious nature of this portrayal. My theory of declinism’s emergence suggests that declinism emerges from a perceived need to break from the past and establish a new set of policies, policies which are often associated with outsiders or a generational shift within a party. The newcomers, or the generational shift within the party, makes advancing a message of decline easier, for two reasons: they are not beholden to the party’s past performances and they are, by their nature, breathing ‘fresh

---

634 Cautrés and Cole 2008, 23.
635 Sauger 2007, 1169.
636 Sauger 2007, 1167.
637 Sauger 2007, 1167.
638 Cautrés and Cole 2008, 23.
639 See, e.g. Marliére 2009, 377.
life’ into politics, something which they often lean upon rhetorically. This self-characterization by Sarkozy as an outsider is consistent with my theoretical expectations. According to a *New York Times* profile of Sarkozy upon his election victory, Sarkozy created an outsider image:

Mr. Sarkozy had portrayed himself as an outsider, an immigrant’s son with a foreign-sounding name, a man who never went to one of France’s elite universities. He is also the quintessential political insider, however, a longtime figure in party politics and a member of the cabinet of President Jacques Chirac for much of the past five years. But he succeeded in making himself look like a political outsider, distancing himself from Mr. Chirac, who was seen by the French as old, tired and powerless in the twilight of his 12-year presidency.640

To go from Chirac to Sarkozy, then, was not a continuity of ideas or ideology in the domestic or foreign spheres. The rise of Sarkozy, and his election in 2007, was not a case of an opposition picking up the banner of decline, but it was a case of realignment within the UMP—intentionally and strategically maneuvered by Sarkozy—and not a case of a continuity of ideology or thinking from the incumbent to the new president. Thus, I approach Sarkozy’s declinism as a question of what it means to differentiate oneself from one’s own party, or at least the incumbent figureheads, in proclaiming declinism while acknowledging that this is not a case that fits my general theoretical expectations regarding opposition parties.

In addition to his image as an “outsider,” Sarkozy presented himself as solely capable of lifting France out of decline, not unlike Margaret Thatcher’s belief that she

---

alone could turn around British decline or de Gaulle’s belief that he could restore French grandeur.\textsuperscript{641} According to Nick Hewlett, “at every rally, in every television appearance, every interview and press release, he [Sarkozy] built the image of himself as a personal bearer of the formula necessary to bring France out of the moral decline, political lethargy and economic crisis into which he said it had been allowed to sink…[Sarkozy] was the hero of the time who would offer a path to success for a nation in turmoil, a nation which was (according to Sarkozy) wracked with self-doubt.”\textsuperscript{642}

\textit{The Broader Context: Declinism in 2000s France}

The notion of French decline was on the lips of many academics/economists in the early 2000s. According to Sue Collard, declinism began to fester in France again in the early 2000s when European Commission reports told a dire story of France’s economy relative to other European countries.\textsuperscript{643} French economic growth was below the Eurozone average, and the French budget was consistently (for decades), as Nick Hewlett notes, in a deficit.\textsuperscript{644} According to Hewlett, “many mainstream economists suggested that France had failed to adapt to the increasingly European and globalised economy…”\textsuperscript{645}

This general sense of economic decline and stagnation prompted Nicolas Bavarez, a French economist, to write articles and a bestselling book in 2003 entitled “La France qui tombe,” (“France in Decline”) which argued that both the political Left and Right in

\textsuperscript{641} Cannadine 1998. For a discussion of de Gaulle and his messianic view of France’s destiny, see Kritzman, 2007.
\textsuperscript{642} Hewlett 2017, 41.
\textsuperscript{643} Collard 2010, 30.
\textsuperscript{644} Hewlett 2017, 43.
\textsuperscript{645} Hewlett 2017, 43.
France were to blame for not coming to grips with the realities that France faced in a globalized world. Moreover, Bavarez averred that French resistance to the Iraq war and French policy vis-à-vis Europe was the icing on the cake of French decline.646 As Collard notes, Bavarez was a friend of Nicolas Sarkozy, and his arguments “were seen by many as being an open invitation to his friend Nicolas Sarkozy to take the lead in advocating a more ‘libéral’ set of policies to lead France out of its inexorable decline.”647 Bavarez saw Sarkozy’s election success as a mandate from the French people to restore political authority (indicative in Sarkozy’s persona and the unique position of the French presidency) and a desire for economic and social liberalization.648 Moreover, social strife layered on an additional sense of déclinisme among the French. There were riots in France in 2005 and a growing sense that French society was unraveling.649

Beyond the economic and social strife that seemed to plague France, there were clear indications from French polling that the French were feeling down and out.650 A survey taken in 2006-2007 showed that 52 percent of respondents believed that “France in general” was in decline, whereas only 8 percent believed France was making progress.651 Similar sizable numbers of French citizens felt like France was in decline with respect to purchasing power (74% reported believing France was in decline, 7 percent making progress), influence in the world (46% reported believing France was in decline, 19% making progress), and the competitiveness of business (42% reported

---

648 Chabal 2015, 154.
649 Hewlett 2017, 44. See also, Canet, Pech, and Stewart 2015.
650 It should be noted that public opinion in France from the mid-1990s on suggests that the French public has been pessimistic about the future of France. See Hazareesingh 2015, 316.
651 40% said “neither.” See Goldhammer 2010, 97.
believing France was in decline, 22% making progress). In short, the time was ripe for a candidate to pounce on such feelings and exploit them for electoral gain.

The Content of Sarkozy’s Declinism & His Cultivation of an “Outsider” Status

Sarkozy’s election campaign, and subsequent victory, in 2007 was built on a “platform of decline and revival” alongside his law and order rhetoric and flirtations with the themes dominant in Front National (the main French far-right party) discourse. Sarkozy’s coalition of right and far-right groups—from neoliberals and moral conservatives to ethno-nationalists—provided Sarkozy with a base from which to advance a story of France’s renewal. Sarkozy spoke of a moral crisis in France that had led to decline, which included “othering” immigrants and minorities in France as well as pointing to the ‘successes’ of George W. Bush and Tony Blair as examples to mimic with a French twist.

Sarkozy’s declinism focused on both claims of absolute and relative decline. As I note below, Sarkozy’s declinism was wide-ranging, from claims that France was in a state of moral decline and facing a decline in the social order relative to its past self as well as his notion of what France should be. Sarkozy was concerned with France’s relative decline in several respects. First, his personal fascination with other countries,

---

652 Goldhammer 2010, 97.
653 Cole, Meunier, and Tiberj 2013, Location 340. See also: Mondon 2013.
654 Evans and Godin 2014, 207.
655 On moral decline and Sarkozy, from a highly critical perspective, see Badiou 2008, especially chapter 6.
particularly the UK and US, was part of his belief that France needed to emulate such
countries to overcome decline. Second, the decision by Chirac to oppose the Iraq War led
many, including Sarkozy, to believe that France was “becoming less relevant, that it no
longer offers an attractive, universalist model.”\textsuperscript{656} Third, prominent declinists who
influenced Sarkozy, like Baverez, saw the French Republican model as one that cut
France at the knees when it came to France’s international competitiveness.\textsuperscript{657} In short,
Sarkozy’s reference point for declinism was both relative to peers as well as to France’s
self-image and her past performances. However, to the extent that his election campaign
was focused on domestic issues, Sarkozy’s reference point for French decline was much
more self-centered on France’s own performance, with the effects of her own
performance (e.g. her economic performance, or the rise of the so-called “BRICS”
countries) then having effects on France’s ability to play a global role.

With respect to the causes of decline, the content of Sarkozy’s narratives of
decline focused on how large the French state, and its spending, had gotten. According to
Cole, Meunier, and Tiberj, Sarkozy argued that decline was the consequence of “an
overprotected and under-productive public sector, a level of personal and business
taxation that was too high, a social model that discouraged employment, and a centralized
and inefficient education system.”\textsuperscript{658} His narrative of French decline and renewal fits
with a “domestic overstretch” narrative in my typology: the French state had “done too
much” domestically, leaving it inefficient relative to France’s peer competitors. This

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{656} Cole, Le Galés, and Levy 2008, 3.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{657} Cole, Le Galés, and Levy 2008, 3.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{658} Cole, Le Galés, and Levy 2008, 3.}
required, Sarkozy argued, a reformation of the France’s social model, a reduction and
case of public expenditure, and a culling of the number of French civil servants,
among other domestic policies.659

Key to Sarkozy’s message was the notion of “rupture” from the past, specifically
a “rupture tranquille” or “smooth break” from the past.660 Consistent with my claim in
Chapter 3 that declinists aim to move beyond tinkering with policies and put forward
wide-scale change, Sarkozy believed that major change—a rupture—was needed to
revive France. For example, in his acceptance speech, Sarkozy promised to break from
the past:

The French people have spoken and have chosen to make a break with the ideas,
the customs and the behaviour of the past. I am thus going to restore the status of
work, authority, standards, respect, merit. I am going to give the place of honour
back to the nation and national identity. I am going to give back to the French
people pride in France...661

In terms of foreign policy Sarkozy wanted a much closer relationship with the
United States and Europe and, in general, did not argue—like he did with respect to
domestic policy—for a scaling back of government activities and spending.662 Sarkozy
remarked during his acceptance speech that “tonight France is back in Europe.”663
Sarkozy’s pro-American/pro-Anglo-American stance was a bit strange. After all, his

659 Cole, Meunier, and Vincent 2013, Location 340.
660 Sarkozy added the term “tranquille” in order not to ruffle too many feathers; Sarkozy was worried that
the small-c conservative nature of the French public would recoil at the idea of rupture. He therefore sought
wide scale changes, but wanted to balance such desire for change with the chance that he could spook the
French electorate or moderate conservatives. Marlière 2009, 376. See also Cole, Meunier, and Vincent
2013, Location 340.
661 BBC. Nicolas Sarkozy: Victory Speech Excerpts. BBC. (May 6, 2007).
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6631125.stm
663 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6662353.stm
predecessor, Jacques Chirac, was staunchly opposed to the Iraq War, and there was a long tradition in French politics of a “Gaullist” approach to the UK and US. However, as Chabal suggests, “it seems reasonable to suggest that Sarkozy’s unusual enthusiasm for the Anglo-Saxon world was, in part, due to the widespread prevalence of a language of crisis that stressed the need to look beyond the Hexagon for solutions to its predicament. As awareness of France’s deficiencies and its apparently ‘unreformable’ social model has grown, more and more voters have been convinced by the need to learn from foreign models.” In other words, Sarkozy’s pro-American and pro-European stance can be understood as a response to what Sarkozy perceived as a source of weakness: France’s (Gaullist) approach to “independence.” Efforts by Sarkozy, for example, to integrate France into NATO’s military integrated structure were efforts not only to change the relationship between France and other powers, but also to expand French influence. “If France shoulders all her responsibilities in NATO,” Sarkozy remarked, “Europe will have more influence in NATO. And so NATO will not be an exclusively US-dominated organization.” In short, while Sarkozy’s domestic policies were aimed at scaling back—because France had “done too much”—Sarkozy wanted a change of direction in French foreign policy (e.g. NATO, Iran) which made France a more active power on the global stage.

In stark contrast to Sarkozy’s rather coherent declinist message, observers noted that his opponent’s campaign, that of Ségolène Royal, “…was fraught with mixed

664 Chabal 2015, 230.
665 Holm 2009.
666 Holm 2009, 30.
messages, defections and shifting strategies. She never seemed to convince voters that she had enough substance.” 667 Others concur, suggesting that that Royal gave off the impression of “imprecision, drift, and being unprepared.” 668 Moreover, Royal was not an outsider, nor did she claim to be one. Instead, Royal was from a bourgeois Catholic family, obtained her education from the National Administration School, and had served in Mitterrand’s cabinet for seven years from 1981 to 1988. 669 Royal was not, in short, an outsider, nor a declinist.

Sarkozy’s Victory: Forging Ground with National Front

Sarkozy won by a slim margin. Sarkozy “was successful because he managed to appeal for support from centre to extreme Right. The core message of the presidential platform, however, was addressed to right-wing voters frustrated with the inability of the previous regime to challenge a number of policies held to have contributed to France’s decline.” 670 Sarkozy was intentional in courting far right voters, and his rhetoric of French decline—a decline not only relative to other countries but also in vague notions of what it means to be French—helped forge an electoral coalition across a broad spectrum of French conservative voters. According to Gilles Ivaldi, this was a strategic move by Sarkozy: “In strategic terms, the authoritarian and anti-immigration discourse would come to terms with itself as aimed at those voters who had defected to the FN. The

668 Knapp and Sawicki 2008, 55.
increased salience of Le Pen’s proprietary immigration and security issues in the 2002
elections had provided Sarkozy with a first window of opportunity to re-enter the
political arena.”671 Sarkozy was thus able to pull votes away from Le Pen and pull
together a coalition that would take him over the finish line and into the presidency.

Consistent with other declinists who, upon entering office, declare decline dead,
Sarkozy was fond of returning to the theme of French decline—or lack thereof—during
his reign. Sarkozy was fond of saying “France is back.”672 However, it was easy for
Sarkozy to disappoint other declinists. To return full-circle to the economist Nicholas
Baverez, who penned the best-selling book “La France qui tombe” (“France in Decline”) in 2003 and who was close friends with Sarkozy, Baverez wrote an op-ed upon Sarkozy
winning the presidency which claimed that the election “brought an end to the post-
Gaullist period and launched France's long-delayed adaptation to globalization and post-
Cold War politics.”673 The revival of Sarkozy’s UMP party, Baverez asserted in his Wall
Street Journal op-ed, consisted of the party re-aligning its principles and focusing on a
plan to “halt France’s decline.”674 For Baverez, Sarkozy’s victory was a mandate to
“overcome the tyranny of the status quo” and his campaign was the first in decades to
address the main problems facing France: “low economic growth, mass long-term
unemployment, a ballooning public debt, sclerotic bureaucracies and shabby universities,
inadequate scientific research, and the failure to integrate Muslim immigrants and their

671 Ivaldi 2007, 267.
672 See, e.g. Chamberlain, Gethin and Willsher, Kim. 2007. Nicolas Sarkozy: France is Back. The
Telegraph (August 26, 2007). https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1561371/Nicolas-Sarkozy-
France-is-back.html
offspring, who now make up almost a tenth of France's 64 million people.” Nicolas Sarkozy was to be “the president of France’s renewal.” Just a few years later in 2012, Bavarez published a pamphlet that suggested Sarkozy did not bring about the much-needed change, despite rhetoric to the contrary.

Nicolas Sarkozy’s election campaign and victory in 2007 is consistent with some aspects of my theory of declinism’s emergence but not others. Sarkozy was not a member of the opposition party when he ran for President in 2007, which is not consistent with my theoretical expectations. Yet he did paint himself as an outsider, someone who was part of not only a new generation of politicians but also someone who would break from the past and create a new vision for France. He used his time in office as Interior Minister to gain credibility as someone with experience, but distanced himself dramatically from Chirac, both substantively and politically.

Sarkozy’s message while campaigning in 2007 for the French presidency consisted of claiming that France was in decline as a result of a stagnant and bloated French state and economy. Sarkozy promised renewal through neoliberal policies. Much like other declinists, and consistent with my expectation that declinism arises from “outsiders” or “newcomers,” Sarkozy painted himself as an outsider to politics—whether it was his ethnic or educational background—and promised that he alone could deliver France from decline and bring about renewal. Sarkozy’s message to the French people was consistent with the “domestic overstretch” narrative that I outline in Chapter 3.

---

677 Hazareesingh 2015, 302.
Additionally, Sarkozy constantly decried the loosening of French morals and character as well as a decline in “law and order,” a message that was overtly aimed at France’s immigrant populations.

However, there is suggestive evidence in this example that other dynamics may have been at play as well, which should be further explored in future research. First, as I note throughout this section, Sarkozy was influenced (though it is not clear how influenced) by economists and other French academics who critiqued the French social and economic model. Yet, it is unclear to what extent these arguments influenced Sarkozy’s campaign messaging, whether Sarkozy thought such messages would resonate and why, etc. Future research should explore these connections between academic and political circles as well as the rhetoric of Sarkozy’s main opponent, socialist candidate Ségolène Royal. Second, perhaps declinism in 2007 was over-determined and thus a less-interesting period from which to examine the rise and impact of declinism. Future text analyses might identify other periods of more dominant declinism.

2017: Macron’s Optimism and France as a “Start-up Nation”

In some ways, Macron’s emergence on the French political scene, according to my theory of declinism’s emergence, would be a time that would likely be ripe for declinism. After all, Macron was an “insurgent” candidate, a “technocrat turned outsider”678 who had never tried for elected office. He was the youngest candidate in the

---

678 Belin and Toucas 2018.
field. However, he was also an insider insofar as he emerged from the same political and educational institutions from which Sarkozy was able to distinguish himself.

During his campaign, Macron was largely optimistic and rejected the declinism of others. Macron held a rally in 2017 in Lyon in front of 10,000 people and declared “So tonight my friends, we respond together to those who no longer believe in anything, the defeatists, the declinists who surround them, we say to them: ‘The best is in front of us, the best is ours!’”679 Macron was open to the European Union and multilateralism, and an ardent believer in the promises of a globalized France.680 Scholars of French politics have noted the stark contrast between Macron’s optimistic rhetoric and that of fear and a degree of declinism emanating from the far-right National Front under Marine Le Pen, a seasoned politician whose leadership of the National Front was a familial affair.681

Upon entering office, Macron spoke to both French houses of parliament at Versailles in a State of the Union-esque speech whereby Macron averred that the French people had an “overwhelming thirst for renewal.”682 The speech, and Macron’s victory, were largely optimistic. According to the New York Times, “Polls show the French are now more optimistic than they have been in some years. Mr. Macron aimed to encourage this optimism about the future [during his speech] … He called for France to become “the center of a new humanist project for the world,” telling citizens to beware “the cynicism

679 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8xPxKBr8nI
that lies dormant in all of us… And it is within each one of us that we must shut it up, day after day.” In short, Macron did not engage in declinism, quite the opposite.

Macron’s lack of declinism may have been a result of a few factors at play in the 2017 election. First, Macron pulled away in the polls in the build-up to the election advancing a message of breaking away from the “obsolete, clan-based political system” which Macron believed dominated French politics and instead creating his own party En Marche! In doing so, Macron drew “on the left and right” while “balancing protection of the French welfare state with mild encouragement for business in an attempt to break through France’s employment and productivity stagnation.” In other words, while Macron eschewed the mainstream divides in French politics, he wanted to borrow, ideologically, from policies and concepts from across the ideological spectrum.

Moreover, Marine Le Pen’s message of doom and gloom, racism and xenophobia, fear of the ‘other’ and demonization of the EU may have foreclosed a declinist path for Macron, or, alternatively, opened up a space for Macron to paint a much different picture of France. By consistently engaging in declinism from the far-right, Le Pen may have blocked off a discursive route for Macron to take. Desiring to keep distance from Le Pen, and characterize himself as “above” Le Pen, Macron may have simply decided that echoing declinism from the far-right would be unappealing to the electorate.

III. Japanese Declinism

Japan is an interesting contemporary case of declinism. As Japan’s economy grew, so too did predictions that the Japanese would overtake the United States. The 21st century was meant to be Japan’s century. However, that bubble burst, and in its wake—the “lost decade” or “lost score”—has left the Japanese feeling a sense of decline, of dashed expectations. A New York Times article from 2008 notes Japan’s “crisis of confidence” that swept the nation: “Just two decades ago,” the author notes, Japan “was a vibrant nation filled with energy and ambition, proud to the point of arrogance and eager to create a new economic order in Asia based on the yen. Today, those high-flying ambitions have been shelved, replaced by weariness and fear of the future, and an almost stifling air of resignation. Japan seems to have pulled into a shell, content to accept its slow fade from the global stage.” And it is not just the New York Times who has diagnosed this declinism: senior economic bureaucrat Sakakibara Eisuke has referred to Japanese declinism as “a masochistic depression.”

In this section, I review recent Japanese declinism, particularly around the 2012 election. I begin by examining the discourse of Shinzo Abe—the leader of the main opposition party in the 2012 elections—before examining the electoral discourse of Torō Hashimoto, the leader of the Japan Restoration Party (JRP), who stole the limelight during the election yet nevertheless fizzled out of the political scene shortly thereafter.

---

686 See, e.g. Vogel 1979.
688 Buckley 1999, 3.
As I note below, Japan only recently has become a case in which my argument’s scope conditions would fit: 2009 marked the beginning of a two-party, competitive, system with the victory of the Democratic Party of Japan. In 2012, there were a proliferation of parties vying for national attention. This is important to my theory of declinism’s emergence and the scope conditions. My theory is partly predicated on multiple parties, or a viable opposition(s), from which a coherent and strong narrative of decline can emerge. Therefore, I focus attention on recent Japanese declinism.

Furthermore, many scholars have documented a puzzling aspect of Japanese politics: that prior to 1997, conservative politicians (particularly the LDP) in Japan were not focused, nor did they focus their discourse on, national security policies or politics.\textsuperscript{689} According to Amy Catalinac, “national security became more important after 1996 not because the new security threats are worse than the ones that came before, but because competition under the new electoral rules requires politicians to take a stance on national-level issues.”\textsuperscript{690} As such, national security politics replaced, to some degree, pork policies meant to help individual districts. Therefore, prior to this surge in interest in Japan’s national security and its foreign policy, we would not expect to see much declinism on the part of Japanese politicians regarding Japan’s place in the world. The talk was far more local. Therefore, it makes sense to look both post-1997, when electoral reform changed the nature of Japanese politics, and once viable alternatives to the ruling


conservative Liberal Democratic Party emerged on the political scene. I next turn to Shinzo Abe and the aforementioned LDP as an opposition in the buildup to the December 2012 election, before discussing a newcomer on the Japanese political landscape: the Japan Restoration Party.

**Shinzo Abe and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)**

This section concerns the electoral discourse of Shinzo Abe and the LDP as the main opposition to the incumbent DPJ. Abe’s vision for Japan has been well-documented. While there are hints of declinism in Shinzo Abe’s rhetoric—after all, there were a series of serious crises facing Japan—the dominant message that Abe’s party, the LDP, put forward was “the Democrats [Democratic Party of Japan] have made a mess of things, but the LDP will put things back in order.” The campaign slogan was “Take back Japan.” Such messaging makes some sense, given that the LDP had been in control for around 54 years with a minor exception prior to 2006. The difficulty in assigning blame to the DPJ on the part of the LDP would be that Japan’s recession was going on for two decades. In other words, the Liberal Democratic Party would have a hard time placing all the blame on the short tenure of the incumbent DPJ. Both major parties were receiving lukewarm, if not cold, responses on the part of the Japanese public, exemplified on voting day by a record low turnout, despite the sense of crisis in the wake of the triple disasters. Instead of an expressly declinist message, Abe was

---

692 Endo, Pekkanen, and Reed 2013, 60.
693 Endo, Pekkanen, and Reed 2013, 60.
694 Reed, Scheiner, Smith, and Thies 2013, 36.
focused on one of revival and renewal, consistent with a vision of Japan that saw Japan rightly among the great powers. His focus was not on beating up the largely unpopular and ineffective incumbent Yoshihiko Noda. Indeed, upon entering office, unlike declinists who maintain blame on the opposition, Abe struck a conciliatory tone:

“…the crisis and the issues that we face at present will not be resolved by looking back on the past or by criticizing the previous administration. I intend for us to brush aside the past and from now vigorously take our first step forward towards the future.”

While Abe’s rhetoric was not particularly declinist, his political agenda, often dubbed the “Abe Doctrine” and “Abenomics”—sought to reinvent Japanese foreign policy from a traditional internationalist stance to a “more narrowly focused defence of its great power status, a proactive security role and historical revisionism…”

According to Hugo Dobson, the “central goal” of the Abe Doctrine was the maintenance of Japan’s great power status against the backdrop of a rising China which would threaten regional security and Japan’s place in the world.

Therefore, as the main opposition leader, Abe and the Liberal Democratic Party were certainly quick to critique the governing Democratic Party of Japan. However, Abe would concern himself with Japan’s great power status but would do so more as a cheerleader-in-chief than as an arch declinist. In other words, Abe navigated a fine-line between acknowledging the blatant failed expectations borne from the constant political turnover, the erratic and self-defeating incumbent DPJ, and the “lost decade”—or even “lost score”—and offering something new to the Japanese electorate, who were fed up

695 https://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201212/26kaiken_e.html
696 Dobson 2017, 220.
697 Dobson 2017, 209.
with constant political turnover and the general direction of their politics. There was indeed a sense of urgency from Abe, who, in his *Foreign Affairs* interview upon taking office, claimed both that “Japan was back” but also that “time is not on our side. Prolonged deflation and the resulting economic stagnation that has lasted for 15 years have kept my country almost standing still, while the rest of the world has gone far. This is the last chance for us, and the sense of urgency is therefore enormous.”

While Abe felt a sense of urgency and acted upon such urgency early on in his tenure through economic policies such as monetary easing, fiscal stimulus, and structural reforms alongside diplomatic endeavors to strengthen ties with the US, Abe would eschew notions that Japan’s best times were behind her, or that declinism would win the day. Abe saw a bright future for Japan, and focused his gaze on Japan’s potential, rather than her ongoing decline. For example, in 2014, at the World Economic Forum, Abe boldly remarked:

“Pundits used to say that Japan was at dusk, or the land of the setting sun. They said that for a country as mature as Japan, growth would be impossible. These arguments were made to sound almost legitimate. You can see what Japan’s psyche was like before I took office as Prime Minister. Hardly can you hear such voices now. Our growth rate has changed dramatically, from negative growth to positive...It is not twilight, but a new dawn that is breaking over Japan” (Shinzo Abe, 2014).

---


699 Yoon, 2018, 66.

This quote exemplifies several aspects of Abe’s approach to the question of Japan’s place in the world. First, unlike declinists, he casts such declinism—even prior to his premiership—as illegitimate, though a real or palpable sentiment in Japan. Second, Abe wanted to convey hope and a renewed belief in Japan’s trajectory, which was linked to Japan’s potential and her rise from the ashes of defeat after World War II.\textsuperscript{701} In other words, Abe struck a hopeful tone, seeing decline as an aberration rather than destiny for Japan. In his 2015 New Year’s address, Abe proclaimed:

> Our predecessors accomplished rapid economic growth, making Japan one of the greatest powers in the world. There is no reason whatsoever that the Japanese of that era could achieve this but the Japanese of today cannot. Now, as we mark the new year, I have renewed my determination to, together with the Japanese people, make Japan a country that once again shines on the world’s center stage.\textsuperscript{702}

In short, Shinzo Abe flirted with declinist rhetoric. His core political orientation was built around reasserting Japan, whether it was his economic strategy or his nationalist sentiments. But he was also vocal in his anti-declinism, insofar as he refused to treat Japanese decline as given or the feelings of being down and out to take hold over his rhetoric. Abe’s position, and his party’s history, however, meant that he had a careful tightrope to walk. Declinism would have thrown his own party—and his own previous tenure—into question. Rather, Abe decided to look forward, only looking back to draw inspiration from the successes of Japan rather than the dismal decades leading up to his election for a second time as Prime Minister. One step Abe did take in order to freshen up his new government’s image was to fill his cabinet with “relatively young and unknown

\textsuperscript{701} See Dower 1999  
\textsuperscript{702} Dobson 2017, 203-204.
faces…the fresh lineup is also apparently intended to emphasize the party has changed since it was driven from power three years ago.” However, in total, Abe was far less declinist than his challengers, particularly Hashimoto Tōru, who I turn to next.

The Proliferation of Parties and Challenges to the Status Quo

As I mentioned above, the 2009 Japanese elections brought about a change from a largely single-party dominated political system (led by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)) to a more competitive two-party system with the rise and victory of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). By 2012, there were more parties vying for a place in the Diet, the so-called “third force” parties. Chief among these alternatives to the LDP and DPJ was the Japan Restoration Party (JRP; *Nippon Ishin no Kai*).

In September 2012, the leader of the Japan Restoration Party (JRP; *Nippon Ishin no Kai*), Tōru Hashimoto, declared that “Our glorious country Japan has fallen into a state of decline” during his announcement that he would run for national leadership. He implored the Japanese electorate to “fight together...to once again revive a glorious Japan.” According to political scientist Koichi Nakano, Hashimoto’s rhetoric and presence in the 2012 election pushed Japanese discourse to the right and appealed to a Japanese electorate “looking for a messiah who will turn things around and make

---

704 Pekkanen, Reed, and Scheiner 2013, 3.
Hashimoto has been described as a Japanese version of Trump because of his style of attacking opponents, which often includes bashing the Tokyo-centric status quo, overpaid local bureaucrats, utility executives, teachers’ unions or, indeed, anybody who disagrees with him.”708

Hashimoto was an outsider to the Japanese political scene.709 According to Martin Fackler, Hashimoto’s appeal came from “…his outsider status. A lawyer whose father was a gangster, Mr. Hashimoto came from a neighborhood in Osaka populated by descendants of Japan’s medieval class of “buraku” untouchables, who still face discrimination…He is also one of the first national political figures from the “lost generation” that came of age after the early 1990s financial collapse, and who appeals to young urban voters with his calls for breaking up a system that blocks youthful challengers, in politics and in business.”710

Hashimoto’s appeal stemmed, in part, from a sense of crisis and decline that resulted from a series of Democratic Party of Japan mishandlings over the past few years. In other words, there were certainly contextual factors that drove the appeal of a declinist narrative like that put forth by Hashimoto. Japan, politically, was a mess: prime ministers came and went, and accountability seemed in short supply. The ruling party, the

Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) oversaw the worsening of relations with the United States and territorial disputes with China. There was a broad sense that the Japanese people were anxious because of the economic malaise that had swept the country for decades as well as a perceived lack of leadership on the part of the major parties in Japan.

Most importantly, perhaps, there were the “triple disasters” also known as “3.11” of 2011: a mega earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster. These events shook Japan and the Japanese leadership was widely (uniformly) criticized. The crisis that subsumed the nation was used, according to Richard Samuels, as a tool for “political entrepreneurs” to advance narratives of “putting the nation in gear,” “staying the course,” or “reversing the course” of Japanese politics and society. Those on the right, including Hashimoto, believed that the crises represented an opportunity to put Japan “in gear.” For example, Samuels cites a retired defense official who predicted that “the 3.11 disaster will be seen as a big shock that led a declining Japan to revival.” Others, like Ishihara Shintarō argued that 3.11 “was an opportunity to “wash away the greed” that had become central to Japanese national identity.” Right-wing newspapers, like Sankei and Yomiuri, argued against denuclearization in the aftermath of the Fukushima Daiichi disaster.

711 Nakanishi 2015, 237.
713 For an in-depth analysis of the politics of crisis and “3.11,” see Samuels 2013.
714 See Samuels 2013a; 2013b.
716 Samuels, Richard. 2013b, 30.
717 Samuels, Richard. 2013b, 30.
Nuclear Power Plant meltdown because denuclearization would lead to a “decline of Japan’s presence and influence in the international sphere.”

Hashimoto’s vision for Japan was radical and Hashimoto described the Japan Restoration Party’s platform as a “great reset” which included “eight measures for restoration.” Hashimoto was not interested in tinkering at the margins of policy. To “revive a glorious Japan,” Hashimoto expressed a desire to “dismantle Japan’s heavily centralized government, once seen as its strength but now viewed as thwarting reform. His party aims to replace what exists with an American-style federalism in which newly created states would hold greater control over their regions.”

His ideas were considered radical and included “committing Japan to trade liberalisation and abolishing the upper house of parliament.” Moreover, Hashimoto expressed a desire for Japan to have nuclear weapons and was an unabashed nationalist and critic of China.

The 2012 election did not result in the JRP sweeping into power. Yet, the party—who merged at the last minute with the Sunrise Party—picked up 11 percent (54) of the seats in the lower house of the Diet, which nearly made them a larger opposition to the LDP than the incumbent DPJ party. While Hashimoto’s Japan Restoration Party did not have a decisive victory in 2012, the Liberal Democratic Party, led by Shinzo Abe,

---

718 Abe 2015, 102.
724 Pekkanen and Pekkanen 2015,106.
clearly paid attention to the rise of the JRP and courted Hashimoto throughout the campaign and after the election. 725 Abe was particularly aligned with Hashimoto on issues related to Japanese nationalism, such as Hashimoto’s ordinance as mayor of Osaka that teachers must sing the national anthem and fly the Japanese flag at all times. 726 Yet Abe did not seek an LDP-JRP coalition, choosing to align themselves with their traditional partner, the center-right Komeito. 727

A good coalition partner Torū Hashimoto did not make; as a celebrity figure with an over-sized personality, it is unlikely that he would have shared the limelight with Abe, who himself is the focus of much celebrity. Moreover, Hashimoto did not have the party-political access and networks from which to broker a coalition together on his own. Hashimoto was an important figure in 2012, disrupting Japanese politics and offering something new, but he did not have the political networks and ideological appeal needed to gain power as an outsider. His declinism, in the grand scheme of things, thus failed.

In short, there is some suggestive evidence from the Torū Hashimoto case that several aspects of my theory of declinism seem to be at-play. First, Hashimoto was an outsider and his appeal was, seemingly, a result of his desire to upend the seemingly stagnant nature of Japanese national politics. But his declinism failed in carrying him to victory because he was, in a sense, too much of an outsider. He did not have the institutional, party-political, position from which to play a brokerage role. Second, vis-à-

726 Johnston, Eric. “Abe Sings Praises of Hashimoto Bid to Form Party But Keeps Distance” Japan Times (August 17, 2012).
727 Sato 2013, 49.
vis Abe, Hashimoto may have, like Le Pen may have for Macron, blocked off the fully declinist route for the more centrist candidate. In other words, Hashimoto’s rhetoric may help explain why Abe was far less declinist than his challenger.

As I discuss above, Hashimoto’s declinism coincided with a particularly troubling period in Japanese life, with the 3.11 disasters as well as decades of economic stagnation. The latter, however, cannot explain why declinism appealed at this particular moment and not for the whole period of the “lost score.” Further research is required to measure declinism over time in this case and pinpoint high and low points of declinism.

IV. Conclusion

In this chapter I have traced declinism in two other country-contexts: France and Japan. In outlining the declinism of Nicolas Sarkozy and Torō Hashimoto, I have shown how some key aspects of my argument seem to hold up in different contexts. First, Sarkozy and Hashimoto portrayed themselves as outsiders who were fed up with the status quo, a status quo they thought bred national decline. Sarkozy was not properly an outsider, yet he went to great lengths to portray himself as such. Second, Sarkozy and Hashimoto sought large-scale changes, from neoliberal policies put forward by Sarkozy to trade liberalization and deep political reform by Hashimoto. Decline was not about tinkering at the margins.

Third, the relative success of Sarkozy and Hashimoto’s declinism varies significantly. Crucially, Sarkozy could play the role of a broker, whereas Hashimoto could not. Thus, Sarkozy was able to use his position within the UMP yet also appeal beyond the UMP. Hashimoto tried to kick-start his own party, and thus did not have the
electoral edge to win. Hashimoto stole the limelight in 2012, but did not win, leaving a small mark relative to the winner Abe. On the other hand, Sarkozy made strategic choices in focusing much of his electoral appeal on aspects of declinism which would appeal to the far right in France, pulling votes away from Le Pen. With a foothold already in the UMP—serving in the Chirac cabinet and cultivating a following since the early days of Chirac—Sarkozy was also able to pull votes from the centre-right of France. In other words, Sarkozy is an example of a declinist who was able to build a broad coalition under the idea of French decline and renewal, while Hashimoto did not have the institutional clout, nor the message, that would forge a coalition.

Fourth, Japanese case highlights that it is difficult for parties and their leaders who have been in power for large swaths of the immediate past to credibly claim decline is occurring. Shinzo Abe, as a one-time Prime Minister and leader of a party which was in control for roughly (and nearly continuously) 56 years prior to the election. Instead of a declinist narrative, one which would have blamed the ruling DPJ party of malpractice leading to Japan’s decline, Abe opted for a different tone, stressing the innate ability of the Japanese nation to overcome decades of negative growth and dismissing declinists and offering a new outlook without focusing on the past. When Abe did look back to the past, it was to put a nationalist spin on Japanese history, rather than to take stock of Japan’s failures under the LDP. He struck a conciliatory tone with the opposition upon winning, choosing to focus on his own project rather than passing around blame.

Several questions remain to be answered from this chapter in future research. First, in each case, other contending explanations for declinism’s emergence are also present. For example, in France, the influence of academics in the political conversation
seems particularly relevant. Future research should unpack Sarkozy’s election strategy and the influence of these scholars in more detail. In Japan, contextual factors are present: the “3.11” triple-disaster and two decades of low growth may have left declinism overdetermined. Indeed, in both cases declinism may be overdetermined. Scholars and journalists have, in both contexts, described declinism as “near-constant” in these cases. This leads me to my second direction for future research: measuring declinism systematically over time. As Chapter 2, shows, declinism ebbs and flows in its frequency over time in the UK and US. Future research should measure declinism over time in these contexts relative to objective measures in order to assess the objectivist alternative explanation systematically, and in order to determine whether declinism is overdetermined in these cases. Finally, there is a clear link between Sarkozy’s moral decline arguments and those of Thatcher presented in Chapter 4. Both Thatcher and Sarkozy flirted with the far right and anti-immigrant, racist, discourses. Future research should unpack further the links between anti-immigration, racism, and declinism in cases like these.
Chapter 8

Conclusion: Make Us Great Again

“We read history not to find predictive patterns but for the same reason that we listen to oldies stations on Sirius radio as we drive back roads on holiday: the old songs matter. Many of them were better than the new songs. That we might not learn anything from them, aside from the obvious truth that what worked then worked for then and what works now works for now, doesn’t alter our taste for old music. The long look back is part of the long ride home. We all believe in yesterday.”
-Adam Gopnik

“This American carnage stops right here and stops right now…Together, we will make America strong again. We will make America wealthy again. We will make America proud again. We will make America safe again. And, yes, together, we will make America great again.”
-Donald J. Trump

I. Introduction

As he descended his golden escalator in Trump Tower in June 2015, Donald J. Trump marked the beginning of a presidential campaign bent blaming his predecessors, immigrants, and other countries for the decline of the United States. He campaigned on making America “great” again. “We must make America respected again. And we must make America great again,” Donald Trump proclaimed. Shortly after entering office, Trump reminisced on the America he remembered: “When I was young, we were always winning things in this country.” Trump, alone, would bring America back to the lofty heights he once remembered. Or, so Trump thought. As I have shown in this dissertation,

Trump’s declinism fits a pattern of declinism in the United States that comes and goes in waves. Engaging in declinism is not a uniquely Trump phenomenon, nor is it likely the last time a politician in the United States will preach a narrative of international decline to their domestic audiences. We should expect declinism to rear its head again, perhaps in new forms with different diagnoses of decline and routes to renewal.

I have also shown that declinism is not confined to the United States. Narratives of international decline emerge in the domestic politics of other great powers, like the United Kingdom, France, and Japan. Recently, for example, Boris Johnson’s (and the other Brexiteers) Brexit rhetoric blamed the European Union for Britain’s problems, suggesting that the Brexit vote represented a choice “between a dynamic, liberal, cosmopolitan, open, global, free-trading, prosperous, Britain, or a Britain where we remain subject to a undemocratic system devised in the 1950s that is now actively responsible for low growth and in some cases economic despair.” As Eoin Drea argues, “It is this reality of Britain’s changing global role, and the widespread perception of relative decline it invokes within large portions of Britain itself, that underpins the hard-line Brexiteer approach to ‘taking back control.’” Britain, according to Brexiteers, is the victim of the bureaucratic, sovereignty-encroaching, European Union. Britain could realize her greatness again, according to the likes of Johnson, if Britain could remove the shackles of the EU.

734 Drea 2019, 18.
This final chapter proceeds as follows. First, in Section II, I return to the core argument and findings of the dissertation. Section III describes three pathways for future research made possible by this project. Finally, in Section IV, I outline the implications of this research for IR theory and for policy.

II. Argument and Findings

This project developed a theory of the causes and consequences of declinism in great powers. I first argued that decline and declinism rarely move in lockstep with one another. I demonstrated, using text analyses in the United Kingdom and United States, that such mismatches occur regularly in Chapter 2.

Following from the observation that decline and declinism do not move in lockstep with each other, Chapter 3 set out to explain why declinism emerges. Why do politicians evoke the nation’s decline? Why do politicians think declinism will be a winning message? I argued that, contrary to conventional wisdom, declinism arises and subsides in great powers for domestic political reasons. First, I argued that the political opposition is most likely to cultivate a narrative of decline. Second, I contended that the appeal of declinist rhetoric is greatest to those members of the opposition who wish to break radically from the past and establish a wholly new policy direction. These newcomers or outsiders, I theorized, are able to occupy brokerage positions, whereby they are able to use their positions and access within parties, in the sense that they have access to traditional party apparatuses, and outsiders, who appeal to voters, parties, and organizations/movements who are otherwise unconnected.
Why does declinism matter? In Chapter 3 I also outlined how narratives of international decline impact policies at home and abroad. I show how different narratives of decline prescribe different polices or behaviors for overcoming decline. In particular, I identified two main dimensions of declinist narratives: (1) the policy domain where the problem lies (domestic/foreign) and (2) the reason why the nation is said to have declined (done too much/done too little). Narratives of decline posit *why* decline has happened, and what is to be done to overcome decline. These two dimensions produce four important kinds of narratives: (1) domestic overextension narratives (which prescribe policies like cutting spending and reducing regulation), (2) international overextension narratives (which prescribe policies such as policies of retrenchment and decreases in military spending), (3) domestic decay narratives (which prescribe policies like strategic investment in the nation’s infrastructure, education, and health), and (4) international re-exertion narratives (which prescribe policies from increased spending on the military to preventive war).

I tested my theory in three main cases: the declinism of Margaret Thatcher in the New Right in 1970s Britain, the declinism of John F. Kennedy in the late 1950s and the 1960 U.S. presidential election, and the declinism of Ronald Reagan, especially during his 1980 presidential campaign. In Chapter 4, I traced the emergence of declinism in Britain during the 1970s, using evidence from archival research in the UK at the Conservative Party and Labour Party Archives. I showed how members of the New Right attempted to bring declinism to the Conservative Party message during and immediately after the 1974 general election but were pushed back by the establishment of the party. Once members of the New Right seized control of the party after 1974’s dismal electoral
performances, they were able to bring declinism to bear and frame their message and policy goals around the question of Britain’s decline.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I traced the emergence of declinism in two US cases: JFK and Reagan. In Chapter 5, I traced the emergence of declinism during the latter half of the 1950s in the US, particularly with respect to John F. Kennedy’s presidential campaign. Using evidence from archival research in the JFK archives, I showed that declinism was “instrumentalized” in the JFK campaign; the campaign recognized the strength of JFK’s argument versus Nixon regarding declining American prestige and capabilities and encouraged heightening and emphasizing such arguments as the campaign wore on. I traced these developments using the papers of key speechwriters like James Tobin, Arthur Schlesinger, and Walt Rostow, demonstrating that declinism was rampant within the campaign’s inner circle. In Chapter 6, I traced the emergence of declinism during the Reagan presidential campaign and presidency, famously from his campaign slogan “Make America Great Again” to his reelection campaign, including his memorable “Morning in America” advertisement. I showed how Reagan, as an outsider, was able to deploy declinism to his advantage.

In each substantive chapter, I also showed how declinism impacted policy. In Chapter 4, I examined Thatcher’s rhetoric regarding the future of British foreign policy, and how Thatcher’s declinism carried prescriptions of greater defense spending—despite cuts elsewhere—and the rhetoric of decline in the buildup to, during, and aftermath of the Falklands War. In Chapter 5, I examined Kennedy’s rhetoric regarding the missile gap and restoring American prestige abroad, and the consequences of his declinism with respect to his foreign policy and his defense spending. And in Chapter 6, I traced the
consequences of Reagan’s declinism with respect to his foreign policy and his defense spending, including the death of détente and the birth of his Strategic Defense Initiative.735

However, to only look at the United Kingdom and the United states might lead to an Anglo-American bias in the project. Thus, in Chapter 7, I examined two additional cases of declinism in France (around the 2007 French presidential election) and in Japan (around the 2012 national elections). Both cases revealed interesting dynamics relative to my theory of declinism’s emergence.

III. Future Research

This dissertation has identified a number of avenues made possible by focusing on narratives of decline for future research, three of which I outline here. First, this project opens up possibilities for examining how—and why—leaders and publics assess their decline in the ways that they do. I have shown throughout this project that leaders claim decline is happening for different reasons, drawing upon different metrics, and often contest the very notion of the nation’s decline. Future research could examine, via automated text analyses or other methods, the prevalence of particular metrics used to assess decline in the discourse of politicians/leaders, or in elite debate. Such research would provide more insight into how decline is understood and constructed in the domestic politics of great powers.

735 Gaddis 2005.
Second, future research could examine particular kinds of narratives of international decline and their specific consequences. For example, IR theorists have long fretted about the potential for conflict born from power transitions between great powers. However, less attention has been paid on the fracturing domestic politics that stem from concerns over international decline. The notion that ‘enemies within’ are the cause of the nation’s malaise are part and parcel of many narratives of international decline. To take one case as an example, as I discussed in Chapter 4, Margaret Thatcher expressed concern that Britain was being “swamped” by people from different cultures. Thatcher linked anti-immigrant sentiment to Britain’s international decline: Britain was purportedly losing her identity, values, and what made her great. Future research could examine the interplay between, for example, narratives of international decline and anti-immigrant, racist, sentiments at the level of discourse and in shaping public attitudes. By unpacking the content of specific narratives of decline, future research could further seek to understand the possibilities for declinism to lead to policies of fracture or, alternatively, discourses and politics focused on renewal, of integration, and of progress.

Third, future research should further dive into the domestic politics of decline, and how it is (or, as I have argued, is rarely) connected to objective international circumstances. As I note below with respect to implications of this project for theories of international relations, if politicians and their publics do not get ginned up when decline is happening—or vice versa—this throws a wrench into theories that assume states react swiftly and promptly to their international circumstances. While not all mechanisms offered in this literature point to the function of narratives or of domestic politics outside of elite circles, scholars should be attentive to when decline becomes a live issue in great
powers, particularly democracies. Future research should weigh these “second image”
dynamics against “second image reversed” dynamics offered by much of the literature on
declining powers and power transitions.

IV. IR Theory and Policy Implications

In this section, I first return to the implications of my research for IR theory. I
then discuss policy implications that may follow from this research.

IR Theory

As I noted in Chapters 2 and 3, great powers throughout history have fretted about
their international standing, at times justifiably, but at other times unjustifiably.736 This
dissertation has challenged the conventional approach to the question of great power
decline, which treats decline as objective and dangerous: power shifts cause insecurity
and conflict.737 Recent conventional work that exemplifies this approach tends to focus
on questions such as how great powers respond to relative decline,738 or the strategies of
rising powers vis-à-vis an actually-declining great power.739 Instead of focusing solely on
objective measures of decline, I examined why narratives of international decline emerge,
irrespective of whether “objective decline,” as commonly measured, is occurring.

Most studies of decline offer positivist (and generally realist) explanations of
when and why decline becomes a major issue in the domestic politics of great powers. As

737 Copeland 2000, 1; Gilpin 1981.
738 MacDonald and Parent 2011.
739 Shiffrinson 2018.
I argued in Chapters 2 and 3, they assume that decline is an objective reality and is therefore interpretable by states. These explanations tend to focus on the structural imperatives of decline, and the degree to which states react swiftly or slowly to such imperatives;\textsuperscript{740} or on domestic pathologies like poor decision-making, bureaucratic fragmentation, or domestic dysfunction (e.g. special interests) as deviations from ideal responses to decline.\textsuperscript{741} Both sets of explanations overlook the social construction of decline, and declinism. In other words, most—if not all—explanations treat decline as knowable, as a “brute fact” which leaders respond to, absent domestic pathologies, mistakes, or delays. A core contribution of this dissertation is to unpack and examine the relationship between “objective” measures and declinism.

The existing literature on decline in international relations largely misses, or treats as given, declinism. Conventional approaches to decline are typically structural-realist in orientation, and therefore usually disregard domestic politics or ideational factors in understanding decline. Yet many of the policy responses to decline that such accounts argue occur (from preventive war to retrenchment and everything in between), suggest that declinism should accompany objective international decline. Such policies are legitimated to domestic and/or international audiences.\textsuperscript{742} Governments justify why they, for example, need to send troops abroad or ramp up defense spending at the expense of other policy priorities. There should, then, be a correlation between decline and declinism, if conventional accounts are correct: decline is recognized (rather quickly) by

\textsuperscript{740} MacDonald and Parent 2011.
\textsuperscript{741} Snyder 1993; Friedberg 1988.
\textsuperscript{742} Goddard 2018.
politicians, and they put forward policies to stem decline. This project begins to fill a gap in existing literature and problematizes assumptions inherent in conventional accounts that decline and declinism track closely with one another.

Why does the mismatch between decline and declinism matter for IR theory? Common assumptions about how states respond to decline presume that states can observe their decline and react promptly. Indeed, such accounts suggest that decline is a sensitive affair, making power transitions dangerous and destabilizing. However, if domestic attention to decline is divorced from metrics of decline scholars use to measure rising powers, declining powers, and power transitions, then such presumptions about the observability of decline are unfounded. If leaders, and their oppositions in government, do not see decline as a major issue, or cannot agree that decline is occurring, then the mechanisms through which decline impacts policies, from preventive war to retrenchment, should be questioned. The mechanisms through which decline is said to matter, namely the notion that leaders can assess their nation’s position relative to others in almost real-time, assume a correlation between decline as observed by scholars and declinism. Such assumptions not only lead to scholars missing cases in which ‘decline is on the mind’ of the nation, but also the political dynamics through which decline is interpreted, narrated, and acted upon in the domestic politics of great powers.

Policy

---

The policy implications of declinism depend upon what policies are put forward by the declinist. As I discussed in Chapter 3, narratives of international decline can prescribe policies abroad that may be policies of retrenchment (suggesting that the nation has “done too much” abroad) or expansion (suggesting that the nation has “done too little”). In other words, declinism can lead to a vast variety of policy outcomes. In this section, I briefly touch upon how prominent scholars and commentators have understood declinism’s consequences, before coming back to the broad takeaways from this project vis-à-vis policy. I then note how this study might inform the way we understand debates around the rise of China and the decline of the United States.

In popular accounts, declinism is said to produce everything from ‘superpower suicide’ to a ‘galvanizing function’ for renewal. For example, Robert Kagan argues that declinism can produce unneeded or dangerous policy results. Of course, whether such policies are ‘unneeded’ or ‘dangerous’ in this context are in the eye of the (in this case, neoconservative) beholder. Americans, Kagan argues, are “in danger of committing pre-emptive superpower suicide out of a misplaced fear of their own declining power.”744 According to Kagan, there is a danger when declinism is high that Americans may accept their own decline and see it as inevitable, thus coming to the conclusion that “the United States can take a time-out from its global responsibilities” and “escape from the moral and material burdens that have weighed on them since World War II.”745 In other words, Kagan argues that declinism leads—or can lead—to the United States playing less of a

role on the global stage. Such declinism would feed into narratives of “we’ve done too much” abroad, seeking to scale back U.S. commitments and presence abroad and in international organizations. Again, however, such questions are normative. Declinism itself, as I have shown, does not necessarily pull in one direction. In fact, one could say that based upon my cases, declinism often leads precisely to the opposite reaction of the reaction Kagan is concerned about and thus Kagan’s worries about declinism are perhaps unfounded.

To some scholars and commentators, declinism serves a net-positive function, or, at least, functions to wake up the nation. Samuel Huntington has observed that declinism has served a galvanizing function for the United States.746 Declinism warns of dangers ahead, and encourages changes of course, in this account.747 In this sense, perhaps declinism is a form of learning. To take my policy typology as an example, if the state is overextending domestically or internationally, perhaps declinism serves to rein it back in. Or, if the state is underutilizing its resources or international power, perhaps declinism serves to wake up the nation from resting on its laurels. For example, Fareed Zakaria argues that concern over America’s economic decline in various phases of American history were not only well-founded, but that such concerns, matched with the flexible and resilient system of American government, prompted a change of attention and direction for the better (but not any longer).748 However, it is possible that declinism is negative,

---

instead serving a “self-defeating” function. “Myths of decline,” Josef Joffé notes, can be the opposite of self-fulfilling prophecies, instead a “self-defeating” prophesy: “the alarum starts out with a “false definition of the situation” and then triggers “new behavior which makes the original false conception come ‘true.’”

It is not hard to imagine that the United States will face similar periods of declinism and declinist narratives going forward. As competitors like China threaten the United States’ #1 position in international politics, we already see much alarm around the rise of China and the supposed decline of the United States. Others, from commentators to scholars, downplay such fears. As debates rage on, and scholars continue to offer very different predictions about what China’s rise means for the United States, declinist narratives and their impacts will warrant attention and, in some cases, concern.

For example, one need not look further than the controversial recent book by Graham Allison, widely adopted by those in Trump’s inner circle, as evidence of the power of particular understandings of international politics, the nature of US decline, and the inevitability of particular kinds of foreign policy outcomes to see how declinism may have pessimistic, and undercutting, impacts on US foreign policy. Moreover, as I noted above, narratives of international decline can be fracturing, placing blame on “enemies within” or on racist stereotypes of the “other.” We should be attentive when confronting narratives of international decline. We should be weary that such narratives do not fall prey to such fracturing, divisive, rhetoric and the policies that stem from such rhetoric.

---

749 Joffé 2013.
750 Allison 2017.
751 Crowley 2017.
Declinism is powerful. Declinism motivates, it galvanizes, and it demands a response. Whether declinism is a canard or a canary in the coalmine, we should expect declinism to continue to be a feature of American politics in the years to come, especially during election cycles. The question then becomes what form declinism takes and the consequences it produces.
Bibliography


Mattson, Kevin. 2009. ‘What the Heck Are You Up To, Mr. President?’: Jimmy Carter, America’s ‘Malaise,’ and the Speech That Should Have Changed the Country. New York: Bloomsbury USA.


Appendix 1

Additional Figures, Tables, and Links from Chapter 2

Figure 1: Mentions of ‘declin*’ in Parliament, 1946-2004

Figure 2: Mentions of ‘declin*’ in Parliament, 1946-2004, per Million
Figure 3: Speeches Mentioning ‘declin*’ in Parliament, 1946-2013
![Graph showing speech mentions of 'declin*' from 1946 to 2013.]

Figure 4: Refined Dictionary: Mentions of ‘declin*’ in Parliament, 1946-2004
![Graph showing refined dictionary mentions of 'declin*' from 1946 to 2004.]

350
Figure 5: Mentions of Decline in the *Times of London* Editorial Section (newspaper strike in 1979)

Mentions of 'Declin*' in the Times' Editorials: 1945-2012

Figure 6: Bigrams in the *Times of London*

The data on particular sections of the newspaper do not allow me to weight the number of editorials containing declin* by the total number of editorials.
Figure 7: Bigrams in the *Times of London*

![Bigrams in the Times of London](image-url)

- factor(word2)
- relative declin^*
- absolute declin^*
Figure 8A: Occurrences of Dictionary Terms alongside “declin*” in Parliament
Figure 8B: Occurrences of Dictionary Terms alongside “declin*” in Parliament (continued)
Figure 9: Mentions of “declined” in the *Times*
Mentions of ‘Declined’ in the *Times*: 1945-2012

Figure 10: Mentions of “declining” in the *Times*
Mentions of ‘Declining’ in the *Times*: 1945-2012

Figure 11: Mentions of “declin*” in the *Guardian*
Mentions of ‘Declin*’ in The *Guardian*: 1945-2003
Table 1: Validation of Keywords in Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>KWIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>253</td>
<td>compete with other nations in the markets of the world, our manufacturing industry will decline, and our service industries will also suffer: Indeed, that is the crux.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4218</td>
<td>Where nearly 10,000 people are engaged in three great shipbuilding yards: Naturally the continuing decline in the strength of the order books disturbs not only those who are concerned in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>546</td>
<td>public services focused on the poor: However, because world commodity prices are still declining—; coffee, cocoa and so on— and oil prices have been rising,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2605</td>
<td>Sir Fergus Montgomery Yes it is, and the terrible thing is that the decline started when the last Labour Government were in power:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1493</td>
<td>a time when it is an ominous fact that the global production of cereals has declined in the past two years for the first time since 1945: The world's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2800</td>
<td>today: The Motion welcomes the determination of Her Majesty's Government to reverse the decline in the economic strength and competitive power of this country … The noble Lord</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>464</td>
<td>it has seemed that every year in recent years our share of world tonnage has declined by about ½ per cent: Also, whereas total world tonnage has increased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1688</td>
<td>'s position in the world has changed: The most important change is the relative decline in the military and economic power of this country: Militarily, we no longer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2470</td>
<td>This, primarily, and most importantly, depends upon a turnaround of the national decline position which I have spelled out: Investment has been mentioned and blamed, as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1483</td>
<td>it about: At the same time, as the danger of global war is declining, instability in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Latin America seems to be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3581</td>
<td>product grows, as I hope it will, the share for defence may slightly decline, but I doubt whether any further reductions will be possible in the future other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3901</td>
<td>for the Research Councils by the Royal Society reveal that Britain shows the most marked decline in its share of scientific output of any major OECD country: What is worse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>it immediately to sterling: A year later, once the foreign currency has substantially declined in value against sterling, he converts back into the foreign currency enough sterling to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2444</td>
<td>to do more and more, yet their position in society is, relatively, declining: This creates a certain cynicism: 287 I hope that in the reply tonight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4082</td>
<td>of jobs? At a time when the European Community share of world trade is declining, does he agree that the European Union should reduce burdens on industry, as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4307</td>
<td>be attracted, under the new regime they would be left with assignees of steadily declining covenant strength and no other recourse: Investment prospects and confidence would decline accordingly:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2340</td>
<td>are entitled to ask the Minister what will be our position if the order book declines substantially once the credits are exhausted: If they were not available we might find</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4005</td>
<td>, far from providing any sustained boost to exports, were associated with the continuing decline in our share of world trade in manufactures: Devaluation offers at best a temporary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3912</td>
<td>by the British Government's neglect of the science base and by the dramatic relative decline in our share of world trade and in our international competitiveness: The superficial stance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2964</td>
<td>accountable, they must discuss it: The truth is that it reveals a serious decline in the capacity, competitiveness and effectiveness of British Industry: These problems have,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

753 Random number generator to pull 20 key words in context for validation purposes, alongside validation with historical literature.
Table 2 Bigram Counts in the New York Times

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word Pair Searches</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>american + decline</td>
<td>199,454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>international + decline</td>
<td>130,298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>economic + decline</td>
<td>121,444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relative + decline</td>
<td>56,188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>absolute + decline</td>
<td>17,439</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Dictionary Terms -- terms that appear within 9 words on either side of “declin*”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Frequency alongside “declin*”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>competitive*</td>
<td>932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foreign</td>
<td>2184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>global*</td>
<td>317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>influence</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>international*</td>
<td>1153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>position</td>
<td>1003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>power*</td>
<td>2303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prestige</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>share</td>
<td>1822</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>standing</td>
<td>932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>status</td>
<td>351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strength</td>
<td>669</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>world</td>
<td>4027</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 14: Mentions of Declin* in the Congressional Record (Sessions 81 to 111)
Figure 15: GDP x GDP per capita (Beckley Measure)
Appendix 2

Description of Archival Research

Chapter 4: Less like the Germans and More like the Italians: Thatcher, the New Right, and Declinism in 1970s Britain

For this chapter, I use archival material from three physical archives and two online archives:

2. Labour Party Archives, Manchester, UK.
3. National Archives, Kew, UK.
4. Labour Party Online Archives, available here for a subscription fee.
5. Margaret Thatcher Foundation Archives, available here for free.

Chapter 5: “The America We Must Not Be:” Missiles, Prestige, and Kennedy’s New Frontier

For this chapter, I use archival material from two physical archives:

1. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, MA, USA.
2. Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, CA, USA.

Chapter 6: From Malaise to Morning in America: The Declinism of Ronald Reagan

For this chapter, I use archival material from two physical archives:

1. Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Atlanta, GA, USA.
2. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA, USA.

Files/Boxes Examined in Each Archive

Please click this link to view a folder with relevant spreadsheets that include what I examined at each archive.