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Hope and Hopelessness in America

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These first decades of the 21st century likely will become known in the future as the time when the global power center finally shifted from the North Atlantic world to the Indo-Pacific world. Changing economic and political geographies spell the end of American global hegemony and a dramatic decline in the American way of life. While the U.S. might remain the sole military superpower for some time to come, its social and economic competitiveness has passed its prime. All the signs of decline are there for everyone to see. The challenge for Americans is to address these changing geographic realities in ways that might preserve some vestiges of a once-dominant nation's quality of life.

The rise of China and India, for example, is driven in part by strategic investments in the key ingredients of socioeconomic growth. Building infrastructure and educating citizens are two critical areas where these emerging economies are outperforming the U.S. Indeed, by most international measures, the U.S. is below average or merits a failing grade on many important indicators of social wellbeing. America's education system is on life support. States have disinvested in schools and universities at alarming rates, and higher education students are burdened with skyrocketing tuition resulting in crushing debt burdens after graduation. Basic infrastructure is in dreadful shape across the nation. We have an aging air traffic control system stuck with 1950s technologies and mentalities, and highways, railroads, and electrical grids that are crumbling and substandard at best. The nation's electronic communications capacity and speed have been surpassed by many other countries.

Even more alarming, American democracy is in crisis. Congress might as well hang a banner over its entrance reading "abandon hope and civility all ye who enter!" The political system is hopelessly mired in self-destructive partisanship, with little meaningful legislation benefiting the country – notwithstanding the recent vote on health care reform. Tea Parties and Coffee Klatches will not help restore trust in a broken system, where demonizing other points of view and verbally trashing opponents have become acceptable discourse.

A deeper understanding of economic geography principles would highlight the fatal flaws in American society today. A successful manufacturing system requires the U.S. to make things that other societies want, at competitive prices. We do well in some areas, but the average hourly labor cost and regulations make us less competitive in the global marketplace. As consumers we demand high quality goods at the lowest possible price, and steadfastly refuse to consider the social and environmental costs of this unsustainable approach. We demand cheap gasoline but do not support alternative energy strategies, and we turn a blind eye to misguided policies in the Middle East that keep the cheap oil flowing. China even surged ahead of the US in 2009 to become the leading investor in renewable energy technologies. Unfortunately, Americans cling stubbornly to outdated and underfunded social entitlement programs while decrying any attempt to raise taxes to pay for them. Rural and urban poverty are at epidemic levels, yet any attempt to achieve human equality is denounced as socialism or worse.

Will hope or hopelessness shape our future? Although the U.S. may have lost its global pre-eminence in many areas, there are still opportunities to restructure society to achieve a decent quality of life while staying competitive in the global economy. This requires politicians, business leaders, and ordinary people to understand how and why America's economic geography has changed. We need to admit that we have failed to address the basic challenges facing our society and that other countries are advancing by taking steps that we should have begun decades ago.

Only by admitting its national weakness can the U.S. find a way towards rebuilding its future potential. If we fail in this endeavor, future generations will look back on this decade as the beginning of the end of America's hegemonic glory. *David Keeling is a member of the American Geographical Society's Writers Circle and Professor of Geography, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KU 42191-1066, USA. He*

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