



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on November 11, 2011

Niall Ferguson Ignores God-given Rights

Niall Ferguson (left), professor at Harvard and the London School of Economics, summarized his latest book, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* for Newsweek magazine's *The Daily Beast* by stating that he is not a "declinist" but is instead expecting an imminent collapse of the United States. He wrote: "I really don't believe the United States ... is in some kind of gradual, inexorable decline.... in my view, civilizations don't rise...and then gently decline, as inevitably and predictably as the four seasons.... History isn't one smooth, parabolic curve after another. Its shape is more like an exponentially steepening slope that quite suddenly drops off like a cliff."



As evidence Ferguson points to the lost city of the Incas, [Machu Picchu](#), which was built over a hundred years and collapsed in less than ten. He notes that the Roman Empire collapsed in just a few decades in the early fifth century, while the Ming dynasty ended with frightening speed in the mid-17th century.

He tries to explain why the West, and especially and specifically the United States, is set up for a similar collapse through the use of the analogy of what made America great in the first place, computer-based "killer applications" such as competition, the scientific revolution, the rule of law and representative government, modern medicine, the consumer society, and the work ethic.

His conclusion that these "apps" were the basis for the enormous growth and improvement in the standard of living from the year 1800 on was challenged by Dr. Gary North who thinks that Ferguson has missed the primary point: the rule of law was developed out of the Great Awakenings that established firmly the rights of man as a creation of the living God with unalienable rights, including the right to his own life and the property he accumulated by exercising that right.

Ferguson's first killer app, competition, can be explained as the natural outgrowth of human action as each individual sought his own ways to maximum his own well-being. He learned that he could prosper only by providing better goods and services to his customers than others in the same field of endeavor, and thus was driven to make those improvements or lose those customers.

The scientific revolution, according to Ferguson, mostly happened in the 17th century: breakthroughs in mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry and biology. This coincided with the development of the Gutenberg Press in 1436 and the rapid dissemination of information across the world over the next hundreds of years. It was not so much a scientific revolution as it was an information revolution stemming from one man's attempt to do something more efficiently.

The rule of law and representative government sprang from the Catholic Church's university system and the Protestant Reformation. That reformation spread to America primarily from Scotland, bringing with it the organization known as presbyteries, which were adopted by the founders of the republic.



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Modern medicine was an offshoot of the scientific revolution as was the mis-named “consumer society,” more accurately described by North as the “customer society.” And the coveted work ethic grew out of the awareness that a person had the right to keep what he earned, enhanced and strengthened by the Calvinist ethic of doing God’s work for His glory.

Perhaps the biggest miss of all is Ferguson’s failure to mention the greatest creation of men’s minds in the history of mankind: the Declaration of Independence. In that single document echoes the growing understanding down through the centuries that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness, That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed...”

And when the Constitution was adopted it reflected the further understanding, stated so eloquently by Thomas Jefferson, that its purpose was (and is) “to bind men down from mischief” by its chains, restrictions and limitations.

It is unfortunate that so bright and intelligent and gifted and informed as Ferguson is that he seems to think that it was those “killer apps” that made the West the shining city on a hill, instead of the more fundamental, foundational understanding of the nature of man taught in the Holy Scriptures that made all the difference. That, and that alone, is what has made America “exceptional.”



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