

Niall Ferguson

Niall Ferguson: The ascendancy of the West would not have been predictable to anybody in the year 1400. If you'd gone on a world tour in that year, you would have been much more impressed by Chinese civilization than by West European civilization. You would have been much more struck by Nanjing than by London. And yet, beginning at some point after that - it's hard to say exactly when - there was a great divergence in economic terms most obviously, but in other respects, too. To give you an indication of what I mean, in around 1600 there wasn't an enormous difference between the incomes of people who were settling in North America and the incomes of people who were living in Eastern China. Maybe the North Americans were a little better off. We can't really say for sure. By the mid-20th century, the average American was 20 times richer than the average Chinese. The West was also healthier. Life expectancy increased by leaps and bounds in the West. It did not increase in the rest of the world. Moreover, we see the extraordinary influence of Western ideas being spread around the world by settlement, by trade, and so forth. And ultimately, we see dominance in the sense of military dominance and political dominance so that by the early 20th century an enormous proportion of the world's land surface and population, are under some form or other of Western control.

Niall Ferguson: It's very tempting to think of civilizations declining gradually. I think we're hardwired to think of the historical process as being a little bit like the life of the individual human that we are young, and scrappy and hungry. And then we reach maturity and then we kind of begin aging and we are passed our prime, and then there's a kind of senescence and finally death. And this is the way that historians for centuries have thought about the rise and fall of empires; the rise and fall of civilizations. It's something of an arc. Of a cycle. I don't think that's right. I don't think that analogy works. And that's because when you look closely at the great powers, the empires and the civilizations of history, they turn out not to go through a protracted period of decline. They very often fall apart quite fast. And there's a way of thinking about this in theory, which is to say they are complex systems. And complex systems teeter on the edge of chaos. And often fall right over the edge under the influence of a quite small shock. So I don't think of history as a series of arcs or cycles. Rather I think of it as a series of complex systems, which can fall apart with astonishing speed. I'll give you two examples. One very distant, and one relatively recent. We used to think that the Roman Empire took a very, very long time to decline and fall. And in Edward Gibbons' account it's basically a thousand years, extraordinary protracted decline. But more recent research by historians like Brian Ward-Perkins and Peter Heather makes us realize that in fact the Roman Empire in the West, fell apart very fast. In the space of about a generation. And we can use archaeological and other evidence to show that what was a thriving civilization fell apart with astonishing speed. Fast-forward to the 1980s. Most people, even then, thought the Soviet Union

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would be around for a very long time. It fell apart with astonishing speed, beginning really in the mid-1980s but nobody quite noticed until 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down, that its empire in Eastern Europe was unraveling. By 1991, the Soviet Union had ceased to exist.