

This Prophetic Academic Now Foresees the West's Defeat

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By Christopher Caldwell

Mr. Caldwell is a contributing Opinion writer and the author of “The Age of Entitlement: America Since the Sixties.”

“If anybody in this room thinks Putin will stop at Ukraine, I assure you, he will not,” President Biden said during his State of the Union address on Thursday night. Europe is “at risk,” he added, as he welcomed Ulf Kristersson, the prime minister of Sweden, the newest member of NATO.

But Mr. Biden also said he remains “determined” that American soldiers will not be necessary to defend Europe. As a White House spokesman put it last week, it is “crystal clear” that the use of ground troops is off the table.

Mr. Kristersson’s head must have been spinning. The prospect of further Russian incursions was the strongest argument that the United States relied on to draw NATO into the war, and to draw new members, like Sweden, into NATO. But if such incursions were a genuine concern, then ground troops would be an option for the United States and its allies almost by definition.

The rationale for NATO participation in the Russo-Ukrainian war is getting fuzzier at the very moment when one would expect it to be getting clearer.

This is a problem. Europeans, like Americans, are tiring of the war. They are [increasingly skeptical](#) that Ukraine can win it. But perhaps most important, they distrust the United States, which has done little in this war to dispel skepticism about its motives and its competence that arose during the Iraq war two decades ago. Unique though Americans sometimes believe their polarization to be, all Western societies have a version of it. As Europe’s “elites” see it, NATO is fighting a war to beat back a Russian invasion. But as “populists” see it, American elites are leading a war to beat back a challenge to their own hegemony — no matter what the collateral damage.

American leadership is failing: That is the argument of an eccentric new book that since January has stood near the top of France’s best-seller lists. It is called “La Défaite de l’Occident” (“The Defeat of the West”). Its author, Emmanuel Todd, is a celebrated historian and anthropologist who in 1976, in a book called “The Final Fall,” used infant-mortality statistics to predict that the Soviet Union was headed for collapse.

Since then, what Mr. Todd writes about current events has tended to be received in Europe as prophecy. His book “After the Empire,” predicting the “breakdown of the American order,” came out in 2002, in the flush of post-9/11 national cohesion and before the debacle of the Iraq war, to which Mr. Todd was fiercely opposed. Anglophone (his doctorate is from Cambridge) and

Anglophile (at least at the start of his career), he has grown steadily disillusioned with the United States, even anti-American.

Mr. Todd is a critic of American involvement in Ukraine, but his argument is not the now-familiar historical one made by the dissident political scientist John Mearsheimer. Like Mr. Mearsheimer, Mr. Todd questions the zealous expansion of NATO under Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, the neoconservative ideology of democracy promotion and the official demonization of Russia. But his skepticism of U.S. involvement in Ukraine goes deeper. He believes American imperialism has not only endangered the rest of the world but also corroded American character.

In interviews over the past year, Mr. Todd has argued that Westerners focus too much on one surprise of the war: Ukraine's ability to defy Russia's far larger army. But there is a second surprise that has been underappreciated: Russia's ability to defy the sanctions and seizures through which the United States sought to destroy the Russian economy. Even with its Western European allies in tow, the United States lacked the leverage to keep the world's big, new economic actors in line. India took advantage of fire-sale prices for Russian energy. China provided Russia with sanctioned goods and electronic components.

And then the manufacturing base of the United States and its European allies proved inadequate to supply Ukraine with the matériel (particularly artillery) needed to stabilize, let alone win, the war. The United States no longer has the means to deliver on its foreign-policy promises.

People have been awaiting this moment for quite some time, not all of them as far from the corridors of power as Mr. Todd. Mr. Biden mentioned in his 2017 memoir that President Barack Obama used to warn him about "overpromising to the Ukrainian government." Now we see why.

Mr. Todd contends that Americans' heedless plunge into the global economy was a mistake. Parts of his case will be familiar from other authors: The United States produces fewer cars than it did in the 1980s; it produces less wheat. But parts of his case involve deeper, long-term cultural shifts perennially associated with prosperity. We used to call them decadence.

In an advanced, highly educated society like ours, Mr. Todd argues, too many people aspire to the work of running things and bossing people around. They

want to be politicians, artists, managers. This doesn't always require learning intellectually complex stuff. "In the long run, educational progress has brought educational decline," he writes, "because it has led to the disappearance of those values that favor education."

Mr. Todd calculates that the United States produces fewer engineers than Russia does, not just per capita but in absolute numbers. It is experiencing an "internal brain drain," as its young people drift from demanding, high-skill, high-value-added occupations to law, finance and various occupations that merely transfer value around the economy and in some cases may even destroy it. (He asks us to consider the ravages of the opioid industry, for instance.)

As Mr. Todd sees it, the West's decision to outsource its industrial base is more than bad policy; it is also evidence of a project to exploit the rest of the world. But ringing up profits is not the only thing America does in the world — it also spreads a system of liberal values, which are often described as universal human rights. A specialist in the anthropology of families, Mr. Todd warns that a lot of the values Americans are currently spreading are less universal than Americans think.

Anglo-American family structures, for example, have traditionally been less patriarchal than those almost anywhere else in the world. As it has modernized, the United States has come to [espouse a model of sex and gender](#) that conjugates poorly with those of traditional cultures (such as India's) and more patriarchal modern ones (such as Russia's).

Mr. Todd is not a moralizer. But he insists that traditional cultures have a lot to fear from the West's various progressive leanings and may resist allying themselves on foreign policy with those who espouse them. In a similar way, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union's official atheism was a deal-breaker for many people who might otherwise have been well disposed toward Communism.

Mr. Todd does believe that certain of our values are "deeply negative." He presents evidence that the West does not value the lives of its young. Infant mortality, the telltale metric that led him to predict the Soviet collapse half a century ago, is higher in Mr. Biden's America (5.4 per thousand) than in Mr. Putin's Russia — and three times higher than in the Japan of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida.

While Mr. Todd is, again, not judgmental on sexual matters, he is judgmental on intellectual ones. The inability to distinguish facts from wishes astounds him at every turn of the Ukraine war. The American hope early in the war that China might cooperate in a sanctions regime against Russia, thereby helping the United States refine a weapon that would one day be aimed at China itself, is, for Mr. Todd, a “delirium.”

For students of the Vietnam War, there is much in Mr. Todd’s book that recalls the historian Loren Baritz’s classic 1985 book, “Backfire,” which drew on popular culture, patriotic mythology and management theory to explain what had led the United States astray in Vietnam. Mr. Baritz concluded, “We are what went wrong in Vietnam.” Had Lyndon Johnson managed to impose his will on the Vietnamese, Mr. Baritz reflected, “an entire culture would have been utterly destroyed out of the goodness of the American heart.”

One is constantly reading in the papers that Vladimir Putin is a threat to the Western order. Maybe. But the larger threat to the Western order is the hubris of those who run it.

Fighting a war based on values requires good values. At a bare minimum it requires an agreement on the values being spread, and the United States is further from such agreement than it has ever been in its history — further, even, than it was on the eve of the Civil War. At times it seems there are no national principles, only partisan ones, with each side convinced that the other is trying not just to run the government but also to capture the state.

Until some new consensus emerges, President Biden is misrepresenting his country in presenting it as stable and unified enough to commit to *anything*. Ukrainians are learning this at a steep cost.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/09/opinion/emmanuel-todd-decline-west.html>