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The Empire Crumbles: Part I—The Big Picture

In the wee hours of Monday, January 19, US president Donald Trump sent a now-infamous text message to the prime minister of Denmark (full text and analysis [here](#)):

“Considering your Country decided not to give me the Nobel Peace Prize for having stopped 8 Wars PLUS, I no longer feel an obligation to think purely of Peace, although it will always be predominant, but can now think about what is good and proper for the United States of America. . . . The World is not secure unless we have Complete and Total Control of Greenland. Thank you!”

Trump’s brief, belligerent message underscores a stark reality: one man is causing an acceleration of civilizational collapse.

Only hours later, at the annual gathering of world political and financial leaders at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, [a general sense of fear and dread](#) enveloped the proceedings. Even Trump’s half-hearted announcement that he wouldn’t use force to acquire Greenland couldn’t lift the gloom. The most memorable speech was that of [Canadian prime minister Carney](#), who began by saying:

“Today, I’ll talk about the rupture in the world order, the end of a nice story and the beginning of a brutal reality where geopolitics among the great powers is not subject to any constraints. . . . But let’s be clear-eyed about where this leads. A world of fortresses will be poorer, more fragile and less sustainable. . . .”

Systems scientists have been [warning](#) for decades that the current growth-based world economic order is [unsustainable](#), and that it [will inevitably become smaller and more simplified](#) during the remainder of the 21st century. This downsizing is likely to be messy and sometimes violent. Meanwhile, observers who focus on geopolitics have argued that the US, which built a global empire during the 20th century, is already [showing signs of decline](#) in several respects, and that [China is poised](#) to become the [next global superpower](#), if only briefly (that is, until the viability of global superpowers is itself outworn).

What is surprising is that this unraveling of the old order is accelerating so

suddenly—and doing so largely thanks to just one man. During the last couple of decades, [experts on societal collapse](#) discussed whether the “[Great Unraveling](#)” would be a slow erosion over decades or a fast disintegration over mere years. The latest evidence (including Trump’s Greenland text) tips the scales toward a faster collapse scenario.

Since this shift is being driven largely by Donald Trump, it’s natural to wonder whether international calm could be restored simply by shunting him aside. There is, after all, growing concern over Trump’s health. (His sleepiness during daytime, his slurred speech, and his frequent frustrated fumbling for the correct word—in his Davos speech he called Greenland “Iceland” four times—have raised questions about his fitness for the job). The US Constitution provides two methods for removing an unfit president: impeachment, and the invocation of the Twenty-fifth Amendment. Few informed observers of the American political scene expect either of these remedies to be implemented soon. Even if they were, Trump’s actions in the past year have irrevocably undermined stability in the US and globally. If his second presidency were to end tomorrow, Trump likely will have had as decisive an influence on history as pivotal world leaders like Churchill, FDR, Lenin, Hitler, or Stalin.

In this article we’ll explore how and why the march toward collapse is hastening, and what this trend has to do with Trump’s failure to understand social power. We’ll also explore what individuals can do in response to increasing signs of societal instability.

Three Elements—and Three Tools—of Social Power

The conclusions about Trump and accelerating societal unraveling stated above are rooted in my studies of the nature of power (see my book [Power: Limits and Prospects for Human Survival](#) and its related limited-run [podcast](#)). Every large society, from ancient kingdoms to modern industrial empires, has had to master three elements of *social power*—i.e., the ability to get other people to do things. The essential problem for would-be leaders of large societies is to enlist the populace to fight wars, build pyramids (or other significant structures and institutions), and increase economic activity. But what motivates people? Typically, they respond to coercion, enticements, and persuasion. If these are the three *elements* of social power, then it follows that the three main *tools* of social power are weapons, money, and communication technologies. In the book I trace the development of these tools, and the social consequences of their progressive development and use.

In *Power* I also point out that there are two basic types of social power—vertical and horizontal. Vertical power is top-down, exercised through threats and punishments: “you must do this, or else,” or “if you do this, I’ll give you that.” Horizontal power is mutual and cooperative: “we can do this together”; it arises through inspiration and negotiation. Democracies tend to rely more on horizontal social power, and autocracies more on vertical power; but durable large societies seem to demand both.

Trump seems reflexively to rely solely on vertical social power—the use of threats and bribes. With such means, he has taken control of the Republican party, won the presidency twice, and dominated Congress to the point that it has become virtually inert. He has been successful largely because horizontal

power relationships in the US have been [under increasing strain](#) during the last few decades for [several reasons](#), notably fast-rising economic inequality. From one perspective, his achievements are remarkable. Trump *seems* to understand power better than any other leader on the national stage. But his understanding of power is one-dimensional.

Trump seems profoundly ignorant of, or indifferent to, horizontal power. He has squandered the goodwill of allies and needlessly created international enemies. Again, [Carney at Davos](#):

“The multilateral institutions on which the middle powers have relied—the WTO, the UN, the COP—the architecture, the very architecture of collective problem solving are under threat. And as a result, many countries are drawing the same conclusions: that they must develop greater strategic autonomy, in energy, food, critical minerals, in finance and supply chains. . . . Call it what it is—a system of intensifying great power rivalry, where the most powerful pursue their interests, using economic integration as coercion.”

Even authoritarian nations, if they’re to outlive their leader, need buy-in from citizens and allies. Chinese citizens, for example, expect stability and predictability while rapid economic growth improves their economic prospects. They also know that they will face severe penalties if they speak out against the regime, and they (mostly) willingly comply. Americans, however, thanks to Trump’s poor understanding of power, can now expect much less stability and predictability amid economic stagnation or even reversal. And many will be increasingly unwilling to comply.

Vertical Power Alone Is Fragile

Trump’s deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller recently [told CNN’s Jake Tapper](#),

“. . . [Y]ou can talk all you want about international niceties and everything else, but we live in a world, in the real world . . . that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power. These are the iron laws of the world.”

Trump is not the first world leader to rely almost exclusively on vertical social power. History is replete with authoritarian regimes and tyrants. Here’s an excerpt from a 3,000-year-old cuneiform text from the Assyrian Empire:

“I am Tiglath Pileser the powerful king, the supreme King of Lashanan; King of the four regions, King of all Kings, Lord of Lords, the supreme Monarch of all Monarchs, the illustrious chief who under the auspices of the Sun god, being armed with the scepter and girt with the girdle of power over mankind, rules over all the people of Bel; the mighty Prince whose praise is blazoned forth among the Kings. . . .”

Pileser sounds positively Trumpian.

But vertical social power, on its own, often tends to lead to revolution, coup d’état, assassination, or war. Some historical authoritarian dynasties lasted

centuries (China offers [several examples](#)). However, the lifetime of many modern authoritarian regimes has been brief (for example, [Pol Pot](#) ruled Cambodia for only four years). Concentrating the power of the state in one man often makes the glue that holds the nation together more brittle. What does the future hold for Russia after Putin? Why is the post-Gaddafi regime in Libya so frail? Strongmen tend to leave power vacuums in their wake, along with weakened social institutions. The fall of a strongman doesn't always make way for a vibrant democracy; more often, it leads to chaos and a string of other short-term strongmen. In the case of Trump, the strongman is already old and (in [many observers'](#) opinions) infirm. He's [not overwhelmingly popular](#), and his likely successors are even less so. The inevitable end of Trump's rule, whether it occurs in days or years, will leave the US far more polarized and unruly than it was in 2016 when he was first elected.

Internationally, the US system of alliances that was patiently built over seven decades has not adapted well to Trump's style of threats and bullying. When we see the military of Canada (*CANADA??!!*) [modeling war plans](#) for inflicting maximum casualties on US troops in the event of an invasion, it's fair to conclude that old alliances are coming unglued fast. And that means global peril for both peace and trade. Trump is not a solely American problem.

Power Tools as Engines of Destruction

In Donald Trump's hands, the perennial tools of power are becoming engines of destruction.

- *Weapons and coercion:* From the earliest kingdoms to today's modern states, it is men with weapons who have conquered or defended territory and countered domestic unrest. Trump's use of the military, and threats of its use, are not just turning away allies, but also presenting his officers with [intractable moral and strategic problems](#). Meanwhile, he is deploying troops to US cities against the wishes of governors and mayors. The possible results are explored in an article by Claire Finkelstein ominously titled "[We Ran High-Level US Civil War Simulations. Minnesota Is Exactly How They Start.](#)" Finkelstein writes: "The core danger we identified is now emerging: a violent confrontation between state and federal military forces in a major American city."
- *Money and enticements:* All organized societies gather and exert social power through their control of currencies and trade. Early in his second term, Trump announced hefty tariffs on imports from nearly all nations. While he has waffled on the percentage amount of those tariffs, they are still in effect and having a chilling effect on global commerce. In April, in response to tariffs, Canadian prime minister Carney [announced](#) that the 80-year period of American economic leadership was over. The US dollar, which has been the world's [reserve currency](#) since 1946, is now increasingly [perceived as toxic](#). A stampede to ditch the dollar would impoverish all who are invested in it; instead, countries seem to be [quietly exiting dollar-denominated holdings](#). The inevitable result will be a decline in the value of the dollar and in US living standards.

- *Communication technologies and persuasion:* From the invention of writing in ancient kingdoms to the spread of social media and AI deepfakes in the present, communications tools have been used to induce large numbers of people to think and behave in ways leaders (or “influencers”) want them to. Inspiration, threats, promises, and warnings motivate voting, fighting, and buying. Democracies typically value science and unfettered fact-based journalism. Autocracies usually spew propaganda. The Trump administration has been labeled a [tabloid presidency](#) by Timothy L. O’Brien, who worked with Trump for the 2006 biography, *TrumpNation*, and who compares the president’s leadership style to tabloid magazines like the *Weekly World News*, with its focus on “dubious,” “trashy,” and “lunatic” stories designed to “knock readers back on their heels.” The administration has [attacked mainstream news outlets](#) that have been critical of it, sometimes employing the government’s regulatory powers as a cudgel. Trump’s [false claims are so frequent](#) that professional fact-checkers are employed by mainstream print and broadcast news organizations solely to spot, count, and refute them. Meanwhile, through a combination of verbal threats and funding cuts, the Trump administration is [assaulting](#) science, medicine, culture, and education. For example, the administration [no longer gathers or publishes information about climate change](#), including both raw data and scientific research.

What to Do?

As I explained at some length in a [recent article](#) (which includes lots of resources and advice), *local action to build community resilience* is the antidote to national and global unraveling. Notice the persistent bonds of horizontal power holding your community together and engage in activities that build social ties. Strengthen local institutions, from credit unions to food co-ops. Identify and participate in international networks of trust and mutual aid, such as the [Global Democracy Coalition](#). And [learn from people in other parts of the world](#) who have lived through authoritarian takeovers or successfully opposed them.

Build community resilience wherever you are. My organization, Post Carbon Institute, has produced [books, articles, reports, and podcasts](#)—as well as [webinars](#) and an [online course](#)—to help, and there are [other organizations](#) working along complementary lines. Our friends at Shareable have developed a fantastic set of guides ([Mutual Aid 101](#)) for anyone interested in starting a mutual aid initiative in their own community.

Collapse is accelerating. So must our efforts to build personal and community resilience. Don’t cower in front of your screen. Get out and join with others in projects to make your town stronger and more socially and environmentally sustainable.

As I’m writing this essay, national events are spiraling toward chaos and human tragedy. In Part II, I hope to address the US national political crisis, and [potential resilience-building responses](#), in greater depth.

The Empire Crumbles Part II: Creative Dissidence and Mutual Aid

[Part I of this article](#) argued that the world is now crossing a threshold from decades of growth and increasing integration to decades of economic shrinkage and political breakdown. This shift will create stresses that extend in scale from ecosystems and international relations down to households and individuals. Everyone will be personally—and likely profoundly—impacted by the [polycrisis](#).

There are three components to this tectonic shift: environmental, economic, and political. It's useful to think of this in terms of *disasters*, e.g. natural disasters, economic calamities, and government repression or civil war.

Every disaster is unique, but some general observations apply. When a disaster happens, our normal sense of time is interrupted and our priorities get scrambled. Suddenly, nothing matters but the immediate necessities of escaping harm and helping others to safety. People's attitudes tend to be sober, purposeful, and helpful; hysteria is rare. Everyone's implicit goal is to get back to something approximating normal. Importantly, disasters also tend to evoke a similar community-minded response in people: at least in the short run, they work together creatively to meet one another's basic needs.

Environmental disasters are sometimes the easiest for victims to mentally comprehend, though not always to recover from. After floods, fires, earthquakes, and chemical spills, immediate response efforts are led by the affected region and surrounding communities, while longer-term recovery typically depends on national governmental assistance. Neighbors pull together to make sure all are safe (see [this account](#) of my experience during the 2017 wildfires in my hometown of Santa Rosa, California).

Economic disasters can linger for years and can scar a generation, as occurred during and in the wake of the Great Depression of the 1930s, and in the [currency collapses](#) that have plagued several nations over the last century. The Global Financial Crisis of 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic, though relatively short in duration, saw large-scale failure of businesses and disappearance of jobs. Again, it's typically up to local communities to help meet people's immediate needs until the national government can intervene to provide aid and stability.

Political disasters (including civil conflicts) are often different in significant ways. In some instances, they turn neighbor against neighbor, or communities against their national government. Government may hurt rather than help; indeed, government may be out to get you. Severe political conflicts can therefore be more psychologically devastating than environmental or economic disasters. But, as we will see, they can also evoke extraordinary levels of community solidarity and mutual aid.

[The Great Unraveling](#) of environmental and social stability will feature all three kinds of disasters. Currently, global breakdown is being accelerated primarily by an ongoing and worsening political calamity in the United States. In this article, we'll go to the frontlines of conflict in Minneapolis to see how people are responding to a violent—even deadly—government-imposed crisis. As the Trump regime [promises to end](#) its surge of federal

agents in that city, perhaps it's a good time to reflect: what have we learned that might be helpful in future crises?

A City Under Siege

Recent events in Minneapolis and surrounding communities are being widely reported and [analyzed](#). They've even been iconified in a [Bruce Springsteen song](#). Our purpose here is to see what we can glean that's relevant for the larger project of surviving the Great Unraveling.

First, some background facts. Following deployments of troops and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents to Los Angeles, Chicago, and Portland, on January 6, 2026 president Donald Trump sent nearly 3,000 ICE and Border Patrol agents to Minneapolis—a medium-sized city of fewer than half a million residents. There is widespread speculation that the ICE surge is politically motivated, as Minneapolis is a bright blue* town in a blue state whose governor, Tim Walz, was the Democratic vice-presidential candidate in 2024. The current massive deployment of federal agents dwarfs the city's police force of 600 officers.

Trump and his officials have stated that the purpose of the ICE surge is to remove “the worst of the worst”—undocumented immigrants who are thieves, rapists, and murderers. However, officials have imposed [unrealistic arrest quotas](#) on agents, requiring them to round up more undocumented people than can be vetted for criminality—as well as [US citizens and legal immigrants with green cards or refugee status](#). The Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, a nonprofit research organization, has [found](#) that roughly three-quarters of individuals currently detained by ICE [do not have a criminal record](#), and that many who do were convicted of only minor offenses, like traffic violations.

Federal agents have focused their attention on places where undocumented people are likely to be found: restaurants, Home Depot stores, schools, and churches. Often, agents simply grab anyone who looks brown-skinned. They sometimes break into homes [without warrants](#) and effectively kidnap the residents, who are then [sent to makeshift detention centers](#); family members may have [no idea](#) where their loved ones are for many days.

As a result, many immigrants and non-immigrants alike feel as though they are living under [occupation](#) by a hostile army. People are terrified, businesses are closed, workers are staying home, rent payments are falling behind, and children are not going to school.

Resistance Breeds Solidarity

The response of the people of Minneapolis and its surrounding suburbs has been peaceful but organized and insistent. Neighbors are protecting neighbors.

Minnesota has a longstanding [tradition of mutual aid](#) and of neighborhood organizing, which intensified after [the killing of George Floyd by a police officer in 2020](#). Residents are making a disciplined effort to avoid violence, even when protesters are being attacked. They've created a [leaderless cell-](#)

[based pattern of organization](#), communicating through Signal (an encrypted social media app). Participants use pseudonyms, and every effort is made to maintain anonymity.

Actions undertaken in response to the specific needs of the community fall under four broad headings: documenting the actions of ICE agents, protesting their presence, protecting vulnerable people, and helping meet those people's daily needs for food, shelter, schooling, and doctor visits. Often these actions require courage and creativity, as when massed members of the group [Singing Resistance](#) walk frozen streets, raising the spirits of fellow community members with songs of solidarity, grief, and rage.

I recently reached out to a friend who lives near Minneapolis to ask about their experience in resistance networks there. The story of what is happening there is best told by someone who is in the thick of it themselves, so I am giving over the remainder of this article to their words. This is an edited transcript of the comments from my friend, who wishes to remain anonymous:

"My first encounter with ICE was in mid-December. It was a very cold day. I saw construction workers trapped on the roof of a house they were building, and ICE had surrounded it. Very quickly, observers started gathering and blowing whistles. The workers on the roof weren't prepared to be up there for a long time, so observers were trying to throw them blankets and handwarmers. In the end, one of the workers had to be taken to the hospital for possible frostbite.

Later, I got involved in response efforts. We have ICE agents staying in hotels where I live, and there are some nicer restaurants that they like to frequent. There were reports of ICE outside one local restaurant. We talked with employees, who said there's a table of ICE agents eating. Then we were able to identify a car of ICE agents outside, and people started surrounding the car and honking. This was before any of the observers had been killed [i.e., [Renee Good](#) and [Alex Pretti](#), both gunned down by ICE/Border Patrol agents], so I think we were a little bolder at that point. One man even got out of his car and walked right up to the ICE vehicle and yelled at them. Then the local police came, but the cops usually say they can't intervene.

On another occasion, there was a report of ICE agents outside a [Mexican] restaurant. I was the second observer on the scene; there was already a lady there with her megaphone, making noise. We had identified three ICE vehicles in the parking lot. So, we started driving around trying to get their plates so we could have them in our records and verify they were in fact federal agents. The goal was to make enough noise to hopefully get the agents to leave. We're honking and flashing lights at them, and they're flashing lights at us. They were obviously irritated. Within 20 minutes, between 15 and 20 additional cars showed up to observe and show support for the cornered workers. One by one, they slowly left, and community members helped the workers who were trapped inside to get

home safely in cars that weren't identifiable to them.

We've got a couple of contacts who live in big apartment buildings and who are vulnerable, and they've been go-betweens for fundraising. We've been able to fundraise to help people pay rent. It's a domino effect: people are worried about going to work. They stop going to work, and restaurants temporarily close because a lot of their workers are vulnerable. As a result, they can't earn money, and they're at risk of losing their job.

We get specific calls like, hey, we have this family that needs this or that, and people can raise their hands either to fund that, or to drop it off to the liaison who then distributes it, all to keep people's information private.

The ICE agents are adapting all the time. They're changing up their cars, and they're switching plates. There have been occasions where they are driving around without any plates at all. They were all wearing masks, and now a lot of them are wearing plain clothes to try and blend in more. But as they adapt, we do too."

I think the community building going on has been impressive because, unlike what the media says, none of us have been paid a cent for this and never expect to be. At a protest the other night, one guy said, 'There's no amount that anybody could pay us to *not* show up for our neighbors.' I don't know why people can't comprehend that people would be doing this just because they care about the well-being of others.

It's been an evolution. As people get more involved, they see the different pieces of the puzzle, and then they can contribute. The biggest thing for the people who've been leading it longer is that they're getting burnt out. Many involved already have full-time jobs, and they're also putting in full-time hours for this effort. So, the longer-term observers are keen to get more people in leadership roles so that the work can be distributed. And the ability to do that has come from just building trust with people you initially may only know anonymously through the phone. That trust comes from showing up repeatedly, putting in the time and effort, and vouching for each other.

This is a community effort. I don't think anyone is trying to be recognized for what they're doing. Everyone involved knows that this is the right thing to be doing. There are a lot of people out there, especially in our government, who try to spin what's going on here as being terroristic in intent, or that we're just trying to interfere with government operations or hurt people. But that is so antithetical to what anyone here is actually trying to do.

There's risk involved, and the distributed leadership model helps diminish that because then individuals can't be targeted as easily. But I know some of my local elected representatives have been

involved, and they've been subject to threats, because they're public and they're not hiding their identity.

Even when the imminent threat of people constantly being taken dies down, there's going to be more need for community organizing and mutual aid. And so, hopefully, this is cementing a framework that we can continue to expand upon as needs in the community grow through whatever challenge may arise. I think if anything positive is going to come from all this, it's the fact that people are going to be more connected and more willing to help their neighbors.

Having these federal agents here and knowing my community is under extreme surveillance is unfamiliar and infuriating to me, but I know it is something like what many marginalized groups have contended with for decades or centuries.

It is increasingly difficult to leave the house and drive somewhere without viewing every car with suspicion. We wave and smile as I pass through vulnerable neighborhoods, to show we are here to help and not harm. There is a sense that we are always 'this close' to an agent feeling justified to smash in our windows or detain us for simply practicing the rights the US Constitution entitles us to. We fear what may come next, what the retribution may be. It is frustrating knowing that if we call the cops with concerns regarding the illegal or unethical behaviors of these agents, we will be met with no response.

But there is a power in this resistance, a feeling of deep connection and kinship to those around you, even if you just met or only know their online alias. You know you are on the same side of this battle for basic human rights. There's a feeling that so many people have your back, even if they have never met you. Seeing extreme bravery from regular people encourages your own commitment.

The biggest feeling of all, though, is the feeling that none of us are doing enough. Despite our efforts, people are still being taken from their families every day to potentially disappear in the system.

The other frustrating thing, to me, is that this shouldn't have to be our priority. It wouldn't be if our United States government were set up in a way that wasn't so focused on exploiting and 'othering' people for money and greed. We could be putting all this energy toward trying to build a more sustainable world rather than just protecting people from being abducted. But this is the imminent threat right now."

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Footnote:

* In US politics, blue is the color of the Democratic Party and red is the color of the Republican party.