

The Dog and the Tail: Reflections on the Moral Fate of Nations

*A Meditation on the Moral Anatomy of Decline —
Between a Time to Die and a Time to Live*

By Lev Neymotin

Author's Preface: The Conversation That Sparked This Essay

This reflection began not in an academic setting, but in a long and often weary conversation with a friend — an intelligent, liberal man whose education and moral seriousness I respect. He has a habit of speaking in absolutes. One day, he said to me, flatly: “Trump is a fascist.”

It was not the statement itself that troubled me — political hyperbole is an old American art form — but the certainty with which it was delivered, as though the world could be divided neatly between the enlightened and the damned. That conversation stayed with me, not only because I felt compelled to defend Trump from an unfair and simplistic label, but because I was struck by how easily moral passion turns into moral blindness, and how quickly our public speech has shifted from reasoning to denunciation.

I tried to steer our talks away from rage and toward reflection, toward the idea that the decay of a nation cannot be blamed on one man, one party, or one ideology. It is we, the people — all of us — who bear the responsibility for the condition of our civilization. We have built the mirrors that now reflect our divisions. The leaders we fear or idolize are symptoms of our own fragmentation.

And yet, in the quiet of that realization, a darker question began to haunt me. Perhaps we are living through a moment akin to the title of one of Erich Maria Remarque's novels: “A Time to Live and a Time to Die.” Many powerful societies before us — Rome, Byzantium, the Soviet Union — also believed their longevity guaranteed. Why should the United States be an exception?

Our common culture, once the invisible glue of shared meaning, is dissolving. We are becoming a federation of tribes — racial, ethnic, ideological, digital — each guarding its identity as if it were a fortress. Even religion, once a source of restraint, has become a battleground. And our optimism — that instinctive American faith in self-correction — feels thinner with every passing year.

This essay is my way of confronting that despair. It is neither partisan nor nostalgic. It is a meditation on responsibility — on the moral anatomy of decline, and the possibility, however faint, of renewal.

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I. The Tail That Wags the Dog

We speak often of governments as if they were the masters of destiny — capable of shaping nations with decrees, policies, and programs. But history teaches a subtler truth: governments rarely lead. They follow.

A society's rulers, its revolutions, and its despots are not imported from outside; they are drawn, like iron to a magnet, from the moral field of the people themselves. When the soul of a civilization weakens, its institutions grow brittle. When the conscience of its citizens falters, even the finest constitution becomes parchment without power.

The dog — society — moves by instinct and appetite, and the tail — government — follows, wagging to its rhythm. When the dog is diseased, the tail cannot cure it. It only thrashes more violently.

II. The Fragility of Law Without Virtue

Modern nations, especially those proud of their constitutions, imagine themselves safe because they have laws. But law is only the external skeleton of a moral organism; it cannot stand when the flesh beneath decays.

The American founders understood this with almost biblical clarity. John Adams warned that “our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people.” He was not pleading for theocracy; he was stating a civic physics: freedom requires self-restraint.

When citizens cease to govern their passions, governments must do it for them. And since the state has only one instrument — force — the result is inevitable: the more corrupt the citizen, the more tyrannical the government must become.

Moral anarchy breeds political authoritarianism, which in turn deepens moral anarchy. That cycle — now visible in modern democracies — is the true engine of decline.

III. The Loss of the Shared Story

Every healthy civilization is bound by an invisible narrative — a common understanding of what life is for. This does not require uniformity, only the recognition that some truths must be shared. For two centuries, Americans believed — or at least pretended to believe — in the same foundational myths: freedom, fairness, individual dignity, and the possibility of self-betterment.

But these myths are fading. We have become a nation without a single language of meaning. Our children grow up fluent in technology but illiterate in belonging. We are divided not just

politically, but existentially: urban vs. rural, secular vs. religious, global vs. local. Our television screens, once national campfires, have become digital mirrors reflecting our contempt for each other.

A civilization cannot endure on contempt. It requires memory, gratitude, and the will to see in one's neighbor not a threat but a fragment of the same story.

When those shared fictions die, democracy becomes a polite war of tribes. Facts are no longer shared; they are weaponized. History becomes a courtroom. And irony — the last refuge of intelligence — turns corrosive, eating away at reverence itself.

IV. Religion and Its Substitutes

For millennia, religion held the line against our self-destructive impulses. It offered not only belief, but restraint. Now, in much of the modern world, that restraining force has faded — not because science disproved it, but because comfort replaced it. We outgrew the fear of hell and forgot the fear of ourselves.

In the vacuum, politics became our new faith. We now divide humanity not into saints and sinners, but into progressives and reactionaries, patriots and traitors. Parties became churches; ideologies became gospels; leaders became messiahs — each promising salvation through victory. But political religion offers only what all idols offer: ecstasy followed by despair.

A society that worships power will eventually serve it. And when religion becomes a political instrument — as we now see across continents and creeds — it ceases to save.

V. When a Nation Forgets Why It Exists

Civilizations die not because their armies are defeated, but because they forget why they deserved to win. They crumble when comfort replaces purpose, cynicism replaces faith, and rights are remembered but duties forgotten.

America, for all her noise and energy, no longer agrees on why she exists. We still recite the vocabulary of freedom but have forgotten the grammar of duty. Our schools teach success, not sacrifice; our politics rewards outrage, not restraint. Even our sense of national identity — that elusive idea of American-ness — is dissolving into fragments of grievance and pride.

A nation is not held together by highways, GDP, or weapons. It is held together by meaning — by the belief that life within it has moral weight. When that conviction is lost, borders become mere lines on a map and freedom degenerates into consumption.

Every empire that ever fell — Rome, Byzantium, Spain, the Soviet Union — perished first in spirit, long before barbarians or budgets destroyed it. America's danger lies not in foreign

enemies, but in forgetting the covenant that once made her exceptional: the belief that liberty demands virtue.

VI. The Mirror of Politics

In this light, our obsession with labeling leaders as “fascist,” “socialist,” “populist,” or “savior” misses the deeper point. These figures do not create divisions; they reveal them. They are mirrors, not makers.

When half the nation worships a leader and the other half demonizes him, it is not the leader who is dangerous — it is the hunger he satisfies. The need for certainty. The thirst for belonging. The relief of moral surrender.

In that sense, my friend who calls Trump a fascist and I are not adversaries but fellow witnesses to the same unease. He sees danger embodied in the man; I see danger in the widening gulf that makes such judgment feel inevitable. Both of us fear the same decay — but from opposite directions.

The leaders we fight over are merely reflections of what we have already become.

VII. The Way Forward: Renewal from Below

No decree from above will heal this. Nations are saved the way people are saved — one conscience at a time. The cure begins not in legislatures, but in living rooms; not in think tanks, but in hearts that rediscover the simple dignity of truth, decency, and reverence.

Every moral revival in history began small. Monks in the ruins of Rome preserving wisdom. Citizens in dark regimes refusing to lie. Parents teaching children that freedom without virtue is a kind of slavery.

We must learn again to govern the only territory that cannot be conquered: the soul.

VIII. The Prophetic View

If our civilization continues to drift without moral compass, no political system — left or right — will survive the storm ahead. Technology will amplify vanity, anger, and deceit faster than wisdom can restrain them. Nations will fragment into digital tribes; truth will dissolve in the acid of relativism; freedom will become a noise too loud to hear meaning.

And yet — the end is not inevitable. Every collapse carries within it the seed of renewal. When enough people rediscover the courage to live as if truth still matters, the wheel turns again. A moral minority — quiet, steadfast, unyielding — can outlast an empire.

IX. The Final Reckoning

Yes, it matters who governs, and yes, leaders can wound or uplift a people. But the deeper question is always the same: Who are we now?

If we are honest, we will admit that our political chaos is not the cause of our moral decay — it is its reflection. So the prophecy is not one of doom but of consequence: If we choose cynicism over conviction, consumption over conscience, we will get the leaders we deserve. If we choose meaning over comfort, humility over hubris, truth over tribe — then no tyrant will find fertile soil here.

The future of our civilization, as always, waits not in Washington, Brussels, or Beijing, but in the ungoverned country between every human heart and its God.

Afterword: The Hope of Many Worlds

This essay was not meant as a call to rebellion or as a sermon of despair. If our age feels like twilight, it is because the light that once unified us is scattered, not extinguished. The dream of a single, homogenous culture may be gone for good — but perhaps that is not tragedy, only transformation.

Every civilization eventually learns that unity cannot mean uniformity. The task before us is not to erase difference, but to civilize coexistence — to rediscover respect without agreement, to build islands of meaning within seas of diversity. The future, if it is to endure, will belong to those who can inhabit plurality without hatred.

If there is to be a “happy exit from the gloom,” it will not come through conquest of ideas, but through renewal of character. When individuals choose honesty over ideology, compassion over contempt, and curiosity over certainty, a quiet peace becomes possible even among a divided people.

Let that be our modest hope: not the rebirth of a perfect union, but the recovery of a humane one — a civilization at peace with its many worlds, bound not by sameness, but by shared decency and the unshakable dignity of being human.

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