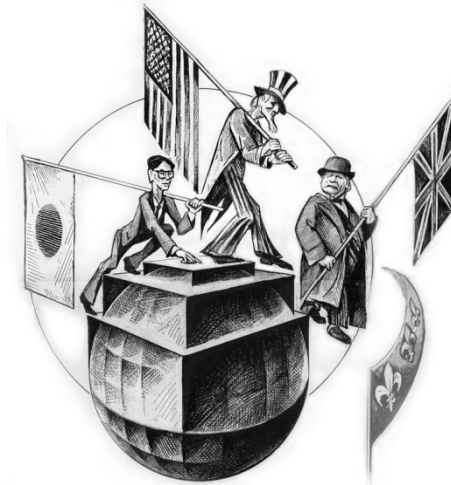


# The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers

(1987)

by Paul Kennedy



From *The Rise and Fall*:

The relative strengths of the leading nations in world affairs never remain constant, principally because of the uneven rate of growth among different societies and of the technological and organizational breakthroughs which bring a greater advantage to one society than to another. For example, the coming of the long-range gunned sailing ship and the rise of the Atlantic trades after 1500 was not uniformly beneficial to all the states of Europe-it boosted some much more than others. In the same way, the later development of steam power and of the coal and metal resources upon which it relied massively increased the relative power of certain nations, and thereby decreased the relative power of others. Once their productive capacity was enhanced, countries would normally find it easier to sustain the burdens of paying for large scale armaments in peacetime and of maintaining and supplying large armies and fleets in wartime. It sounds crudely mercantilistic to express it this way, but wealth is usually needed to underpin military power, and military power is usually needed to acquire and protect wealth. If, however, too large a proportion of the state's resources is diverted from wealth creation and allocated instead to military purposes, then that is likely to lead to a weakening of national power over the longer term. In the same way, if a state overextends itself strategically-by, say, the conquest of extensive territories or the waging of costly wars-it runs the risk that the potential benefits from external expansion may be outweighed by the great expense of it all-a dilemma which becomes acute if the nation concerned has entered a period of relative economic decline. The history of the rise and later fall of the leading countries in the Great Power system since the advance of western Europe in the sixteenth century-that is, of nations such as Spain, the Netherlands, France, the British Empire, and currently the United States-shows a very significant correlation over the longer term between productive and revenue-raising capacities on the one hand and military strength on the other (xv-xvi; First Vintage edition; see also p. 539).

## **Summary of some of Kennedy's points**

There have been a few times in recent centuries, when one powerful European state was trying to dominate Europe. Spain and Austria were under one (Habsburg) monarchy in the early 1500s, which was also ruling southern Italy, with nominal control over a German confederation, as well as the wealthy Spanish American empire. They fought France, Britain, the Dutch, Sweden, and various German states. This struggle lasted off and on from 1521 to 1659. The second major attempt at European domination was that of Louis XIV of France. This took place from 1701 to 1713. France and Spain fought Britain, the Netherlands, and many German states. The third major attempt was by revolutionary France, from the 1790s until Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815. France during those wars fought Britain, Austria, Prussia (a very powerful German state), and Russia.

One major theme stands out in each of these phases: the power of a coalition. Each Great Power trying to dominate Europe was opposed by a coalition of smaller, weaker states. But when these states united into a coalition, their economic and military power was much greater than the Great Power that they fought. Even later attempts (Germany in World War II, and the USSR against NATO) show the power of economic strength in a coalition, as well as problems due to overextension.

The economic strength of wartime opponents is very important, as it reflected not only the ability to manufacture ships and weapons, but the ability to pay for them, as well as the armies and navies that used them. These wars could easily cripple an economy. Using the Habsburg rulers of Spain and Austria as an example, one campaign in Germany in 1552 cost the Emperor Charles V 2.5 million ducats—ten times the royal taxes from the American silver mines. In 1557, both France and Spain were forced to declare bankruptcy. The Armada that sailed from Spain to attack England in 1588 cost 10 million ducats (by then, royal taxes of American silver were 2 million ducats a year). In 1596, and again in 1607, Spain defaulted on its debt, which was now 100 million ducats, and two thirds of royal revenues were going to pay the interest alone on this debt.

## **Criticisms:**

1. Kennedy's idea that the strongest economies usually win major wars suggests the construction of alliances and coalitions. It is not simply "What country has the wealthiest economy?" but "Who can weave together the wealthiest coalitions?"
2. His analysis (published in 1987) of current rising and falling powers was flat out wrong. He saw the US as falling faster than the USSR was, but still spoke of a bipolar world (a world with two Great Powers) for the future.
3. He realized that US military spending has gone down since the 1950s, but didn't explain how this would still drain the US economy; he insisted on seeing the US as an overextended Great Power, but not as a leader of a very wealthy coalition; and he ignored cases where military spending did not drain an economy at all; and when nations had much economic and military power after prolonged periods of military spending.