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## **Trump or not, US meltdown could be inevitable**



The idea that we can predict the collapse of societies is hotly contested — but that doesn't mean we can't learn from it

**Gillian Tett** YESTERDAY

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When the [former US president Donald Trump](#) was found liable of the sexual abuse of journalist E Jean Carroll last month, some observers might have hoped this would make him less appealing to American voters. Not so. If you look at a Quinnipiac poll released in late May, Trump now has the backing of 56 per cent of Republicans for the 2024 race, over twice that of his nearest rival, Florida governor [Ron DeSantis](#).

Admittedly, some 56 per cent of the voters surveyed say they disapprove of Trump, but a similar proportion also disapprove of President Joe Biden. A Pew survey also suggests that 56 per cent of Americans currently think that the US cannot solve its own problems, up from 41 per cent last June. To top it off, the survey finds that “roughly three-quarters of the public say they have little or no confidence in the wisdom of the American people in making political decisions, up from 62 per cent in 2021”.

What explains this level of dysfunction? We’re often told that US politics is in the grip of dark forces fed by political manipulation and Big Tech as misinformation undermines democracy. That may be partly true. However, for another view it is worth pondering some of the ideas advanced by [Peter Turchin](#), a biologist and complexity scientist who employs Big Data to study ecosystems. Applying those methods to analyse the rise and fall of complex societies is an approach he’s dubbed “cliodynamics”. Clio was the Greek muse of history.

Turchin uses reams of economic and sociological information from history to explore the cycles of political economies over thousands of years around the world. This led him to the conclusion that there is a fundamental pattern: an elite grabs power, then over time tries to protect that by grabbing more and more resources. That inevitably ends up leaving poor people even poorer (“popular immiseration”) and spawning an “over-production of the elite” — too many elites chasing too few roles — which, in turn, leads to extreme frustration, anxiety and in-fighting.

The result is usually a social explosion and political disintegration, with Turchin’s models suggesting that such structural shifts typically occur about every 100 years in complex societies. Even before Trump’s election in 2016, he predicted that the US and western Europe were destined for a “turbulent Twenties”.

Turchin's ideas are controversial. Twenty years ago his theory of empires, outlined in the book *Historical Dynamics*, provoked pushback from historians. "Sophisticated mathematics will not improve naive social theories," argued one critic. But with Trump trying to stage a return, Turchin is back too. His new book, *The End Times: Elites, Counter-Elites and the Path of Political Disintegration*, argues that the dynamics he predicted previously are only intensifying. Decades of falling real wages have had an impact, he says, as shown by the declining life expectancy data of poor Americans. Meanwhile, elite overproduction is surging, as the number of graduates explodes and competition for jobs gets ever more intense, fuelling insecurity and resentment at the 1 per cent, even among the top tier.

Indeed, when Turchin runs a cliodynamic model based on the past 60 years of economic and sociological US trends, his results suggest — even without factoring in other details about Trump and Biden — that "by 2020 both immiseration and elite overproduction . . . reach very high levels [in America]. The radicalisation curve starts to grow after 2010 and literally explodes during the 2020s. So does political violence." In this world, events such as the January 6 insurrection could just be foreshocks.

In plain English, this suggests that a figure such as Trump is a symptom, rather than the cause of the US's turmoil. The only way to shift this trajectory, based on the data, is to replay the New Deal policies of the 1930s and the immediate postwar years in the US, using redistribution to reduce inequality. In the 1950s, for example, the top rates of federal income tax in the US jumped to 90 per cent, compared with 7 per cent in 1913 or 37 per cent today.

Such calls would horrify many American elites, so much so that they might reject these forecasts out of hand or point out that relying on mechanistic models is dangerous. But Turchin is not the only contemporary Cassandra; even hedge-fund billionaire Ray Dalio, another believer in cyclical shifts, is warning that rising inequality could create social explosions.

So it would be foolish for US leaders to ignore Turchin. If nothing else, the concept of elite overproduction is a good way to explain why elite US education is now so costly, competitive and damaging for would-be elite kids and adults alike.

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