WHY GREAT STATES FAIL

Prepared for the 2026 James Corry Lecture in Political Studies,

Queen's University, March 5, 2026

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Draft January 10, 2026

Few of us at present see any way out of a baffling dilemma. Bigness and concentration of power seem to be the prerequisite for material advance and for the extension of liberating opportunity, and at the same time the enemy of other humane values.

James Corry, *The Changing Conditions of Politics*, 1963

The destinies of the world are in the hands of a giant with the limbs of an undergraduate, the emotions of a spinster, and the brain of a pea-hen.

Harold Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters*, 1964.

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1. ROGUE ELEPHANT

This is a book about great states and why they fail. It matters for people who live in great states—almost half the world's population—since their quality of life will clearly suffer if the political order is collapsing around them. The other half of the planet lives in smaller states like Canada that neighbour and trade with great states. These people also need to understand why great states fail, because life in small states is so heavily influenced by the caprices of their giant neighbours. When great states stumble, small states suffer too.

This is hardly news for Canadians. A half-century ago, Canada's prime minister, Pierre Trudeau, gave a speech at the National Press Club in Washington, DC. Trudeau had just visited the White House for talks with President Richard Nixon. He explained that Canada-US relations were never easy because the two countries were not evenly matched. The United States had ten times more people than Canada and its economy was eleven times larger. "Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant," Trudeau said. "No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, one is affected by every twitch and grunt."[1]

What Trudeau did not say is that the American elephant often was *not* friendly and even-tempered. In the early 1970s, Canada-US relations took a nasty turn. The

Nixon White House imposed tariffs on Canada and circulated a catalogue of "grievances" to be resolved before tariffs were removed.[2] More or less the same thing happened after Donald Trump re-entered the White House in 2025. In neither case was the outburst against Canada triggered by anything that Canada in particular had done. On the contrary, the White House was preoccupied with domestic problems: that is, with the challenges of holding a great state together. One side-effect of its internal woes was a more hostile and unpredictable policy toward neighbours and allies.

Let me back up and define some terms. A state, for political scientists and international lawyers, is a governmental system that is recognised as the sole legitimate authority within a defined territory. Canada is a state and so is the United States. There are about 195 states in the world today, most of them created after the crack-up of empires between 1917 and the 1970s. The United Nations, established in 1945, is a sort of clubhouse for states. The UN is built on the principle of sovereign equality—that all states "have equal rights and duties and are equal members of the international community."[3]

We are talking here about formal or juridical equality—equality in the eyes of international law. As a practical matter, states are obviously not equal at all. Consider the disparities in population. At one end of the spectrum are so-called micro-states: countries with less than a million people. About forty states, including countries like

Iceland and Guyana, fall in this category. At the other end of the spectrum are the behemoths—countries with more than 200 million people. There are just seven of these, but most people on earth live in one of them. The middle tier—neither micro-state nor behemoth—includes about 150 countries. Guatemala, with a population of about eighteen million, is a typically-sized country. Governing a country of eighteen million is hard, but not nearly as hard as governing a country that is twenty times more populous (like the United States) or almost eighty times more populous (like India or China).

My interest is in behemoths, precisely because I believe that they confront distinctive challenges in governance. As one political scientist observed a century ago: "Difference of scale produces a difference in kind."[4] I will also adjust my list of behemoths slightly. I include the United States, India, and China: the three most populous countries. But I also include the European Union—population 450 million—even though it is strictly a federation of states, not a state in itself. I see the EU as an emerging behemoth. It is becoming more statelike over time. And finally I include the Russian Federation, although it strictly belongs in the middle tier according to its current population of 143 million. Russia joins the list for historical reasons. Its predecessor the Soviet Union was unambiguously a behemoth until it cracked up in 1991. Some Western statesmen in the 1950s and the 1960s thought that it would soon overtake the United States.[5] We can

learn a lot about the challenges of behemoth-governance by looking at Soviet and Russian experience. If the EU is an emerging behemoth, Russia is a declining one.

Let me now switch terminology. Rather than talking about behemoths, I will talk about great states. I am inspired to use this term by the work of Professor Timothy Brook, a professor of Chinese history at the University of British Columbia. Professor Brook explains that Chinese emperors from the thirteenth to nineteenth century considered China to be a Great State—or rather, *the* Great State. China was not just great because of its massive territory and population. Chinese emperors believed that their state embodied a civilisational ideal: that is, a model of what a good society should look like. Greatness meant preeminence in world affairs too. Surrounding states were expected to remember their place and treat the Great State with respect.[6]

Although modern-day leaders of the People's Republic of China do not explicitly call it a Great State, in practice they think of it that way. President Xi Jinping said in 2023 that his aim was to build a "great modern socialist country" that leads the world in terms of strength and influence.[7] "Greatness isn't only a slogan for them," says another Canadian sinologist, Daniel Wang. "It's a full-on, life-or-death pursuit."[8] Zhang Wei-Wei, a writer whose work is favoured by President Xi, argues that China is simply too big and complicated to be compared with most other countries. He calls it a "civilisational

state," distinguished by "a super-large population, a super-vast territory, super-long traditions, [and] a super-rich culture."[9]

Modern-day Chinese leaders are not the only ones obsessed with greatness. For more than a decade, Donald Trump has campaigned to Make America Great Again. In 2025 he told Americans that their country would "soon be greater, stronger, and far more exceptional than ever before."[10] Ronald Reagan won the White House with the same slogan in 1980. The belief that the United States is distinct among countries, because of its values as well as its size and power, is hardwired in popular culture. "America is a nation with a mission," President George W. Bush said in 2004.[11] Its calling, according to Bush, is ending tyranny in the world.[12]

In the mid-twentieth century, Soviet leaders were equally confident in the greatness of their state and its world-historical mission of promoting socialism. "History is on our side," Premier Nikita Khrushchev warned Americans in 1956. "We will bury you."[13] That did not work out as expected. But Russia's current leader, Vladimir Putin, aspires to recover the status of a great state, if not with the same purpose. "Russia is not just a country," Putin explained in 2020, "It's really a separate civilisation."[14] Moreover, this civilisation—in Putin's view—encompasses not just Russia but people in next-door countries like Ukraine as well.

Putin sees an emerging world order dominated by a few great states like Russia. "There are not so many countries in the world today that have the good fortune to say they are sovereign," he said in 2007. "You can count them on your fingers: China, India, Russia and a few other countries. All other countries are to a large extent dependent either on each other or on bloc leaders. This is not a very pleasing situation, but it is my deep conviction that this is the reality today."[15] This view is shared by the Trump administration. Its 2025 national security strategy observes: "The outsized influence of larger, richer, and stronger nations is a timeless truth of international relations."[16]

Narendra Modi also describes India as a civilisational state, equal to China and performing the same role as a "pillar of stability" in its region.[17] Leaders of the European Union describe themselves similarly—if not exactly as a civilisational state, then certainly as a "top-tier geostrategic actor," vested with the mission of promoting values rooted in Europe's "spiritual and moral heritage" such as democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights.[18]

Smaller states take claims to greatness with a grain of salt. What great-state leaders construe as civilisation-spreading often seems like bullying to smaller neighbours. Of course, small states are careful about calling out this sort of behaviour. Finnish leaders dealing with Russians in the last century worked on the principle that frankness "was a luxury only the powerful could afford."[19] In 2018 Malaysia's prime minister, Mahathir

Mohamad, summarized his country's relationship with China this way: "We are a weak nation and China is a powerful nation, and powerful nations will do what they like."[20]

Still, there is something worse than hypocrisy, and that is unpredictability. Sometimes great states go rogue. They behave erratically for reasons that are difficult to discern. For small states, moments of erratic behaviour are especially dangerous. It is impossible to guess which way the elephant will go, and the risk of getting caught underfoot is large. This was the predicament that Canadians faced after the inauguration of President Donald Trump in January 2025. One commentator observed that Canadians found themselves living next to "a mentally unstable partner."[21] Another saw signs of "U.S. collective irrationality."[22] A third thought the American government was "out of control."[23] An American journalist described queries from Canadian colleagues in the months following the inauguration: "What is wrong with your country? What is going on over there?"[24]

This book responds to questions like these. I am not going to get into the particulars of how Donald Trump became president, or the immediate factors that drive his behaviour from one day to the next. There are other people better qualified to tell that story. I would like to step back and tell a broader story about the internal dynamics of all great states, including the United States.

My broad theme is that great states are not like other states. In this sense I agree with leaders like Trump, Modi, Xi, and Putin. But I have a different view about why great states are distinct. My argument is that they are, in an important sense, not great at all. On the contrary, they are delicate enterprises that are prone to crisis and collapse. Leaders of great states put on a show of strength, but in reality they struggle constantly to hold things together.

In all great states, leaders over decades have centralised power, with the expectation that this would bolster the strength and resilience of their systems. But this formula for governing great states has backfired. Centralisation has made the great states less robust and increased the odds that they will engage in erratic and dangerous behaviour. Canadians can see this happening in the United States today. The elephant has gone rogue and the rest of us must deal with the consequences.

2. GREATNESS NEVER LASTS

Every year a Washington-based think tank, the Fund for Peace, publishes a health check of almost all the world's states. The Fund gives each state a score based on its capacity to maintain order, deliver essential services, and win the support of the people that it governs.[1] Any state that does poorly at these tasks is described as fragile. In the most recent version of its Fragile States Index, the Fund sorted 179 countries into categories, with those that are dangerously fragile at the bottom, and those that are very stable at the top.[2]

Canada does well in the Fragile States Index. It is rated as one of the most stable countries in the world. The other countries at the top of the list are not surprising. They are mainly wealthy democracies in Europe, along with Australia and New Zealand, petro-states like Qatar and Kuwait, and the so-called Asian Tigers like Singapore and South Korea.

If you live in a very stable state like Canada, you might imagine that stability is the normal state of affairs for most people at most times. In Canada we govern like we drive—with one hand on the wheel, except when a storm blows across the road. It is important to recognise that this view of the world as an essentially benign place is

profoundly mistaken. The Fragile States Index reminds us that most countries are not stable at all. Only one out of six people lives in a stable state. Almost sixty percent of the world's population live in states that are dangerously fragile.[3]

Not coincidentally, many of the most stable states are small. In fact, Canada is the most populous country on the top-ten list. More typical are Denmark or Norway, with only six million people each. Great states, by contrast, do poorly on the Fragile States Index. Russia and India are among the states counted as dangerously fragile, while China is placed on the threshold of danger. We can see why Chinese leaders still follow the rule laid down by Deng Xiaoping decades ago: "Stability overrides everything."[4]

The United States is still counted as stable, but its ranking has plummeted over the last decade. With increasing frequency, pundits describe the United States as a failed state—"rich but ungovernable."[5] This is hyperbole, but it reflects the general sense that the United States is not the rock of steadiness that it once was.

The European Union is not strictly a state, so it is not included in the Fragile States Index. However, we can speculate how the EU might be rated if it were included. Many EU member states, taken in isolation, rank very highly for stability. But the EU itself would fare more poorly. Populist anger against the project of European integration is growing. Its third largest member state, the United Kingdom, exited in 2020. Experts who write about the EU describe a system in "a perpetual state of crisis."[6]

This is nothing new. Suppose that you were visiting Europe a century ago, in the mid-1920s. Even then, there were people arguing for the creation of an integrated Europe. But the idea of unification was fantastical given the realities of European politics at that time. Only ten years before, European nations had been locked in a bloody and exhausting war. No real peace was established when the conflict ended in 1919. Later, historians would look back at the whole period between 1914 and 1945 and describe it as a period of continent-wide civil war, within which the 1920s and 1930s were nothing more than a momentary truce. The project of building a European Union was launched in the 1950s to forestall another outbreak of war. The EU is like the containment structure of a nuclear plant, protecting everyone from the fissionable material within.

This century-long view reminds us that all of today's great states have a history of extreme fragility. Look at China in the 1920s. The Qing dynasty had collapsed little more than a decade earlier, and the territory once governed by the Xuantong emperor was divided among a half-dozen regional warlords. The country would not be reunified for another quarter-century. Russia was in equally dire condition in the 1920s. The Romanov dynasty had also collapsed a few years earlier, and the Soviet Union that succeeded it was still reeling from its own civil war. British rule in India was equally tenuous. Roughly a third of the Indian sub-continent was still governed by local hereditary princes, not by the British directly. The Indian independence movement was increasingly powerful, but also

split between Hindus and Muslims. Some experts thought tensions within Europe were mild compared to those within India.

Life in the United States was relatively peaceful in the 1920s. Still, we should not over-estimate the stability of the American political order at that time. Almost two million Americans had personal memories of the Civil War. For some, "United States" was a plural noun: *The United States are* was correct grammar, not *The United States is.* One historian described the United States in 1925 as a composite of "rival societies" tied loosely together, not much different than Europe.[7] This sense of the country as a jumble of regions would not fade until the 1960s, and some would argue that it is reviving today.

If we had been alive before World War I, we would not have described the international political order as a "world of states," as we would today. The overwhelming majority of countries that exist today did not exist then. The pre-war order was a world of empires. Indeed, many historians regard empire as the "default mode" of political organization for most of recorded history, a period spanning five thousand years.[8] One expert has calculated that for the two thousand years before World War I, the three largest empires existing at any point of time contained roughly forty percent of the world's population.[9]

The era of empires reached its zenith just before World War I. The largest at that time was the British empire, which contained about 400 million people—almost one-quarter of the world's population—living in territories on every continent. China's Qing empire had roughly as many people, although less land. There were about a dozen other substantial empires, including trans-oceanic empires like the French and Dutch, and land empires like the Russian and Ottoman. Altogether, empires claimed sovereignty over almost all of the world's land surface, and a vast majority of its people.[10]

Several of these empires collapsed as a result of World War I, and the rest crumbled after World War II. The speed with which these empires collapsed was surprising, but the fact of collapse itself was not. During the era of empires, two facts were always acknowledged. The first was that empires were mortal: every one was destined to expire eventually. The second was that dying empires passed their mantle to new ones: there was a *translatio imperii*, a transfer of rule. Thus the idea of empire survived, even if specific empires did not.

In the West, the fragility of empires was expressed in the language of rise and fall. The lesson of history was clear, according to a British writer in the nineteenth century: "The constitution of empires has, like the human body, a period of growth, maturity, decline, and extinction."[11] A contemporary wrote that empires were like "waves in the ocean, successively rising and disappearing again ... Exalted for a moment, but suddenly

overwhelmed."[12] This notion of transience was not unique to the West. A Chinese novel of the fourteenth century begins this way: "Empires arise from chaos and empires collapse back into chaos. This we have known since time began."[13]

Scholarly research conducted over the last half-century has confirmed the impermanence of empires. A 1978 study of major empires throughout history found that they lasted about 250 years on average.[14] A more expansive 1997 study concluded that the average was about 130 years.[15] An even broader survey in 2025 settled on a typical lifespan of 155 years.[16] Moreover, the average lifespan in these bigger studies was skewed upward by a small number of long-lived empires. Most empires had short and unhappy lives.

Over centuries, writers have tried to explain why some empires lasted longer than others, and why all empires eventually died. Empires are not exactly like modern-day great states. But they have enough in common for us to believe that some explanations for the fragility of empires might apply to great states too. Empires, like great states, were grand enterprises, comprising vast territories and large, diverse populations.

Heads of empire—like heads of modern great states—had three basic goals. First, they wanted to establish order within their lands, by repulsing invaders and suppressing rebellions and banditry. Second, they wanted to expand farming, industry, and trade—

because prosperity was a prerequisite for imperial power. And third, they wanted to reorganise everyday life to fit their ideas about morality and justice. This last task is what we call the civilising mission of empire.

To achieve these three goals, imperial leaders levied taxes, organised armies and civilian bureaucracies, and promulgated laws about right and wrong conduct. Most empires tested the limits of what was feasible in terms of practical administration, given the primitive transportation and communication technologies available at the time. The sheer size of empire also meant that the apparatus of government was large and unwieldy. There were more parts in the governmental machine that had to be maintained and coordinated, and therefore more ways that the machine could break down. This is one aspect of a problem that I will call scalar vulnerability.[17] As the scale of government grows, so does the risk of breakdown.

Scalar vulnerability has another aspect. Bigger size means more problems for government to manage.[18] As territory expands, there are more regions that might become rebellious, or that might be struck by drought or other natural disasters. As borders grow longer, there are more neighbouring powers that might launch raids or invasions. As cities grow and travel within the empire increases, there is a higher risk of deadly epidemics. And as trade expands, so does dependence on fickle trading partners. Imperial authorities tried to anticipate all these shocks and strains. But poorly-organised empires were easily

overwhelmed as one surprise piled on another. Today, we call this pile-on of surprises a *polycrisis*: a fusion of challenges that becomes unmanageable not simply because they arrive at the same time, but also because they feed on one another, so that the entire situation spins out of control.[19]

For some historians of empire, polycrisis is the simplest explanation of how empires died. As small polities grew into empires, the odds increased that bad things would happen within them. Rulers were simply playing a game of chance. If they were lucky, shocks to the system were spaced out, so that they could be handled individually. If they were unlucky, shocks arrived in rapid succession, and the system was overwhelmed.

The critical point is that no empire could be lucky forever. Eventually some combination of concurrent shocks would prove fatal. Furthermore, it would be fruitless to conduct an autopsy of the final days of empire in search of a simple explanation for its collapse. Usually there were many contributing factors, hopelessly entangled; and in any case, fate might have served a different but equally deadly cocktail of shocks.[20]

It is tempting to think that today's great states are protected against scalar vulnerability, because they have better tools for anticipating and managing problems. However, the story is not so clearcut. While modern governments might have better tools, the societies they oversee are bigger and more complex. Uttar Pradesh, just one of twenty-eight Indian states, has four times as many people as the Roman empire did at its peak.

Most citizens of today's great states are urbanized and educated, and they also have access to technologies like smartphones that make it easier to evade and resist governmental action. We could say that there is a never-ending race between governmental capabilities and societal complexity, and it is not clear that governmental capabilities are winning.

Scalar vulnerability is our first theory of imperial decline. A second theory says that empires failed because of a tendency toward overstretch.[21] That is, empires could not stop themselves from becoming bigger and bigger. Imperial rulers had several motivations for conquering new lands. Sometimes they did it just to show off their power and importance; sometimes because they saw an opportunity to loot or exploit conquered populations; and sometimes because they wanted to create a buffer zone to protect their current territories.

The theory of overstretch says that imperial rulers eventually went too far, acquiring territories that were expensive to hold but generated little benefit in return. In 20 AD, the geographer Strabo warned against a Roman invasion of Britain, on the grounds that the cost of maintaining the army would exceed the tribute collected.[22] Rome invaded anyway, realized that Strabo was right, but found it difficult to retreat. It was considered dishonourable for emperors to give up conquered lands, even when "they spend more than they receive from them."[23]

Once again, we might be tempted to think that the problem of overstretch does not apply to contemporary great states. After all, rulers of empire lived in a world in which war and conquest were legitimate, even noble pursuits. But beliefs have changed over the last century. The Charter of the United Nations, adopted in 1945, prohibits aggression against other states, and the Nuremberg trials of 1945-46 established aggressive war as a crime under international law.

However, we should be skeptical about how much the world has really changed. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 shows that old ideas about imperial expansion have not died completely away. China has also made clear its intention to regain control of Taiwan: reunification, Xi Jinping said in January 2026, "is unstoppable."[24]

Great states in the late twentieth century also had other ways of extending their influence. The Soviet Union did not assert formal sovereignty over the seven neighbouring countries that constituted the Warsaw Pact, but those states lived under the threat of military intervention and consequently did what they were told most of the time. The United States struck alliances, founded international institutions, and constructed a global archipelago of military bases, all in service of its security and economic needs. It also engaged in covert or overt interventions when other states became uncooperative. If this was not exactly empire in the traditional sense, it was something close—a virtual empire, as Raymond Aron called it in 1974.[25]

Virtual empires also seem prone to over-extension, just like classical empires. One explanation for the collapse of the Soviet Union is that it could not bear the cost of coercing and subsidizing its neighbours and allies. And the United States also stumbled into long and costly overseas wars—Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq—which seemed essential to American security and could not be abandoned without damage to American prestige. On paper, the foreign policy of President Trump is founded on the belief that the virtual empire constructed by the United States since 1945 is more of a burden than a benefit. Still, President Trump cannot resist maintaining that empire, for example by interventions in Iran, Venezuela, and Nigeria.

There is also another way in which great states might be susceptible to overstretch. Within their borders, classical empires usually ruled lightly. They collected taxes and maintained a rudimentary level of law and order, but did little else. Great states are very different. They are much less tolerant of crime and unrest and they police their populations more intensively. Similarly, great states monitor and regulate economic life more closely. At the same time they are expected to provide a broader range of human services, such as education, healthcare, and protection against discrimination.

Ben Ansell and Johannes Lindvall suggest all this work can be considered as a project of "inward conquest."[26] Great states have always asserted sovereignty within their borders, but now they are engaged in the hard work of actually wielding that authority

in practice. All modern states are engaged in similar work. But inward conquest might be especially hard for great states because of their size. The amount of human activity to be watched and regulated is vastly larger. In a bid to keep pace with small states, leaders of great states might bite off more than they can chew: in other words, they might overstretch internally.[27]

A third theory about imperial decline lays the blame on decay within ruling elites. Edward Gibbon famously attributed the end of the Roman empire to the loss of vigour among its leaders. "The fire of genius was extinguished, and even military spirit evaporated"—partly because of long years of peace, and partly because of enervating effects of Christianity, which became the state religion in the fourth century.[28] Similarly Ibn Khaldun, a fourteenth-century student of Islamic empires, thought that they expired because of loss of solidarity and purpose—*'asibiyyah*—with the ruling class. Leaders were no longer on guard against dangers, or prepared to fight for the empire.[29]

There are variations on the elite-decay theory. Some emphasise elite corruption. "The lust for money," said the Roman historian Sallust, is "the root of all evils."[30] Different factions within the ruling class—courtiers, bureaucrats, generals, and provincial governors—use their power to enrich themselves. Factions also fight one another for a larger share of the spoils and waste money on competitive demonstrations of prestige and

status. Rising inequality and corruption corrode efficiency and public respect for the imperial regime. Collapse comes inevitably as the regime becomes more divided, bloated, and ineffectual.[31]

Here again it might be argued that old theory does not fit modern realities. Some might say that great states are generally better at ousting old leaders and installing new ones, so that the risks of moral drift and corruption are reduced. On the other hand, a skeptic might look at Vladimir Putin (leader of Russia since 2000) and Xi Jinping (ruler of China since 2012), or even at American leaders like Biden and Trump (82 and 78 years old at the time of the 2024 election), and wonder about the capacity of great states to refresh their elites.

Underlying this is the reality of rising inequality in all great states. The global financial crisis of 2007-2008 triggered mass movements against the influence of the wealthiest one-percent. In all great states, forty years of neoliberal economic policies have produced a small class of extraordinarily rich people—such as Elon Musk in the United States, Mukesh Ambani in India, Jack Ma in China, and Vladimir Lisin in Russia. Populist movements against government are spurred by anger about the rise of these billionaire-oligarchs. Leaders such as Putin and Xi are themselves conflicted: wanting the support of corporate titans, but also fearing them as rivals.

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Here is what we know so far. Great states are fragile. They present themselves as effortless productions, but in the wings there is frenetic effort to keep the show running. This is not surprising, because great states are the modern-day version of empires, and we know that empires as a class were very unstable. Even today, there is a small industry of academics trying to explain why some empires survived longer than others. Among their theories are the three I canvassed here: scalar vulnerability, overstretch, and elite decay. Whether these theories can be applied to great states too is a matter of debate.

I would like to complicate life by introducing a fourth theory about the roots of fragility. It is not entirely novel or inconsistent with other theories about the rise and fall of empires. My theory is distinct because it draws directly on the experience of great states over the last century, rather than trying on clothes from the wardrobe of imperial history. I will call this the theory of pathological centralisation.

My argument has four parts. The first part is a story about how leaders of great states have responded to the challenges of governance over the last century. As I have said before, these leaders have three main goals—security, prosperity, and their civilising mission—which they pursue in a world which they recognise to be fraught with uncertainties and dangers. Leaders have tried to design their governmental systems—the political and bureaucratic machinery of government—to maximise the probability of achieving their goals. This has usually meant centralising power within the system.

Authority has been pulled up from localities and regions toward the capital; and within the capital, authority has been shifted toward the executive, away from countervailing bodies like the national legislature or supreme court. The general idea is that a strong centre will be better placed to act intelligently and decisively, so that society as a whole is more secure, prosperous, and morally ordered.

In sum, centralisation has been seen as the direct route to greatness. This view has been held by a wide range of leaders. We might not be surprised that authoritarian leaders like Stalin and Mao were centralists. But so were liberals like President Franklin Roosevelt, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, and Jean Monnet, one of the founders of the European Economic Community.

The second part of my story is a tale of unintended consequences. The politicians and intellectuals who promoted centralisation in great states over the last century were conducting an experiment. They had a theory that centralisation would ensure greatness, but they could not be sure that the experiment would work. No-one had tried centralisation on such a scale before.

Much of this book will show how the experiment did not work as planned. Centralised decision-making was supposed to be smarter, but often it was catastrophically bad. Sometimes the centre could not make decisions at all, because competing factions were at loggerheads. And sometimes people at the centre could not translate their

decisions into actions, because the bureaucracy beneath them was too large to be properly managed or reformed.

Citizens were supposed to like centralisation, because it produced things they valued, like law and order, a rising standard of living, and a just society. But the public mood often soured when centralised systems failed to deliver results. Anger toward distant capitals intensified, and people looked toward leaders who promised to make the system work better. That is how we entered the age of strongmen—leaders like Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Narendra Modi, and Donald Trump—who promised to break through gridlock and sclerosis and restore national greatness.

The paradox of strongmanism is that it tries to remedy the pathologies of centralisation by applying even more centralisation. Power is concentrated in the hands of one man who will make the entire system work better through his own brilliance and iron will. But the pre-existing problems of centralisation are not so easily fixed, and in some ways made worse by strongmanism. As system failure persists, strongmen resort to other strategies for holding on to power—distracting citizens with sabre-rattling, finding domestic scapegoats, and clamping down on dissent and protest. The moral price of the strongman remedy is the surrender of democracy and individual freedom.

The century-long experiment with centralisation in great states reveals a paradox. The designers of these great states wanted to build political systems that were durable

and not fragile like ancient empires. Often, though, they achieved the reverse. In important ways, great states have become less stable. People today find it harder to predict what they are likely to do next. This is bad news for everybody, but especially for the people living in smaller states next door.

3. CENTRALISING EVERYWHERE

Centralisation describes the concentration of power within a political system. This can happen in two ways. The first has to do with the allocation of authority between different levels of government. Every great state has at least three levels of government. There is a central government, located in the national capital—Washington, Delhi, Moscow, and Beijing—or in the case of the European Union, mainly in Brussels. Then there are second-level governments: mainly states in India and the United States, oblasts and republics in Russia, provinces in China, and member states in the European Union. Further below are a range of third-level governments: regional authorities, counties, cities, towns, and so on. When power shifts upward within the system—that is, when higher levels acquire more control over lower levels—that is *vertical centralisation*.

Within central government itself, power may be distributed among different parts. Every system has an executive that asserts a leading role in shaping national policy and translating policy into action. But systems usually have other parts that may act as checks on the executive. In Western democracies, two important checks are legislatures and courts. But there can be other checks too. The senior levels of the bureaucracy, the military, or the dominant party (as in China) may act as counterweights to the executive.

When any of these checks weaken, and power shifts as a result to the executive, we are witnessing a process of *horizontal centralisation*.

My argument is that we can see pressures for centralisation of both types operating in all great states over the last century. The process has not been unrelenting: now and then there have been moments of decentralisation. But these reversals have usually been limited and temporary. The long-term impulse is moving power upward and inward.

Look at the history of American government over the last century. Today, American politics is fixated on Washington, and especially on the president. This is a radical shift from the way American government was organised in the 1920s.

At that time, Washington played a marginal role in American life. One well-known writer, James Bryce, suggested that the main connection that Americans had with their federal government was visiting the post office.[1] States and localities were the real focal point of political life. (States have independent authority under the US constitution, and states in turn have historically delegated significant powers to localities.) Washington's role had expanded during World War I but shrank quickly afterward, with the notable exception of Prohibition.

Similarly, presidents were important but hardly dominant figures in national politics in the 1920s. The Senate was seen as the fulcrum of power in Washington.

American presidents throughout the 1920s were derided as non-entities. One critic summarized the credo of Herbert Hoover, president during the financial crisis of 1929: "Do nothing, and when the pressure becomes irresistible, do as little as possible."[2]

The transformation of the American political system began in the 1930s. In response to the Great Depression, Washington extended its control over the economy, built public works, and launched social assistance programs. This was followed by World War II and the Cold War, which led to the construction of a vast defence establishment. In the 1960s and 1970s Washington expanded again to defend civil rights, improve access to healthcare, rebuild roads and cities, and protect the environment.

Attempts by conservative presidents like Nixon and Reagan to stop the growth of federal programs had modest effect. "The forces of centralisation," one expert said in 1986, were "overwhelming."[3] Presidents like Clinton and Bush also talked about downsizing Washington but actually increased its role in policing and homeland security. Obama expanded Washington's role in healthcare, while Trump failed to reverse it.

As Washington's importance increased, so did the president's. Franklin Roosevelt set the precedent in the 1930s. To manage the economic crisis, Roosevelt revived emergency laws from World War I and wrested more powers from Congress. Presidential authority expanded again during World War II. After the war, Congress confirmed the president's role as superintendent of the economy and guardian of national security.

In 1960, John Kennedy declared that the presidency had become "the vital centre of action" in the whole system of American government.[4] By the 1970s, critics were complaining about the advent of an "imperial presidency," and after the resignation of Richard Nixon there were attempts to curb presidential power.[5] These had little impact. Ronald Reagan introduced a new philosophy—unitary executive theory—to justify expansive presidential authority. The presidency enjoyed another resurgence under George H.W. Bush after the terror attacks of 2001.

Between 2008 and 2024, successive presidents—Obama, Trump, and Biden—sought new ways of acting unilaterally while Congress was gridlocked. And Trump in his second term has moved even more aggressively to expand presidential authority at home and abroad. A planning document for his second administration described the presidency as "the beating heart of our nation's power and prestige."[6] It echoed John Kennedy's words in 1960. Critics in 2025 argued that Trump was tearing down the constitutional order—but in many ways he was continuing a decades-long, bipartisan project of horizontal centralisation.

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China was in chaos between the two world wars. In the 1920s a government led by a political movement known as the Guomindang (GMD) claimed to be in charge, but power was really held by regional warlords. The GMD gained the upper hand, but then

was challenged by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Japan, which launched a full-scale invasion in 1937. China did not recover unified rule until 1949, after Japan had been defeated by the Allied powers and the CCP had crushed the GMD in a civil war.

The CCP's leader, Mao Zedong, wanted a centralised state. Under the constitution of the new People's Republic of China, provinces were subordinated to central government. (Today, Beijing still appoints provincial governors.) Within Beijing, power was nominally allocated between an executive, legislature, and judiciary. But all three branches—and the military—were also subordinate to the CCP. The CCP's own constitution made clear that members owed strict loyalty to Mao himself.

There were periods between 1949 and 1969 when central control was loosened. In the early 1950s, Beijing promised autonomy for frontier provinces like Tibet and gave some freedom to private businesses and farmers. Periodically, Beijing tolerated some political dissent and grassroots organization. But these moments of loosening invariably ended. By the mid-1970s, the system was organised as a personality cult centred on Mao. Mao compared himself to China's first emperor, who had "centralised power into his own hands" two thousand years earlier.[7]

Mao's death in 1976 triggered reforms that were advertised as an attempt to reverse the over-concentration of power. Over the next forty years, Beijing allowed a revival of private enterprise, gave provinces room to pursue economic development, and

experimented with reforms like village elections and more professional courts. The party apparatus also loosened its control over professionals in the state bureaucracy. At the apex of the system, power was shared among party elders.

Still, this was constrained and conditional decentralisation. Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, made clear the CCP would never give up its role as China's supreme authority. Party control over security services was not compromised. Although provincial governors had more running room, they were still leashed to economic and social targets set by Beijing. Political and judicial reforms were modest. When protests threatened party power, as they did in Beijing in 1989, they were quickly suppressed.

The post-Mao experiment with decentralisation largely ended with the selection of Xi Jinping as China's paramount leader in 2012. Xi believed the entire system was adrift and set about restoring strict central control. Reforms that seemed to reflect "Western ideals" were abandoned. Anti-corruption campaigns were used to purge the party and state bureaucracies, while CCP cells were created within major businesses. Surveillance and censorship was tightened at the same time.

"The Party exercises overall leadership over all areas of endeavor," Xi said in 2017. "The Party rules everything."[8] In fact, power is even more tightly concentrated than that. Xi quickly abandoned the practice of collective decision-making by party leaders. He is now recognised as the system's core leader, and ideological campaigns emphasise the

primacy of Xi Jinping Thought. Experts say that Xi is recreating a Mao-style personality cult.

The Soviet Union also struggled to hold itself together in the 1920s. Vladimir Lenin, leader of the Communist Party that seized power in 1917, believed the new state would only survive if governed with iron discipline. Parliament was shut down and opposition parties banned.[9] However, the Communists were quickly forced to make adjustments. They retreated from early attempts to micro-manage the economy and allowed room for small-scale enterprise. And they promised autonomy for regions. The Soviet Union was designed as a federation of constituent republics.

As in China, these concessions were made reluctantly and soon reversed. Lenin died in 1924 and was replaced as party leader by Joseph Stalin. Stalin dispensed with rivals and launched purges to assure loyalty within the bureaucracy and military. Tolerance for private enterprise was abandoned as Moscow began intensive economic planning. The pretence of independence for constituent republics was abandoned too. By the time of Stalin's death in 1953, the Soviet political system was "super-centralised."[10]

Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, denounced him for abuses of power and promised decentralisation within the system. He consulted more often with colleagues, gave regions more freedom in economic and cultural affairs, and allowed more room for

dissent. However, this experiment was short-lived. Some measures were reversed by Khrushchev himself, while others were abandoned after his ouster from party leadership in 1964.

The next Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, restored central control over the economy and restrictions on dissent. Brezhnev also established himself as the dominant player within the party leadership. But Brezhnev did not go so far as Stalin or Mao: rather than purging rivals, he negotiated a truce among factions within the party elite. As a result, the system became more grey-haired, sclerotic and corrupt. Brezhnev died in 1982, followed by two successors who also died soon after taking office.

Mikhail Gorbachev, Soviet leader after 1985, thought the Soviet Union could only be saved by radical reforms. He dismantled economic controls, increased political freedom, and tolerated nationalist movements in constituent republics. However, Gorbachev lost control of events. The unintended result was even more radical decentralisation. The Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, replaced by fifteen new countries, of which the largest was the Russian Federation led by president Boris Yeltsin.

The new Russian system initially applied the formula of decentralisation too. At the centre, the Communist monopoly was broken, and political power was divided among branches of government on the Western model. Subnational governments were given

substantial independence. Moscow allowed a free market and sold off state-owned industries, which quickly produced a wealthy and politically influential business class.

By the end of the 1990s, many Russians believed that the system was flying apart. Yeltsin resigned in 1999. His successor, Vladimir Putin, promised a new order in which the office of the president would be "the centre of power."[11] After 2000, regional governments were brought to heel, state control over key industries was reestablished, and unfriendly businessmen were jailed or assassinated. Within Moscow, the authority of parliament and courts was checked. Russia maintained the form but not the substance of a democracy.

Putin said in 2010 that his aim was to create a "vertical of power" within Russia.[12] He told journalists around the same time that the entire system would likely require "manual control" by a strong leader for decades.[13] Putin has also suggested there is something about Russia that demands centralised rule. "Russia from the very beginning was created as a super-centralised state," Putin said in 1999. "It is fixed in her genetic code."[14]

On a map, India as it was ruled by the British in the 1920s looked impressive. It included the present-day states of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Burma. However, Britain's grasp on India was weak. The British raj had been assembled by conquest of several

regional powers, and many were still governed by hereditary rulers under British supervision. A 1918 report described India as "a congeries of self-governing provinces associated for certain purposes."[15]

At first, Indian nationalists imagined that an independent India would be constructed as a federal system in which provinces were powerful. This was a concession to political realities. Muslim nationalists worried that a strong central government would be dominated by the Hindu majority. However, the model of weak-centre federation was not enough to reassure Muslim leaders. When India won independence, Muslim-majority provinces split off to form Pakistan.[16] Burma had already been separated from British India in 1937. This was radical decentralisation, like the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991.

But there was a reverse effect within the newly independent India. Relieved of the need to conciliate Muslim leaders, leaders of the dominant Congress party opted for a more centralised design within India. States had some independent powers, but central government in Delhi retained broad authority to intervene in state affairs. Within Delhi, power was concentrated in the hands of prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, a popular leader with a penchant for micro-managing. Some compared Nehru to colonial-era viceroys.

The Indian system loosened briefly in the mid-1960s. Nehru died, Congress was tarnished by economic setbacks, and regional politicians pushed to protect their languages

and cultures. But this period of loosening was brief. Nehru's daughter Indira Gandhi became prime minister and won a resounding majority in the 1971 election. Delhi nationalized industries, tightened security laws, and in 1974 declared a state of emergency that put even more power in Gandhi's hands. "Indira is India," a Congress party leader said in 1975, "and India is Indira."[17]

The emergency ended in 1977. Over the next thirty years, national politics became more tumultuous. Congress no longer dominated, and Delhi was frequently governed by multi-party coalitions. Some see this as another period of decentralisation. Prime ministers were checked by their coalition partners, while state governments exploited indecision at the centre; Delhi shifted toward market economics, and the constitution was amended to empower localities.

In fact, the decentralising impulse in this period was weak. Economic reforms were incremental and local government reforms did not work as expected. In other ways, Delhi actually expanded its footprint with new schemes for social assistance, education, environmental protection, and disaster response. The centrally-run security establishment also grew larger.

The election of a Hindu-nationalist government in 2014 marked the advent of a new era of centralisation. Under prime minister Narendra Modi, there was a "profound shift" of power from state capitals to Delhi.[18] Modi said in 2023 that a "strong centre"

was essential in national development, condemning regionalism as an "evil that destroys peace in society."[19]

Not only was Delhi made stronger; so was the prime minister. Modi's government worked systematically to weaken checks on executive authority—parliament, courts, watchdog agencies, the media, and civil society organizations. His office became "virtually the command centre for all ministries" within government.[20] Modi's standing was checked by an unexpectedly weak performance in the 2024 election. But he is still widely described as a strongman, classed with the leaders of other great states—Putin, Xi, and Trump.

The European Union, created in 1993 as a successor to the European Economic Community, is not as centralised as any of the other great states. This is mainly because unification in Europe has been pursued through negotiation, while in all other cases the construction of a great state was preceded by territorial unification through conquest. Even so, the EU is still subject to powerful centralising pressures.

The first step toward European integration was the creation in 1951 of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), which supervised a common market among six countries in those two products. A designer of the ECSC, the French civil servant Jean Monnet, envisaged the eventual formation of a United States of Europe. But Monnet recognised the need to proceed "by zig and by zag."[21] In 1957, the six ECSC countries

founded the European Economic Community (EEC) to promote trade and competition within a common market.

Integration sped up in following decades. The number of countries rose to twenty-seven, encompassing most people on the European continent.[22] At the same time, there was vertical centralisation—a steady "drift [of powers] away from member states."[23] This trend continued after the EEC was replaced by the European Union in 1993. Most EU countries now use a common currency, the euro. EU authority touches not just trade and finance but also social policy, policing, immigration, foreign policy, and defence.

There has been resistance to centralisation. Periodically national leaders have tried to slow the trend and voters have refused to ratify pro-integration treaties. In 2020 the United Kingdom exited the union. On the other hand, centralisation has been pushed forward by crises over the last twenty years—the global financial crisis, a surge in unauthorized migration, the Covid pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and President Trump's 2024 re-election—all of which seemed to require a stronger centre. Monnet predicted in 1978 that "Europe would be built through crises."[24]

Today, EU institutions employ sixty thousand people—a small number for a great state. But tens of thousands of bureaucrats in lower-level governments have been enlisted to draft and enforce EU directives. EU law now comprises more than 365,000 documents.[25]

The Court of Justice of the European Union has played a critical role in affirming the preeminence of EU over national law.

Horizontal centralisation is also at work within the EU. The central body responsible for drafting and implementing EU law is the European Commission, led by a president and a college of twenty-seven commissioners. The Commission is staffed by technocrats, but the president and commissioners are experienced politicians drawn from member states. There are three counterweights: the Council of the European Union, representing ministries in member states, which must approve new laws; the European Council, composed of leaders of member states, which meets regularly to set overall priorities; and the European Parliament, elected every five years.

There is a tussle for power among these four bodies. The European Parliament starts in a weak position: it cannot initiate new laws and its authority to determine the leadership of the Commission is bounded. Among the other three, the Commission has the advantage of expertise and staying power: its personnel remain in place as ministers from member states come and go. In emergencies, leaders of member states are especially likely to rely on the Commission.

Authority has also concentrated within the Commission itself. Its president is "more powerful institutionally than ever before."[26] Commission presidents now deliver an annual State of the Union address just like American presidents, and polls show that EU

citizens are increasingly likely to credit or blame them personally for EU policy. Critics complain that Ursula von der Leyen, the current president, has gone too far in concentrating power at the centre. They call her Queen Ursula.[27]

Obviously Ursula von der Leyen is not really a queen. Similarly, Donald Trump is not a king, Vladimir Putin is not a czar, Narendra Modi is not a colonial-era viceroy, and Xi Jinping is not an emperor. But it is telling that so many people in great states talk this way about their leaders. They can see that power has shifted upward and inward. The question is why.

4. WHY REFORMERS CENTRALISE

Leaders of great states have three objectives. The first is security, which means defence against external and internal threats to the state's control of its territory. The second is prosperity: making society—and thereby the state—richer. And the third is the civilising mission: reorganizing society so that it conforms to certain principles of justice and morality.

Leaders try to design or reform the institutions of government in ways that seem likely to increase the likelihood of achieving these three goals. In a way, they are architects, designing the political system to suit their purposes. And they are also general contractors, responsible for building up new institutions, and renovating or demolishing obsolete ones.[1]

But above all they are gamblers. Leaders have theories that institutions designed a certain way will produce certain results, but they cannot be sure that those theories will work, especially when they are applied in new and unfamiliar circumstances. This was the predicament of leaders within great states over the last century. They were conducting an unprecedented experiment in centralisation, believing it would promote security, prosperity, and the civilising mission.

The most vivid illustration of centralisation in the name of security comes from China, where control over the military since 1949 has rested with the CCP leadership, and sometimes with the paramount leader alone. "All things," Mao said in 1938, "grow out of the barrel of a gun."[2] Mao's concern over the course of his career was not just with foreign threats. He also feared threats from within, such as popular uprisings or break-away movements in the provinces. The military squashed pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and protests for autonomy in Tibet in 2008. After Xi Jinping took power, Beijing spent more on internal security than on defence against other countries.

Centralisation in defence of internal security is not unique to China. India has done the same since independence in 1947, with the aim of checking "fissiparous tendencies" inside the country.[3] As in China, advocacy of secession is against the law in India. This is also true in Russia, where Vladimir Putin made a priority of expanding centrally-run internal security forces after 2000, just as Stalin did in the 1930s.

A preoccupation with internal security was observable in the United States as well. After the Civil War, Washington asserted its right to deploy its army for the purpose of maintaining order inside the country, and took more control over state militias so they would be ready to contain labor unrest in industrial centres. Washington again deployed soldiers to enforce civil rights laws in the 1950s and 1960s. Legal constraints on use of

the military within the United States are not tightly drawn and are being tested by President Donald Trump today.

The European Union is the only great state that allows sub-national governments to leave, which the United Kingdom did in 2020. Consequently there is no need for a central force to block secession. Still, European leaders worry about other forms of internal disorder, and Brussels has played a growing role in policing and counter-terrorism. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Brussels has also asserted a bigger role in defence. Ursula von der Leyen warned in 2025 that the EU lacks the capacity to "act as decisively as the situation dictates" in "the most dangerous of times."[4]

Fear of foreign threats are a powerful driver of centralisation. The lesson of two world wars was that victory could only be achieved by total mobilisation of national resources, orchestrated by central authorities. In the United States, the prolonged threat of war after 1941—World War II, then the Cold War—resulted in construction of a vast military-industrial complex led by Washington, and the elevation in status of the President as commander-in-chief. Today, geopolitical rivalry still justifies centrally-guided military build-ups in all great states. There is a basic logic of mass versus mass: if one great state has a large centrally-controlled force, so must the others.

Security-driven centralisation also had the unintended effect of driving centralisation in other policy fields. For example, expansion of war-fighting capacity in

the United States could not happen unless Washington improved its capacity to collect taxes: and once this revenue flow had been established, it could be redirected to domestic policy, as it was after the end of the Vietnam and Cold Wars. Washington also became more active in areas like civil rights and higher education during the Cold War. The oppression of black Americans in the 1950s was an international embarrassment, while universities were important to defence research.

A centuries-old Chinese maxim says that emperors should aim for *fuqiang*, "wealth and power."[5] Obviously the two goals are interlinked. If a society is prosperous, then government can collect taxes more easily and maintain a larger army. Prosperity bolsters state power in another way, by reducing the odds of public discontent and protest.

Central authorities of great states pursued economic growth in several ways. The first was by promoting trade within the state's own territory—that is, by building a common or single market. This was the initial rationale for European integration, but central governments in other great states pursued the same goal, by connecting regions with highways and railroads, and removing legal barriers to the free movement of money, products, and people. Those legal barriers were created by sub-central governments, whose motives were typically disparaged by centralisers. If a state or provinces blocked trade, the assumption was that they were shielding local businesses and workers from

competition rather than pursuing other goals like the protection of worker and consumer rights.

Once established, a common market generated its own problems, which required even more centralisation. If businesses can move freely throughout the whole territory, sub-central governments may hesitate to use any remaining regulatory powers, because burdensome rules will cause entrepreneurs to flee the jurisdiction. By this logic, competition among sub-central governments triggers a "race to the bottom" in regulatory standards. Whether such races actually happen is a matter of dispute among experts. Still, central governments have played on fears about competition to justify incursions into domains of social and economic regulation once handled by lower governments.

Bigger markets also encouraged the growth of massive corporations led by a class of wealthy capitalists—the kind of people known today as oligarchs. Everywhere, the growth of corporate power became another justification for stronger central government. The logic of mass versus mass that was used in geopolitics was applied here as well: the only effective check on concentrated capital was held to be concentrated government. A century ago, Progressive reformers in the United States argued that Washington should take a bigger role to check the power of giant railroad, steel, and oil corporations; today, the culprits are big tech companies like Alphabet or Amazon. In the early Soviet state, the threat was international capital; in newly independent India, both foreign capital and

large domestic business houses. From the start, the European Commission has justified itself as a check against oversized American corporations as well as European cartels. Vladimir Putin built up presidential power after 2000 to control oligarchs, while Xi Jinping has nobbled corporate executives made rich by liberalisation.

The third danger that followed from the creation of a large single market was economic instability. The Great Depression of the 1930s reminded American politicians that a loosely regulated economy was prone to dangerous cycles of boom-and-bust. The response was to strengthen Washington's role in steering the economy and providing relief during downturns. The widely-held belief was that American state governments were incompetent to manage the risks associated with a nationalized economy. Brussels sought a bigger role after the global financial crisis of 2007-2008 for similar reasons: it argued that member states by themselves were unable to reduce or manage the risks of instability.

In the Soviet Union, India, and China, central government was assigned an even more active role in the economy: not just steering, but actively planning. These three countries pursued central planning with different degrees of rigor. In all cases, though, planning was seen as the fast track to economic development. Rapid industrialization would make citizens better off, reduce dependence on Western imperialists, and equip a powerful military.

Enthusiasm for central planning waned in the 1980s and 1990s but it did not disappear. Beijing still produces five-year plans to guide the Chinese economy. Policymakers in Washington studiously avoid talk of planning—but Republicans and Democrats alike see a role for Washington in promoting industrial competitiveness, industrial policy, or a green transition. The same is true in Brussels and Delhi. As competition between great states intensifies, central guidance is also justified in the vocabulary of "strategic autonomy." Narendra Modi has revived the rhetoric of Nehru, promising once again to make self-reliance a priority for Delhi.[6]

An important assumption undergirds the arguments for centralisation made so far. When we give people at the centre responsibility for making decisions about security and the economy, we assume that they will make those decisions intelligently. Reformers in all great states operated with this idea in mind: not only that people at the centre would be good at making decisions, but that they would be better at it than people in lower levels of government.

The logic was straightforward. Small territories have a limited population, and therefore a limited pool of talented individuals available to fill important positions in government. Central governments in great states are not constrained in this way. The

talent pool is much larger. Central governments can also develop the talent pool by supporting elite universities that recruit and train people from every corner of the land.

This notion of an aristocracy of talent prevailed everywhere in the twentieth century. In the United States, the men and women who were recruited into the administration of president John Kennedy in the early 1960s—professors from Ivy League universities and technocratically-minded business executives like Robert McNamara—were called the Whiz Kids. In the 1930s, Franklin Roosevelt had his own cadre known as the Brains Trust. Before that, Woodrow Wilson had an advisory group that included "the cream" of American intelligentsia.[7]

The same mentality operated in India. When the British governed India they relied on an elite group called the Indian Civil Service, which after 1947 was renamed and preserved with modest changes, despite its connections with colonial rule. Chosen through examinations designed to select "the cream of educated youth," the Indian Administrative Service remained powerful in post-independence years.[8] Delhi also created highly-selective institutes in the 1950s to train a new generation of planners and engineers.

In Europe, designers of the EEC envisaged it as an institution led by highly-trained experts. Jean Monnet was inspired by the example of French bureaucracy, which was led by a corps of individuals—"brilliant, confident, and super-rational"—educated in a few elite schools.[9]

Communist systems had their own version of the aristocracy of talent. Lenin's theory of revolution said power should be wielded only by a vanguard that truly grasped the science of Marxism. After the revolution, the Soviet Union built up elite institutions like Moscow State University that became a pathway to high-level posts in government. In China, Mao subscribed to the theory of a revolutionary vanguard but was more hostile to universities. After Mao's death, however, the status of universities improved dramatically. Today, top posts in Chinese government are dominated by technocrats trained at selective institutions like Peking and Tsinghua universities.

The expectation of better decision-making was not predicated only on a bigger talent pool. Decision-makers at the apex of government were also expected to have a more complete picture of the world around them. New communication technologies would make it easier for people at the top to gain a wide-angle view. So would the statistical agencies that were being built up within central governments to collect data about the economy and other aspects of daily life.

The third objective of leaders in great states is reforming society so that it conforms to certain principles of justice and morality. This is the civilising mission. Once again, the pursuit of this mission meant giving more power to central government.

For most of the twentieth century, this civilising mission was about the emancipation of ordinary people. In the Soviet Union and China, revolution was followed by decades in which the civil and political rights of citizens were ruthlessly suppressed. Still, leaders justified these actions in the larger cause of freedom. They were necessary and temporary measures in the campaign to destroy feudalism and capitalism. The ultimate aim was to "bring about a society without unhappiness, oppression, inequality and injustice."[10]

Washington pursued an emancipatory project as well. Franklin Roosevelt said that he was laying the foundations of a welfare state to liberate Americans from "economic slavery."[11] After World War II, Washington passed new laws to help black Americans, one-time victims of actual slavery who were still viciously oppressed. Presidents did not say explicitly that they were civilising Southern states where the oppression of black Americans was most severe. But they demanded that the South conform to "American ideals," which was practically the same thing.

In India, the emancipatory project initially played on liberal and socialist themes. Delhi promised to dissolve feudal and caste structures and honour an ambitious declaration of rights, including social rights not yet recognised in the United States. Europe's emancipatory project was also a liberal one. After the 1990s Brussels became

more active in protecting fundamental rights in member states such as Hungary, Poland, and Austria.

Central governments launched these emancipatory projects because of their profound distrust of sub-central governments. India's first justice minister dismissed local governments as "sinks of ... ignorance [and] narrow-mindedness." [12] Indian state governments were also condemned for their provincial mindsets. Similar disdain prevailed elsewhere. The political scientist William Riker wrote in 1964 that American federalism was simply a scheme for preserving racism.[13] States' rights were seen as the enemy of human rights.

Central authorities were sometimes concerned with homogenization as much as emancipation: they wanted to encourage a common culture and loyalty to their new and fragile states. Soviet leaders used education, art, and propaganda to promote the New Soviet Man: disciplined, hard-headed, and committed to socialism.[14] With similar ambitions, Mao launched a cultural revolution to "touch people to their very souls."[15] Washington in the mid-twentieth century suppressed "un-American" radicalism and imposed loyalty tests. Delhi under Nehru pursued the vision of a liberal, pluralist India, while Brussels promoted the ideal of "European identity."

Forging common culture within great states was hard work. Regions with their own cultures and languages often reacted violently when the centre imposed uniform ways

of thinking and talking. The twentieth century was also a period in which the concept of nationalism gained popularity around the world. Nationalism said that cultural and linguistic minorities should have the right to self-determination. This was at odds with the work of cultural homogenization.

Most leaders of great states in the twentieth century regarded nationalism as the enemy of progress. Nehru even called it a disease. Still, leaders recognised its power and sometimes tried to accommodate it by promising autonomy in cultural affairs to sub-central governments. But this was done reluctantly, with the expectation that nationalist fervor would fade away—either by the homogenizing work of central authorities, or as a side-effect of economic integration and the arrival of mass media.

After 2000, central authorities in most great states shifted their thinking about nationalism. Rather than deploring the concept, leaders embraced and applied it at a higher level. In Russia, China, and India, leaders now emphasise the need for cultural, religious, and linguistic conformity throughout the great state. Everywhere this is justified as an effort to preserve ancient civilisations—or, in the case of the United States, centuries-old "Anglo-Saxon traditions."[16] Even Xi Jinping, head of an avowedly revolutionary party, insists on preserving "traditional Chinese culture."[17] This way of defining the substance of the civilising mission is new and in many ways problematic. But the civilising

mission itself is not new. Central authorities in great states have always undertaken this work.

Security, prosperity, civilisation—these were the three preoccupations of leaders in great states. They were regarded as the prerequisites for greatness, and each political system was structured with an eye to achieving them. Of course, none of these systems were exactly alike. Leninists and liberals started with fundamentally different notions about the most direct route to progress. Still, enthusiasm for centralisation transcended the ideological divide. Even liberals believed that a strong centre would accelerate progress toward these three goals. Leaders of great states were pioneers in large-scale, intensive governance. Centralisation was an experiment. It took time to realise how the experiment could fail.

5. STUPIDITY

Leaders of great states have always emphasised the great accomplishments of centralised governance. Moscow in the Soviet era highlighted the transformation of a rural and illiterate society into an industrial and scientific powerhouse, in the span of only a few decades. Moscow under Putin claims a similar turn-around, restoring a nation shattered in the 1990s to one that is "independent, free and strong" today.[1]

Leaders in India take pride in confounding experts who from the very start doubted the survival prospects of such a large and fractured country. Not only has India survived, but Delhi has made democracy work—in difficult circumstances and on an unprecedented scale. More votes were cast in the 2024 Indian general election than in all British general elections since World War II.

Beijing, meanwhile, trumpets its achievement in constructing the world's second-largest economy and its "complete victory" over extreme poverty.[2] China today is a world leader in building futuristic infrastructure and inventing advanced technologies.

Brussels has its own points of pride. By building up trans-European institutions, advocates of integration brought peace to a continent once wracked by war. The EEC and European Union have enhanced trade, broadened the horizons of citizens, and promoted the ideals of tolerance and freedom. Washington can make similar claims. In the eighty

years following 1941 it mobilised the country against fascism and communism, built a liberal international order, and defended civil rights at home.

We will never know whether less centralised systems might have performed equally well—or even better—under the same historical conditions. And the record of centralised governance is hardly unblemished. Along with great successes there have been devastating failures.

In the realm of economic policy, for example. In 1929, Stalin launched a drive to establish collective farms that set back agricultural production for decades, and caused the death by starvation of millions. Thirty years later, Mao Zedong began a similar reform project, the Great Leap Forward, that also killed millions. In India, Jawaharlal Nehru and a band of technocrats designed an economic development program that short-changed agriculture in favour of heavy industry and self-sufficiency. The Nehruvian program stunted economic growth and social progress for decades.

The United States made its own economic mistakes. In the early 1930s, Washington hiked tariffs and sabotaged international cooperation, making the Great Depression much worse. In the 1980s and 1990s, it pursued a program of trade and financial liberalisation that gutted American manufacturing, increased inequality, and laid the groundwork for the global financial crisis of 2007-2008. In Europe, meanwhile,

response to that crisis was muddled by the failure of policymakers to think through the implications of adopting a common currency a decade earlier.

Great states made great mistakes in social policy as well. In the 1920s Washington began Prohibition—a national "war on booze" that increased scofflawism and organised crime, while doing nothing to curb drinking. A generation later Washington launched its War on Drugs, another "extraordinary failure" of domestic policy.[3] Delhi botched the subject of public education so badly that India has not achieved universal literacy after almost eighty years of independence. In 1979, Beijing launched a one-child policy intended to solve one problem (population growth) which actually created another (an aging society). Soviet Moscow failed to build the new Soviet Man, while Moscow under Putin began health and education reforms that made services worse rather than better.

And finally there were devastating mistakes of foreign policy. India in 1961 sought to strengthen its hand in a border dispute with China, triggering a war it lost badly. The United States in the 1960s and 1970s sent more than two million troops to Vietnam, fighting a war later acknowledged by one of its planners to be "terribly wrong."[4] In 1979 China began its own invasion of Vietnam, intending to "teach some lessons" to its neighbour, and learning some instead.[5] That same year, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan—a decision soon recognised as a "fatal policy error."[6]

The United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001. "We didn't know what we were doing," said an American commander. "We didn't have the foggiest notion of what we were undertaking."[7] The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was equally calamitous. And in 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, wrongly expecting a quick and easy victory. "The Russia we love," said a Russian businessman at the time, "has fallen into the hands of idiots."[8]

At the start of the twentieth century, empires had been criticized for having "the stupidity of giants."[9] Reformers who had advocated for centralisation in the twentieth century were convinced that they could overcome this problem. The "best and the brightest" would be in charge, and from the summit of government they would have a comprehensive view of the terrain. But expectations of smarter decision-making were not realised, for a host of reasons. In practice, centralisation meant the accumulation of brute strength without a corresponding increase in guiding intelligence.

Experience revealed five reasons why people at the top of large centralised systems were at risk of making bad decisions. One was that people at the top were simply not the best and brightest. Stalin by 1948 showed "conspicuous signs of senility."[10] His successor Nikita Khrushchev was "obviously intoxicated much of the time."[11] Nehru, Mao, and Brezhnev were all debilitated in their final years. Ronald Reagan toward the end showed early signs of dementia. Boris Yeltsin was another alcoholic. George W. Bush was "not

intellectually curious."[12] Donald Trump was described by advisors as a "fucking moron."[13] An aging Joe Biden was sometimes tired and confused.

Executive limitations were compounded by court politics. Chief executives usually relied on a small number of core advisors—an informal court, just like the ones that surrounded emperors. In theory, the role of advisors was to give frank advice so that decisions were well-informed. But advisors also knew that they were "temporary people"—Khrushchev's description of the team around Stalin in the 1930s—and that there were risks to conveying bad news or contrary opinions.[14] So the court became a self-contained bubble. Advisors assumed the role of a Praetorian guard, protecting leaders against their critics.

The quality of decision-making at the centre was undermined even more by an extraordinary workload. Centralisation meant that people at the apex of government were compelled to make more decisions, under conditions of tremendous uncertainty and time pressure. The prolonged stress that followed from this burden contributed to a breakdown in the physical and mental health of leaders and their advisors. Decision-makers began to see enemies where there were none, lost their capacity for nuanced thinking, and bristled at dissent. The psychologist Irving Janis called this "groupthink" and suggested that it was a prime cause of "miscalculated" government actions.[15]

There were also more prosaic explanations for executive mistakes. One of these was a simple lack of good information. If leaders at the top are to make good decisions, they need accurate data about what is going on in the world around them—in the economy, society, and global affairs. Leaders depend on bureaucrats to collect and analyse this data. If an information-collecting bureaucracy does not exist, or performs badly, then leaders cannot avoid flying blind.

Stalin was flying blind when he launched collectivization in the 1930s. The Soviet bureaucracy had limited capacity to collect agricultural statistics, so Moscow moved forward on mistaken assumptions about the decline in harvests and hoarding by farmers. China's Great Leap Forward was launched in a similar state of ignorance about rural conditions. Twenty years later, Beijing launched its one-child policy without solid information about the country's actual population and fertility rates. During the Covid pandemic of 2020-21, leaders in all great states acted on bureaucratic data about infection rates that was incomplete and out-of-date.

Experience also showed that frontline bureaucrats had strong incentives to fabricate data to avoid punishment or win favour from their bosses. In the Soviet Union, factory managers exaggerated production figures. During the Great Leap Forward, low-level officials reported spectacular harvests while starvation spread. Decades after Mao's death, Chinese bureaucrats still "catered to the leader" by fabricating data about economic and

social conditions.[16] American soldiers in Vietnam exaggerated villages taken and enemies killed, while their commanding officers polished the data even more. "People told their superiors what they thought they wanted to hear."[17]

At the top of the bureaucratic pyramid there were supposed to be analysts who could test and interpret the information percolating from below. But here too there were problems of incompetence and bias. In the 1960s, Washington suffered from a dearth of experts who really knew Vietnamese politics and society. Forty years later, there was a shortage of people who understood Afghanistan or Iraq, or even spoke the languages of those countries.

We might imagine that chief executives have a strong interest in preserving the data-harvesting and analytic parts of government, but history shows that this is not always the case. Stalin and Mao cut or purged their statistical services because they suspected the experts were disloyal and that the statistics they were compiling would undermine the drive for reform. In India, leaders have long refused to collect census data about caste affiliations, for reasons of principle—refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of caste identity—as well as practical politics. More recently, the government of Narendra Modi has been criticized for altering economic data in its favour.[18] Since his reelection in 2024, Donald Trump has also weakened statistical agencies and blocked the release of data that contradicts his claims about economic revival.

Some critics argued that the problem facing leaders was not simply a shortage of data, but a more profound problem of unknowability. Great states were unlike empires because of their ambitions: they sought to transform economic and social systems within their territory. But these systems were vast and complicated, involving billions of choices made daily by hundreds of millions of people. It was hard enough for statistical agencies to take snapshots of these systems at a single moment, and nearly impossible to comprehend their internal dynamics or predict how they might be altered by governmental action.

The complaint came quickly that leaders of great states had bitten off more than they could chew. In the 1930s and 1940s, conservative economists warned that economic planning was doomed because a modern economy was too intricate to be comprehended and steered by experts. The realm of economic life "is simply not knowable to anybody," warned the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek, "and therefore can hardly be centrally controlled."[19]

Hayek's warning was dismissed at the time. Mid-century planners like India's Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis were convinced that modern economies could be unpuzzled with enough brainpower, computers, and statistical know-how. Even in the United States, presidential advisors were certain of their ability to "fine-tune" the national economy. It was not until the 1970s that this confidence was shaken. Enthusiasts of

planning and fine-tuning realised that the actions of central governments often produced economic stagnation and corruption rather than growth.

The problem of unknowability was not limited to economic affairs. The American "war on booze" demonstrated that ambitious programs of social reform could go awry as well. Prohibition, one sociologist observed in 1939, showed how the "the unexpected results of social action frequently, if not ordinarily, exceed the expected results ... Designed to make the country dry, [prohibition] made it wetter."[20]

The same sort of lesson seemed to follow from social programs launched by Washington in the 1960s. The social scientists who designed these programs had been optimistic about their ability to improve life for poor and oppressed people. Often, though, the results were only modestly good, and sometimes alarmingly bad. Critics put it down to the newly-coined Law of Unintended Consequences. The expert class "had overestimated how much it knew or could hope to know."[21] The law seemed to operate in international affairs as well, giving American defence analysts in the 1980s reason for caution about further military adventures like Vietnam.

The Law of Unintended Consequences was often forgotten. Experience from the "war on booze" did not deter Washington from launching a "war on drugs" in the early 1970s, with similar results: a "general health problem" was now combined with a

"devastating crime problem."[22] And by the early 2000s, Washington had lapsed again into a phase of military adventurism.

This was not entirely a problem of forgetfulness, however. There was something about centralised government that compelled leaders to take action without thinking at all: a "bias for action" that was intensified by the ready availability of massive armies and civilian bureaucracies.

The idea that strong leaders should have a bias for action was promoted by two management experts in a bestselling 1982 book. Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman told executives in government and business it was better to "do anything" rather than bogging down in "cycles and cycles of analyses."[23] Politicians eager to stamp their mark on history did not need much persuasion. The natural incentive when confronted with a problem was to *do something*.

This impulse was reinforced by the existence of military and bureaucratic capabilities. If decision-makers are required to build new agencies or muster new forces to pursue their objectives, careful thought about ends and means is necessary. Spending has to be justified and choices about organization and methods have to be made. But if capabilities already exist, the burden of planning is reduced. Leaders can do something without considering closely whether it is the right thing to do.[24] This became known the Law of Irresistible Use.[25] The debacle in Vietnam illustrated this second law. The United

States rushed into Vietnam because it was easy, given the existence of the post-World War II military-industrial complex. Such action would have been unthinkable a generation before.

For some, this newfound ease of action made it especially important to consciously pause and think first. Defence secretary Caspar Weinberger declared in 1984 that soldiers should only be deployed after Washington had rigorously defined its objectives and considered how military action would achieve them.[26] Weinberger's caution was shared by Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the early 1990s: force should never be "used imprecisely or out of frustration rather than clear analysis."[27]

The Weinberger-Powell doctrine, as it came to be known, had a short life. Presidents and their advisors were incapable of the self-discipline that the doctrine demanded. "What's the point of having this superb military that you're always talking about if we can't use it?" Ambassador Madeleine Albright asked Powell during an argument about intervention in the Balkans in the 1990s.[28] Hesitation about deploying American forces faded throughout the 1990s and disappeared entirely after 2001. The bias to action, reinforced by ready availability of forces, resulted in the disastrous invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. "You've got this great hammer," said an Army officer in Iraq. "Why not go hammer some nails?"[29]

Periodically, leaders would try to improve their capacity for intelligent decision-making. One approach was to create a specialized bureaucracy, directly accountable to the chief executive, with this end in mind. This executive bureaucracy contained staff who liaised with other parts of government and outside groups, analysts who consolidated and assessed incoming information, and senior advisors trusted by the leader.

In the United States, this specialized bureaucracy is known as the Executive Office of the President. Created in 1939, the EOP grew rapidly and now contains almost two thousand employees. Leaders in other great states have similar offices, all of which have expanded over time. The executive bureaucracy for Narendra Modi contains about one thousand people; for Putin, about two thousand; for Xi, probably several thousand more. The Soviet Union at its peak had an executive bureaucracy of perhaps ten thousand.

Experience shows that executive bureaucracies are limited in their capacity to improve the quality of decision-making at the apex of government. Partly this is the result of human nature. Like all of us, leaders have a limited ability to engage intensively with large numbers of people. Regardless of how big the executive bureaucracy becomes, the tendency of leaders is to continue relying on their small circle of confidantes.

Growing executive bureaucracies also confront the problems that plague all large organizations. As size increases, responsibilities are divided and sub-divided, and problems of information flow and coordination grow larger. Procedures for sharing

information and negotiating differences among units within the executive bureaucracy become more elaborate. Decision-making slows down and negotiated outcomes become more conservative. Frustrated leaders may respond by working around the executive bureaucracy, which encourages lower-level officials to end-run standard procedures as well.

Leaders of great states also tried to improve the quality of decision-making by aggressively applying new technologies. In the 1970s, the British theorist Stafford Beer predicted that computerization would allow a dramatic improvement in top-level control. The "governmental brain," as Beer called it, would be fed by "a vast informational network ... run on a basis of 'instant fact.'"[30] By the 2000s, many great states had tried to realise Beer's vision. In the United States after 2001, Washington built databases to provide "total information awareness" about security threats. In 2015, Narendra Modi launched regular meetings to review his government's performance as it appeared on "real-time" digital dashboards.

This techno-centralist vision had its limits. Building and maintaining the necessary information systems was difficult and expensive. Moreover, frontline workers were still able to subvert the system by inputting false data or none at all. The centre might try to eliminate cheating by more intrusive technical surveillance, but important aspects of frontline government could not be monitored this way.

Techno-centralism also confronted a larger problem. Beer correctly predicted in 1972 that the digital revolution would produce "a huge surge of information" toward the top of the governmental pyramid.[31] But technology did not produce an equivalent expansion of processing capacity at the top. A small number of humans struggled with the surge of information from below. The White House suffered "sensory overload" as the upward flow of intelligence intensified after the terrorist attacks of September 2001. "It was like being stuck in a room listening to Led Zeppelin music," said one advisor. "That's when mistakes got made."[32]

The digital revolution complicated the lives of chief executives in other ways as well. Social movements coalesced more rapidly and bombarded government with their demands. Old forms of media—newspapers and broadcast media—declined in relevance, along with the predictable news cycle that structured their work. Domestic and foreign news circulated almost instantaneously, demanding immediate response. Leaders and their staffs struggled in a world where crises appeared without warning and spiralled rapidly.

For leaders and staff within executive bureaucracies, this new world was extraordinarily stressful. A senior aide to President Barack Obama described a workplace in which it was impossible to get adequate rest: a neurological exam after three years of

service found she was "functioning on fifty percent" of her usual capacity.[33] "I wish I could get more bandwidth," Obama himself said during the 2011 Libya crisis, "It's hard to get a grasp on what's happening."[34]

In 2014 Obama told reporters that he had adopted a simple credo: Don't Do Stupid Shit. He called it the Obama Doctrine, while others called it DDSS. The new philosophy was a shift from 2008, when Obama had told voters: "now is not the time for small plans."[35] The next six years had revealed to the president that the world was a "complicated and messy place," that the risk of miscalculation within the presidential pressure cooker was high, and that the consequences of error could be devastating.[36]

DDSS was an appeal for caution, like the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine. It was equally ephemeral. After his inauguration in 2025, Donald Trump threw caution to the wind, promising dramatic change across the spectrum of domestic and foreign affairs. His strategy was "flooding the zone"—that is, confounding the opposition by the sheer scale of reform. But flooding the zone meant flooding the White House too. The president and his staff struggled to execute this sweeping program of reform in a coherent and disciplined way. The administration's actions seemed arbitrary and reckless, because very often they were.

6. GRIDLOCK

The historian G.M. Trevelyan once argued that a durable system of government requires a certain amount of "executive efficiency."[1] He meant that leaders, confronting immense and often dangerous challenges, should be able to make and execute decisions in a timely way. Of course, executive efficiency is not a virtue if those decisions are made stupidly, as we saw in the last chapter. But we should be equally concerned if the system does not allow decisions to be made at all: if the leaders are immobilised while problems pile up. In the United States, this is called gridlock.

Gridlock was a chronic problem in all great states. Decision-making was relatively easy in moments when there was a sense of common purpose or solidarity within the ruling group—what the philosopher Ibn Khaldun once called *'asibiyyah*. However, such moments were rare. More often, factions within the ruling groups of great states disagreed sharply about problems facing the state and how to deal with them. This meant delay or confusion in government action.

Leaders sometimes tried to restore a sense of common purpose within the ruling group by purging troublesome factions. But purges were not always possible, for practical or moral reasons. As a result, strife within the leadership group persisted, along with confusion and delay. As an alternative, opposing factions negotiated *de facto* peace

treaties in which each side agreed to leave the other alone. But these standstill agreements were also unsatisfactory, because potentially disruptive questions were removed from the decision agenda entirely.

Lower levels of government sometimes tried to compensate for gridlock at the centre, but in heavily centralised systems there was a limit to what lower-tier governments could do. Executives in the regions lacked authority or money, and sometimes they too were embroiled in factional struggles at the centre. The end result was that political systems as a whole became more fragile and prone to collapse. In one instance—that of the Soviet Union—the system really did collapse. All of this was ironic, because one of the promises of centralisation was that it would make systems more resilient, not less.

Of all great states, the European Union is generally regarded as the one most prone to gridlock. In 1998, the political scientist Jan Zielonka described a condition that he called *euro-paralysis*: "When it comes to making decisions ... the Union is unable to cope, even with trivial things."[2] Policy gridlock, Simon Hix agreed in 2008, is the system's main weakness.[3] "The system is not made for speed or dynamism," said Ian Kershaw in 2018. "The flywheels and crankshafts of the great 'compromise factory' grind slowly."[4]

Euro-paralysis is a product of institutional design. Authority in Brussels is more diffused than in other capitals—between the European Council, the European

Commission, the Council of Ministers, and the European Parliament. For outsiders it can be difficult to see who exactly is in charge. "Sometimes I get them mixed up," President Barack Obama admitted in 2014.[5] Negotiating between multiple power centres means inevitable delays. Reforms of the 1990s that gave the European Parliament more power to review laws proposed by the European Commission resulted in a significant slowdown of decision-making speed.[6]

Still, this is not the main source of gridlock within the European Union. The original rule for decision-making within the EU's predecessor, the European Economic Community, was that laws would not be adopted unless every member state, represented within the Council of Ministers, also agreed. The plan was always to shift away from unanimity to a form of super-majority voting, but progress in that direction was slow. There are still many topics on which unanimity is formally required, and EU culture continues to emphasise consensus regardless of voting rules. Super-majority requirements also make it easy for small blocs of member states to impede new laws.

The number of member states has also increased over the years—from ten in 1985 to twenty-seven in 2025. The addition of more countries has slowed down decision-making and increased the risk of gridlock, despite the shift toward more flexible voting rules.

In a succession of recent crises, quick action by Brussels has been compromised by dissenting blocs of member states. During the global financial crisis, Germany and other

northern states dragged their heels on aid for failing banks and distressed southern governments. Central and Eastern European states blocked action by Brussels on the migration crisis of 2015-17. Several small states have obstructed efforts to rationalize tax policies across the Union over the past decade. Poland and Hungary have blocked efforts to monitor rule-of-law violations within their territories, and joined with other countries to weaken EU policies on climate change.

In the realm of foreign policy, where the unanimity rule is more firmly rooted, the problem of gridlock is even more pronounced. For decades, critics have lamented the EU's inability to act decisively in response to events—from the Balkans crisis of the 1990s to the Russian invasion of Ukraine today. The European Union "is crippled by its own rules," the former Belgian prime minister Guy Verhofstadt has observed. "The Americans and Chinese can decide immediately, and we do not have the means to do likewise ... We always act too little, too late."[7]

Policymakers in the administration of President George W. Bush were brutal in their criticism of euro-paralysis after the terror attacks of September 2001. The European Union, said John Bolton, had a "proclivity to avoid confronting and actually resolving problems."[8] By contrast, the United States seemed to confront its problems head-on. The Bush administration had acted decisively in response to the 2001 attacks. Laws to

strengthen homeland security and fight the war on terrorism passed Congress with massive majorities.

The American system was never intended to promote executive efficiency exclusively. The constitutional design embraces factionalism, by dividing power between the president, two legislative chambers, and the judiciary. But two factors reduced the risk of gridlock for most of the twentieth century. One was the persistent threat of war—World War II, the Cold War, and George W. Bush's Global War on Terror—which encouraged factions to pull together for the sake of national security. "This is a war," Franklin Roosevelt said in 1942, "Politics is out."[9]

The second mitigating factor was an apparent convergence in political culture after the 1930s. Political differences between regions that had been intense before the 1930s seemed to fade afterward. The same appeared true of differences between parties. In 1960, sociologist Daniel Bell celebrated "the end of ideology" in the United States. He thought politics was evolving into "pragmatic give-and-take rather than a series of wars to the death."[10] Thirty years later, Francis Fukuyama predicted that the main challenge of post-Cold War politics would be managing boredom.[11]

No one thinks that boredom is a problem today. An ideological chasm has opened between supporters of the Democratic and Republican parties. According to polls, most

voters perceive a fundamental disagreement between parties on core American values. They fear their "entire way of life" will be threatened if the wrong party takes power.[12]

Polarization is obvious in Congress as well. In the House of Representatives and Senate, party caucuses are more ideologically divided than they were sixty years ago. In the past, legislators from one party often voted for bills from the other. Few are prepared to do that today.

Today's Congress, says political scientist Sarah Binder, "struggles to legislate."[13] While bills are still introduced on major issues, they are less likely to be passed into law. Meanwhile existing laws are no longer reviewed routinely, as they ought to be. Partisan conflict also means that the schedule for passing federal budgets has been abandoned. More often than in the past, the federal bureaucracy is required to stop working because Congress cannot agree on temporary funding while larger budget disputes are resolved.

The philosophy of presidential power known as Unitary Executive Theory has gained popularity precisely because it promises relief from congressional gridlock. By expanding presidential authority, the system as a whole would recover its "capacity to act with energy, consistency and decisiveness."[14]

Over the last fifteen years, presidents of both parties have also tried to circumvent gridlock on Capitol Hill by stretching the discretion granted to them under existing laws. But actions taken through presidential discretion are not as durable as those authorized

by new laws. They can be reversed when a differently-minded president takes office. ("One good thing about executive orders," Donald Trump said in 2016, "With just a signature they're all gone."[15]) As control of the White House has seesawed between parties, executive orders have been published, withdrawn, and published again.

Today, Washington is widely perceived as "dysfunctional"—unable to formulate a "strong and coherent response" to problems facing it.[16] In the days when Washington's agenda was more limited, dysfunction might have been less of a worry. But centralisation within the American system has raised the stakes. Washington has shouldered responsibilities for a range of problems for which it cannot offer timely solutions.

Vladimir Lenin was obsessed with the danger of gridlock from the start of the Soviet experiment. Success, he believed, depended on strict solidarity within the leadership of the Bolshevik Party. Lenin himself fought for dominance over other factions within the party. Afterward he achieved it, the party command called for "the complete elimination of all factionalism," warning that the new regime was too fragile for "the luxury of discussions and disputes."[17]

Factionalism was contained so long as Lenin remained in good health. His death in 1924 led to a resurgence of conflict within the elite. The result was confusion in government policy. As the balance of power within the elite shifted, Moscow oscillated on

state control of the economy, tolerance for free expression, and support for revolutionary movements in other countries. This period of confusion ended in 1929, when Stalin finally purged rivals and established his dominance as party leader.

The story repeated itself when Stalin himself died in 1953. At first, Stalin's inner circle made a show of "collective leadership," promising to avoid the kind of internecine struggle that had followed Lenin's death thirty years earlier. But unity did not last long. Nikita Khrushchev schemed against rivals, foiled plots to oust him, and gained preeminence in 1957. But he could not thwart a second ouster attempt in 1964, led by his one-time protégé Leonid Brezhnev.

The Soviet government stuttered between 1953 and 1964, just as it had in the 1920s. Once again, policies were weapons of struggle within the elite. Leaders outside the Soviet Union spent much of that decade struggling to comprehend what was happening inside Moscow. Were its actions part of some hard-to-discern plan, American policymakers wondered, or simply the result of "confusion and weakness" in the Kremlin?[18]

Once in charge, Leonid Brezhnev devised his own solution to the problem of factionalism within the Soviet elite. Rather than purging rivals, Brezhnev made peace with them. Contentious questions were avoided, and purges were suspended. Brezhnev said that the aim of his policy was achieving "stability of cadres." Factions within the party were allowed to control segments of the state apparatus so long as they did not

invade the realms of other factions. It was not entirely live and let live: Brezhnev himself gradually acquired more power. But the turbulence of earlier years was avoided. Brezhnev remained in power until his death in 1982.

Gridlock was the price of achieving peace within the ruling elite. The strategy of conciliation among factions made it impossible to pursue significant reforms. Directions from Moscow were ignored by lower-level officials who understood that there was little risk of being removed for obstructionism. Corruption spread throughout the system as officials realised they could exploit their authority with impunity.

Added to this was decay within the leadership group itself. Senior members of the party remained in place until they retired or died. "The most striking characteristic of this group as a whole is its advanced age," a 1983 analysis said, "one higher than at any time in Soviet history ... and in the comparable group in any industrial society."[19] Well before his death in 1982, Brezhnev was incapacitated by illness. His two immediate successors died within months of taking charge.

Mikhail Gorbachev, who became Soviet leader in 1985, was withering in his criticism of the Brezhnev years. He described it as a "period of stagnation" that had fossilized Soviet society and its economy.[20] Gorbachev tried to undo the damage through an ambitious program of restructuring or *perestroika* that quickly spun out of control. In

the end, Brezhnev's method of managing factionalism led to the collapse of the entire system.

Like Lenin, Mao Zedong saw factionalism as one of the main problems facing the Chinese Communist Party. Internal divisions prevented decisiveness. "We must build a centralised, unified Party," Mao said in 1942, "and make a clean sweep of all unprincipled factional struggles."[21]

Mao addressed factionalism just as Stalin did. In the early 1940s, he waged a campaign against dissent within the Communist Party even as the party itself warred against the Guomindang and Japanese. After the People's Republic was created in 1949, purges became commonplace, as Mao sought to eliminate "all erroneous ideas, all poisonous weeds" as well as the people who promoted them.[22]

Mao intended to stiffen the spine of Chinese government by creating a sense of common purpose within the party leadership and its membership. But his relentlessness in pursuing enemies had the opposite effect. The harshness and arbitrariness of Mao's policies cast a pall of fear over the party, and relations within the elite became poisonous. By the early 1970s, "rival leaders no longer communicated with one another ... Politburo meetings were no more than a stage for ritualized confrontations."[23]

Factional conflict intensified as Mao grew ill and after he died in 1976. Reformers within the party leadership fought against hardline followers of Mao and eventually gained the upper hand. Next, there was a split within the camp of reformers that was not resolved until Deng Xiaoping established himself as China's paramount leader in 1981.

"Unless factionalism is eliminated," Deng had said in 1975, "stability and unity cannot be achieved."[24] But Deng proposed to tame factionalist strife without purges. Deng promised collective leadership and rules that would temper the struggle for power within the elite, such as fixed retirement ages, term limits for senior positions, and more careful succession planning. Deng's formula seemed to avoid Brezhnev-style stagnation by assuring that the senior leadership would be refreshed constantly.

In fact, the transition to true collective leadership was slow. Deng and other elder statesmen continued to play a dominant role even though they held no formal titles, and Deng often weighed in against conservatives who were opposed to his program of economic liberalisation. Division within the party elite slowed the pace of economic reform until it was finally resolved in Deng's favour in 1992.

The model of collective leadership promoted by Deng only took root after his death in 1997. It was perfected between 2002 and 2012, when Hu Jintao served as party head. Hu conspicuously refused to identify himself as the core or paramount leader as his

predecessors had done, and promoted a culture of "power-sharing and consensus-finding" within the party elite.[25]

Early reviews of Hu's approach to governance were favourable, but later reviews were not. Just as the Brezhnev years became known as an "era of stagnation," the Hu years became known as "the lost decade." Critics within China complained about Beijing's tendency toward *wuwei*, or inaction. The practice of consensus-seeking had reduced open warfare among factions, but also meant neglect of growing economic and social problems. Corruption within the party increased, just as it had under Brezhnev, while party discipline faltered.

Xi Jinping came to power in 2012 determined to break the Hu-era gridlock in Beijing. Xi, too, sees factionalism as a threat to good governance. But he rejects the notion that the problem can be solved through conciliation. Factions, Xi's propaganda department said in 2022, "must be shown no mercy ... All malignant tumors growing from the Party's healthy tissue must be resolutely excised."[26] Anti-corruption campaigns have become his preferred tool for maintaining ideological cohesion within the system.

The Indian republic is almost eighty years old and for much of that time Delhi avoided gridlock. Nehru had firm command over government and party from 1951 to 1964. So did Indira Gandhi from 1971 to 1977 and 1980 to 1984, Rajiv Gandhi from 1984

to 1989, and Modi after 2014. In sum that accounts for about forty years of Indian independence. It leaves an almost equal block of time in which power struggles in Delhi caused paralysis and confusion.

Factionalism was a danger at the moment of independence. Nehru's authority within Congress was challenged by a conservative bloc led by Vallabhbhai Patel. But Patel died in 1950 and Nehru soon consolidated his position as leader of the party.

More instability followed Nehru's death in 1964. Conservatives within Congress installed a pliable successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri, who died within eighteen months. Shastri was followed by Indira Gandhi, who was expected to be equally compliant. Congress under Gandhi won a bare majority in the election of 1967.

After the election, infighting worsened. Gandhi was more independent than expected and shifted sharply to the left, partly to distinguish herself from the party establishment. Congress split in two in 1969, and Gandhi remained in power with support from other left-wing parties. She regained her footing after winning a large majority in the 1971 general election.

The years between 1964 and 1971 were difficult for India. Some thought the country was verging on collapse. But in this critical moment the country lacked consistent leadership. Congress itself was "bedevilled with crises."[27] Planning fell apart and important economic decisions were mishandled.

Gandhi and Congress were replaced by the Janata Party after the general election of 1977. Janata had a legislative majority, but it was a disparate coalition united mainly by determination to remove Gandhi from office and restore democratic rule. Wracked by internal conflicts, the Janata government collapsed after two years. Gandhi won reelection in 1980 by promising "a government that works."[28] Congress ruled with majorities for the rest of the decade.

In 1989, the country returned to a long period in which no single party held a legislative majority. Over the next fifteen years, India switched prime ministers seven times. The norm was coalition government, in which prime ministers were constrained by agreements negotiated among party leaders. Ministers were often chosen by other parties and treated their departments as fiefdoms.

During this time, Delhi began removing economic controls that stifled growth. But coalition politics meant economic reform was slow and confused. The Indian and Chinese economies were evenly matched in the 1980s, but by 2004 India was far behind. Corruption increased as coalition partners struck deals and ignored misconduct.

The election of 2004 saw the advent of a new coalition, the United Progressive Alliance led by Congress. Over the next decade, UPA suffered the usual problems of coalition government: confusion about leadership, delay in reform, and massive scandals. Delhi, commentators observed, seemed to suffer from "a devil called policy paralysis."[29]

The years of UPA rule paralleled those of Hu Jintao. The Hu years had been condemned in China as a "lost decade," and Xi Jinping took power with the promise of more decisive leadership. Similarly in India: The UPA era was also "a lost decade," Narendra Modi said during the 2014 election. Like Xi, Modi promised the centre would again be treated "with awe and respect."[30]

The ideal of centralisation was a system in which rulers at the apex of government would address problems quickly and intelligently. This ideal was not often realised. In practice, concentration of power also meant an intensification of political conflict at the centre. Leaders might condemn factionalism, but it was nearly impossible to avoid it. For long stretches of time, the centre drifted, as factional wars were waged or mediated through Brezhnev-style peace treaties.

Gridlock at the centre would have been less of a problem if lower-level governments had the capacity to compensate by taking action on their own. In fact, this sometimes happened. In India, the coalition years from 1989 to 2004 are remembered as a period in which state governments began to behave more entrepreneurially in pursuit of growth. Provincial governments in China did the same during the Hu years. Stalemate at the centre made it hard to restrain ambitious officials at lower levels.

However, the compensatory effect of sub-central action was usually modest. In most systems—the European Union is the exception—the capabilities of sub-central governments are severely constrained. Often they lacked the legal authority to take action, and their capacity to raise money by taxing or borrowing was limited. In some systems, like the United States, the institutional set-up within sub-central governments has made them gridlock-prone as well. The ineffectuality of American state governments has been neglected for decades, because people assumed that Washington would take care of major social and economic problems.

As this observation suggests, there are cultural as well as institutional barriers to compensatory action by sub-central governments. Because political culture within great states has developed so that citizens look habitually to the centre, they have been slow to recognise the potential for action at lower levels. At the same time, politics at different levels is often so entangled that sub-central leaders hesitate to do anything that upsets factional struggle at the centre.

The end result is that great states have often found themselves in the worst of all worlds. The centre cannot act decisively, sub-central governments cannot compensate adequately, and problems fester as a result. Centralisation within great states was intended to improve resilience for the system as a whole. Gridlock at the centre meant more fragility instead.

7. SCLEROSIS

The empires that dominated the globe before the mid-twentieth century claimed vast territories, but their ambitions within those territories were modest by today's standards. Partly this was because imperial rulers did not have the bureaucratic or technological capacity to govern intensively. Empires had long arms but weak fingers.[1] Rulers of empires also faced lower expectations. Ideas like economic planning and respect for human rights were not yet established.

Great states faced a bigger challenge than empires. They aimed to police their territory more closely, provide more help to citizens, and do more to spur the economy. Administrative systems were built to perform all these tasks. Centralisation meant that these tended to be polity-wide systems: that is, they encompassed the whole of the territory and population. The design of these systems varied. At one extreme, they were staffed entirely by bureaucrats who were employed by central government. At the other, a small number of central bureaucrats steered the ship, while most of the work was done by lower-level governments and contractors.

Whatever the design, these administrative systems were unprecedented in size and complexity. A single system—such as policing, healthcare, or education—often included thousands of agencies, employed millions of people, and spent massive amounts of money.

Regulatory systems might oversee hundreds of thousands of businesses. Hundreds of millions of citizens depended on the services provided by these systems.

Often, though, these systems did not work well. Directives from leaders at the top of the system did not produce changes in the behaviour of officials at the bottom. Bureaucrats dragged their feet and money did not go where it was supposed to. Local actors continued doing business as they always had.

Not only were systems unmanageable: they were unreformable. Systems were so big and complicated, and so well-defended by vested interests, that restructuring was nearly impossible, even when it was clear that they were not working properly. The people who designed these skyscraper-systems had never anticipated the day when they would need to be rebuilt or torn down completely.

There was a third problem too. Leaders began to fear their creations. They worried that the bureaucracy had formed into a political force that threatened their own primacy. Leaders searched for ways of containing this new force. Sometimes they even declared war on the bureaucratic class—a tactic that had the perverse effect of destroying their own capacity to govern effectively.

Administrative systems were supposed to be instruments that leaders could use to shape the rhythms of daily life throughout the polity. Signals sent from the top would

pulse through the "nervous system" of government, stimulating the extremities into appropriate action.[2] Such was the theory: reality was different.

"You'd think I could change anything in this country," Nikita Khrushchev said in 1963. "Like hell I can. Russia's like a tub full of dough. You put your hand in it, down to the bottom, and you think you're master of the situation. When you first pull out your hand, a little hole remains, but then, before your very eyes, the dough expands into a spongy, puffy mass. That's what Russia is like!"[3]

Soon after, Lyndon Johnson launched his War on Poverty, which included programs to eliminate destitution and blight in American cities. After-action reports in the 1970s were sobering: many programs did not perform as expected. Experience revealed "a wide chasm between high officials who inaugurate programs and the bureaucrats who are put in the trenches to fight for their implementation."[4] One study compared federal initiatives to Rube Goldberg machines, absurdly complicated schemes that amazed observers by functioning at all.

Mao was equally frustrated by his inability to manipulate the extremities of government. The state apparatus constructed after 1949 was "profoundly conservative ... [and] very hard to shift."[5] A half-century later, Beijing still wrestled against local officials who simply ignored unwelcome directives. India, meanwhile, was diagnosed in 2009 as "a flailing state ... in which the head is no longer reliably connected via nerves and sinews to

its own limbs." Frontline workers such as policemen or teachers seemed "beyond the control" of political leaders.[6]

Political leaders in great states expressed a frustration with bureaucracy that transcended ideological differences. It is no surprise that Ronald Reagan complained about bureaucratic slothfulness and inefficiency in the 1970s and 1980s. But Lenin also railed against the "scourge of bureaucracy" decades earlier.[7] Stalin and Mao despaired as well. Just as Reagan was being inaugurated as president, Deng Xiaoping launched his own assault against bureaucratism, which he called a "major and widespread problem" for the Chinese state.[8]

Chinese and Roman emperors had lamented about bureaucratism two thousand years before. But ancient imperial bureaucracies were small compared to those of modern great states. Management experts in the mid-twentieth century realised how, as bureaucracy thickened, the risk increased that instructions from the top would be mangled or ignored. Anthony Downs called this the Law of Diminishing Control.[9]

Similarly, the flow of money from the centre could be reduced to a trickle as it descended through layers of bureaucracy—either because of the unavoidable costs of organization, bureaucratic feather-bedding, or outright corruption. This came to be known as leakage. In 1985, Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi guessed that only fifteen

percent of money allocated by Delhi for social development reached the people it was supposed to help.

The modern-era control problem was compounded by a change in the type of work done by officials at the bottom of the pyramid. Education, healthcare and other social services, and even policing, are intricate tasks. They require skilled judgement by frontline officials about how to treat individual cases.

The intricacy of frontline work complicates control in two ways. First, simple rules about frontline work that are issued from the top are unlikely to be appropriate much of the time. Second, intricacy makes it more difficult for people at the top to judge whether people at the bottom are doing their jobs properly. Leaders can only monitor what is easily measured, and important aspects of intricate work are often immeasurable.

So far we have assumed that leaders oversee solitary bureaucratic pyramids. But the administrative systems of great states are rarely like that. Often there are several pyramids in a row, all of which must act in a coordinated way to solve a problem, and which often fail to do so. Or there is one pyramid stacked on many other pyramids: a bureaucracy within central government attempting to steer dozens of bureaucracies within provincial or state governments. Or there are composite pyramids, built with different types of blocks: some tasks are performed by bureaucrats, while others contracted to private businesses.

The European Union provides the extreme case of one pyramid stacked on other pyramids. Brussels does little on its own. The execution of laws and directives depends almost entirely on work by bureaucrats within the governments of member states. Brussels tries to monitor whether member states are following its laws and directives, but lacks strong tools for dealing with determined resistance. Proper implementation of Brussels' decisions has been called the Achilles' heel of the European project.[10]

In the United States, meanwhile, Donald Kettl sees a widespread practice of "interwoven governance" that entwines federal and state bureaucracies in the delivery of services—and also contractors, who are hired not just to deliver services but also to monitor other contractors. Interwoven governance is "inherently more complicated" than work through single bureaucracies, Kettl says: "more prone to the risks of fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement; harder to manage; and harder to hold accountable."[11]

For an example of interwoven governance, consider the American defence establishment. More than 700,000 civilians work in the Defence Department, supporting 1.3 million military personnel. There are another 400,000 personnel in federally-funded state forces known as National Guards, and several million civilians working for defence contractors or related federal agencies like the Department of Veterans Affairs.

In 1961, President Dwight Eisenhower called this the military-industrial complex. Built as a tool for national defence, the complex acquired a life of its own. Eisenhower feared that it would have "unwarranted influence .... in the councils of government."[12] Certainly the complex was good at self-preservation. Reforming or slimming the defence establishment since World War II has been notoriously difficult.

The challenge of defence reform is not unique to the United States. Soviet leaders were equally frustrated by the obduracy of their military-industrial complex. Vladimir Putin has struggled to modernise the Russian military for a quarter-century with limited success, illustrated by its poor performance during the invasion of Ukraine, during which it was forced to offer pardons to prisoners who were ready to fight.

After Eisenhower gave a name to the military-industrial complex, Americans saw parallels elsewhere: a healthcare complex, a drug-war complex, a higher education complex, an agribusiness complex, and more. All are governed in large part by federal laws, supported by federal government money, and serviced by components of the federal bureaucracy. And all are impervious to fundamental restructuring. Regarding the healthcare complex, Paul Starr observes that the United States "has ensnared itself in a policy trap—a costly, extraordinarily complicated system" that is deeply resistant to change.[13]

India also has policy complexes that have resisted reform. The web of industrial controls set up in the 1950s and known as the "licence raj" was only dismantled forty years later in the face of economic crisis, and even then only partially. Many controls have persisted into the twenty-first century. Controversy has dogged attempts to dismantle state-owned enterprises and revise labor and land laws, agricultural subsidies, and food rationing schemes. The distinguished economist Arvind Subramanian observed in 2018 that "the inability to facilitate or engineer exit out of inefficient policies" was a major constraint on India's economic progress.[14]

Even Beijing has encountered limits to reform, despite its authoritarian advantages. It laboured after the 1980s to eliminate many of its state-owned firms. Overhaul of property laws and local government financing has proved equally difficult. Reversal of the one-child policy took decades. The country still maintains a household registration system created during the Great Leap Forward despite its massive economic and social costs.

After Russia's 2012 presidential election, Vladimir Putin issued a barrage of orders on domestic reforms. Five years later, a Putin official conceded that only one-fifth had been properly implemented. At home, Putin has proved to be a "weak strongman."[15] He has struggled to overhaul policing, education, healthcare and pensions, and simply avoided economic reforms that were "by their nature complex and difficult to implement."[16]

The focus in the European Union is primarily on constructing new systems, rather than overhauling old ones. But the challenge of reform is still evident. The Common Agricultural Policy, a system of subsidies and supports for farmers across Europe, was introduced in 1962. It has been modified since, but never without immense difficulty. Some say CAP is essentially "irreformable."[17]

A common explanation for the durability of large administrative systems is vested interests. Every system gives birth to a constellation of people benefiting from it—not just clients, but also the bureaucrats and contractors who run it, and politicians representing regions in which facilities and jobs are located. All these people are motivated to maintain the status quo. There is no equally strong lobby for change, because gains from reform are usually speculative and diffused. The end result of this imbalance in forces, political scientist Mancur Olson suggested in 1982, is systemic sclerosis.[18]

But vested interests are not the only cause of sclerosis. Decision rules within a polity may contribute as well. Consider the European Union, where there are many points in the policymaking process at which member states or other actors can exercise a veto on new laws or policies. We usually think of these veto points as impediments to the creation of administrative systems. However, they impede the renovation of systems too. The initial design of a system is locked-in, even after its inefficiency or obsolescence has become clear.

Sclerosis is also a side-effect of old age. The practical problems of running large systems are innumerable. As time passes, these problems are resolved by adopting more detailed laws, regulations, and bureaucratic routines. This relentless thickening of law and procedure has consequences for people inside and outside the system. Insiders spend years learning how the system works—making an investment in expertise that could be rendered worthless by broad reforms. For outsiders, meanwhile, the system becomes increasingly hard to understand. For everyone, diagnosing what is wrong with the system and predicting the effects of reform becomes more difficult.

In the mid-twentieth century, conservatives like Friedrich Hayek warned against attempts at economic and social planning, on the grounds that the economy and society were too complicated to be properly understood and regulated by central authorities. In a sense, great states recreated this predicament when they established massive administrative systems. They built new black boxes. Breaking those boxes open was hard and risky—something to be avoided unless a system was deeply in crisis.

Leaders who were frustrated by the rigidity of administrative systems sometimes resorted to reform tactics reminiscent of wartime. They tried to break resistance by concentrated effort, sometimes called campaigning or storming. As the reformer Mikhail Gorbachev said in 1987: "We must keep bombing [the system] from all directions."[19] Campaigning was often brutal in the short run and ineffective in the long run. Every

campaign had to end eventually, because officials had a limited attention span and were neglecting other problems in the meantime. When the attention of leaders inevitably turned elsewhere, systems reverted to old ways of working.

Sometimes leaders just gave up the fight. Fundamental reform meant years of labor with no promise of success. For leaders who knew their time in office was limited, the sensible approach was accepting the status quo. This is the attitude toward healthcare reform in the United States today. Everyone sees that the system is grossly inefficient. Few politicians are prepared to wage a long campaign to redesign it.

Heads of great states were regularly frustrated when bureaucrats ignored orders and looked after their own material interests. But leaders had a deeper concern as well. They suspected that the bureaucracy had coalesced into a distinct political force that was fighting them for control of government. Suspicion among leaders sometimes tipped toward paranoia. Leaders then declared war on bureaucrats, with perverse results. Meaning to consolidate their own power, leaders inadvertently destroyed their capacity to get things done.

Lenin was one of the first to perceive the bureaucracy as a rival. "If we take that huge bureaucratic machine," he said to colleagues in 1922, "we must ask: who is directing

whom?"[20] Lenin concluded that bureaucrats were really in charge. The bureaucracy had become a "distinct social element" that Marxist theory had not anticipated.[21]

Others agreed with Lenin's analysis. Leon Trotsky called the Soviet bureaucracy "an uncontrolled caste."[22] In 1957 a Yugoslav theorist, Milovan Djilas, extended the diagnosis to all communist states. He called the bureaucracy "the new ruling class ... closely in-grown and in complete authority."[23] Mao Zedong declared in 1970 that the Chinese bureaucracy was struggling for power against the party itself.

Such anxiety was not limited to communist states. In the United States, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal kindled fears among conservatives about a "new Ruling Class ... [of] bureaucrats, administrators, and experts."[24] They called it the administrative state. Antagonism toward the administrative state became a touchstone of post-World War II conservative politics, and especially among Trump Republicans.

In India, fears about bureaucratic power focused on the Indian Administrative Service, an elite corps set up during British rule and modified only slightly after independence. Freedom fighters had disdained the British corps as a "ruling caste" and many viewed the IAS the same way. Indira Gandhi called it an "orthodox and conservative" body hostile to her government's agenda.[25] In Europe, meanwhile, anxiety fixated on officialdom in Brussels—a "foreign technocracy," Charles De Gaulle claimed in 1965, that was responsible to no one.[26]

Leaders devised techniques for boxing in the bureaucratic class. Lenin's invention, still used in China, was a party organization that shadowed the state bureaucracy from top to bottom. Key positions within the state bureaucracy were filled by the party rather than through conventional civil service rules. This technique of asserting direct political control over key positions is also used in the United States. A newly-elected president makes roughly four thousand political appointments across the federal government.

Leaders devised other methods of forging what Indira Gandhi called a "committed bureaucracy." The toolkit included loyalty tests, programs of indoctrination, and purges of officials suspected of disloyalty. (Stalin said purges were a way of "draining the swamp."[27] Trump used the same phrase eighty years later.) Leaders modified hiring requirements for the civil service, and rules about promotion and placement, to put less emphasis on skills and more on loyalty, or simply to put bureaucrats on edge.

Partisans within the administration of President Ronald Reagan looked for ways of undercutting bureaucrats rather than winning them over. Political appointees were advised to exclude career civil servants from policy discussions and keep them in the dark about overall strategy. Bureaucrats would "see and work on the individual pieces, but never have enough of the pieces to be able to learn the entire picture."[28] Mao used similar methods to keep bureaucrats in their place.[29]

Sometimes leaders tried to weaken the bureaucracy through campaigns of demoralization and delegitimization. A senior official in the second Trump administration explained: "We want the bureaucrats to be traumatically affected. When they wake up in the morning, we want them to not want to go to work because they are increasingly viewed as the villains."[30] Similarly, Xi Jinping's anti-corruption efforts produced "palpable fear" throughout the Chinese bureaucracy about making an ideological or political mistake.[31] Disloyal officials, the party headquarters said in 2020, should be regarded as enemies of the people.[32]

Campaigns against the bureaucratic class never worked exactly as intended. The Leninist strategy of building a shadow party organization had the unintended effect of burdening the state with two large bureaucracies. Complaints about bureaucratism that were initially directed against civil servants were soon directed against the party officials who has been assigned the task of monitoring them.

The strategy of replacing civil servants in key positions with party appointees also had limitations. Loyalists were not always competent. In China, this became known as the "red versus expert" problem. The problem arose in the United States as well, for example during the federal government's failed response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency was a solidly red Republican but proved to be inept in disaster management. More generally, research shows that the

performance of U.S. federal agencies declines as the number of political appointees within them increases.

More aggressive campaigns against bureaucracy—Stalin's purges, Mao's Cultural Revolution, Trump's effort to "deconstruct the administrative state"—have even more baleful consequences. Fearful bureaucrats bury bad news, withhold advice, and stop taking initiative. And in moments of crisis, the state no longer has the capacity to respond nimbly. When Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Stalin realised that he had purged some of his best generals. The Cultural Revolution had a devastating effect on Beijing's ability to govern in the 1970s and early 1980s. In 2025, the Trump administration sometimes reversed itself after ill-planned mass firings. Many of the critical workers it had thoughtlessly dismissed refused to return.

Twentieth-century governments were often criticized for their penchant for monumentalism: they liked to build giant dams, highways, power stations and housing projects. But monumentalism was expressed through bureaucracy as much as it was through concrete and steel. Great states built administrative systems that were bigger and more complicated than anything the world had ever seen. The total population of many countries is smaller than the number of people now working in the US military-industrial or healthcare complexes.

These administrative systems were constructed because leaders of superstates had high ambitions and systems were necessary to achieve those ambitions. The hypothesis was that these systems would be precision instruments, and that if they did not work properly they could be fixed or replaced. By the early twenty-first century, it was clear that the hypothesis was mistaken: massive administrative systems were difficult to manage and nearly impossible to reform. These systems also spawned a bureaucratic class that sometimes triggered anxieties among leaders and a sort of civil war within the state apparatus itself.

From the outset there was another way of achieving those ambitions. Many tasks taken on by the centre—such as policing, education, healthcare, and other social policies—could have been left almost entirely to sub-central governments. As a result, each of the massive, polity-wide administrative systems would have been replaced by a set of regional systems. Those regional systems would not have been free from bureaucratism and sclerosis, but smaller scale likely would have made these problems less severe.

At the same time, decentralisation would have created more space for experimentation in reform. Dozens of sub-central governments would have had the opportunity to pursue reform, rather than just one central government. In addition, sub-central governments might be less susceptible to error and gridlock. Decision-makers are closer to the frontline of administration, and smaller jurisdictions are less likely to be

hobbled by deep societal differences. Granted, many sub-central governments might have remained mired in inefficiency; but the odds are low that all would have remained mired, and one crack in the dam of administrative sclerosis might have been enough.

In 1942 the economist Joseph Schumpeter said a virtue of capitalism is its capacity for "creative destruction."[33] Competition, he argued, leads to an "incessant revolution" of the economic structure as new ways of working replace old ones. Of course, too much revolution can be unhealthy. But so can too little, and that is the problem within the administrative systems of great states. They are much less dexterous and adaptable than their designers expected.

8. STRONGMANISM

In 2026, four of the five great states were led by men who aspired to be strongman rulers. Vladimir Putin, president of Russia for most of the last quarter-century, promised at the start that he would rescue his country from disorder and restore its greatness.[1] Xi Jinping made the same pledge when he took power in China in 2012, as did Narendra Modi after his election as India's prime minister in 2014. Donald Trump, once derided by the Washington establishment, has dominated American politics for a decade. At his first inauguration, Trump vowed to save the United States from "carnage" and make it great again.[2]

Taking the very long view, the turn toward strongmanism within great states might not be surprising. Throughout history, conventional opinion has held that massive polities survive only when ruled by autocrats. Without a dictator, Gaius Maecenas warned in 29 BCE, the Roman empire would heave like a ship without ballast in a heavy sea.[3] Montesquieu explained in 1748 that empires needed despots because their size made them accident-prone, and only a despot could respond quickly enough to avert disaster.[4] Catherine the Great, empress of Russia from 1762 to 1796, concurred: only an absolute ruler could act "with a vigour proportionate to the extent of such a vast dominion."[5]

Vladimir Putin once counted Catherine as his favourite Russian ruler. Xi Jinping sounded very much like Catherine when he said in 2022 that a country as big as China could not function without strong central leadership.[6]

There are also precedents for strongmanism within modern-era great states. Stalin—another of Putin's favourites—was a strongman ruler from the 1920s until 1953, and so was Mao from 1949 to 1976. Many Americans saw Franklin Roosevelt as a strongman because he sought to expand executive power, using some methods that were revived by Donald Trump ninety years later.[7] Contemporaries compared Roosevelt to Mussolini, and Roosevelt himself admired the Italian dictator. Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency in 1975 that made her an autocrat for two years. These are important but scattered examples of strongmanism within great states. Still, there is no precedent for today, in which four out of five great states are headed by aspiring strongmen.

Granted, too, that there are other national leaders who have posed as strongmen in recent years, such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary or Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey. But strongmanism is not the typical mode of rule for countries that are roughly the size of Hungary or Turkey. The situation is different with great states. The category of super-sized polities is now dominated by aspiring strongmen. The only exception is the European Union.

This did not happen by chance. Strongmanism within great states responds directly to the failures of centralising reforms within those states over the last century. Ironically, the remedy that strongmanism proposes is even more centralisation. We might even think of strongmanism as the apotheosis of centralising reform. But the strongman remedy does not work. Rather than fixing the pathologies of the status quo, it makes great states even more fragile.

Centralisation within most great states has been a decades-long process, driven by reformers who thought that centralised systems would do a better job of producing national security and public order, economic prosperity, and social justice. But centralisation within these massive polities never worked as well as reformers expected. People became angry about economic precarity and inequality, or about a decline in order and security, or about the continuing unfairness of everyday life. Often, they blamed the centre for their woes—naturally enough, since politicians at the centre had talked so much about their critical role. For would-be strongmen, this rising public anger and sense of alienation presented an opportunity. Strongmen played on discontent in their bid for power.

As strongmen explained what had gone wrong in their countries, they walked through the pathologies of centralisation. Sometimes the complaint was that previous

leaders had made stupid decisions. Donald Trump said that the invasion of Iraq was "the worst decision in the history of our country"; the invasion of Afghanistan was also a "terrible mistake ... We don't know what we're doing."[8] Alternatively, the strongman's complaint was that leaders had failed to make decisions at all—that the centre was paralysed and rudderless, as Narendra Modi claimed about India's Congress-led coalition government in 2013.

Often, strongmen decried the failure of their predecessors to take command of the bureaucracy, and their failure to reform administrative systems that were clearly dysfunctional. Xi Jinping criticized the "lax and weak state of governance" and pervasive corruption that prevailed before he took charge in 2012.[9] As we have seen, Modi and Putin also complained about systems drowning in bureaucratism and corruption. Donald Trump condemned a federal government so broken that it could "manage even a simple crisis."[10]

Leaders of large polities have always governed with an awareness of fragility: a sense that the whole enterprise could fall apart if not carefully managed. Strongmen play on this fear of fragility. The problems they see within government—stupidity, paralysis, bureaucratism—are potentially catastrophic. Putin warned Russians in 2000 that their country was on the brink of disintegrating just as the Soviet Union had done a decade earlier. In 2013, Putin again warned against a potential slide into "chaotic darkness."[11]

Xi in 2012 said that a reprise of the Soviet collapse should concern China as well. And Donald Trump also stared into the void: "Our country," he declared in 2022, "is going to hell."[12]

Strongmen are like repairmen: they promise to change the political system so that it works better. But the solution they offer is never decentralising, to reduce the risks of dysfunction at the centre. On the contrary, the solution is even more centralisation. The rules of the game are altered so that more power is wielded personally by the leader, while checks and balances are weakened.

The long-standing promise of centralisation had been that it would improve the quality of governmental decision-making, by putting power in the hands of the best and the brightest. Strongmen doubled down on this promise. Smart decision-making would finally be achieved because power would rest in the hands of one man of extraordinary abilities. As Donald Trump explained in 2018, one of his greatest assets was "being really smart"—a genius, in fact—as a result of having a "very, very large brain."[13] Narendra Modi explained in 2014 that God had chosen him and bestowed the talents to lead India. Xi Jinping's followers celebrate him as a man of "extraordinary political wisdom" who has "deep understanding of the prevailing trends and laws governing the evolution of human society."[14] China's constitution has been amended to recognise the importance of

Xi Jinping Thought—a body of Xi's writings that are credited with "profound historical perspective and broad global vision."[15]

The second frailty of centralisation is gridlock. Here, again, strongmen offer a solution: one-man rule rather than the morass of collective leadership. In China, Xi Jinping is now recognised as "core leader" and "helmsman of the whole Party"—the latter phrase revived from the era of Mao.[16] Trump also sees himself as the core leader. "I'm the only one that matters," Trump said in 2017, as he explained his administration's approach to foreign policy.[17] Rudy Giuliani, an advisor to Donald Trump, praised Vladimir Putin after his annexation of Crimea in 2014: "Putin decides what he wants to do, and he does it in half a day. He makes a decision and he executes it quickly ... That's what you call a leader."[18]

Strongmen also promise bold and aggressive action rather than "empty talk" and small changes.[19] The job of the leader is to "think big," according to Modi.[20] Trump's chief of staff said in 2025 that he "operates [with] a view that there's nothing he can't do. Nothing, zero, nothing."[21]

Strongmen have ways of overcoming resistance to the execution of their plans. As we have seen, they often replace career bureaucrats in key positions with loyalists. For the rest of the bureaucracy, they create a sense of insecurity by removing job protections or launching anti-corruption campaigns. "Real power," Donald Trump said in 2016, "is

fear."[22] Strongmen also seek to remove limits on their own tenure in office, to discourage subordinates from dragging their heels until the leader steps down.

At the same time, strongmen try to overwhelm resistance by launching many battles at once. This strategy is not entirely new. In the United States, for example, newly-elected presidents have often launched "legislative blitzes"—fast-paced campaigns for adoption of big new laws—in their first few months in office. But Donald Trump has modified and expanded the blitzkrieg strategy, by using his executive discretion to make hundreds of major decisions immediately after his inauguration. His supporters called this "flooding the zone" and hoped that it would simply overwhelm the opposition.[23] In fact, all four strongmen have adopted the blitzkrieg strategy after coming to power.

Strongmen have one other technique for ensuring that reforms are actually implemented: relentless personal supervision. In 2017 the *Wall Street Journal* dubbed Modi the "micro-manager in chief."[24] Supporters boasted that he worked eighteen hours every day of the week, while Modi himself said that he rarely needed more than three hours of sleep a day. Xi Jinping also earned a reputation for micro-managing. One observer called him the Chairman of Everything.[25] During the Covid pandemic, Beijing's official news agency reassured citizens that Xi "has taken personal command, planned the response, [and] overseen the general situation."[26]

Donald Trump has made similar claims about his attention to detail. When Congress authorized a half-trillion bailout for businesses during the Covid pandemic, Trump assured critics that the money would be properly spent: "I'll be the oversight."[27] In 2025, Trump's treasury secretary promised that the president would be "personally involved" as the United States renegotiated almost seventy trade agreements with other countries.[28]

Strongmen are not just repairmen. They also deal with problems of system failure through strategies of distraction and repression. Strongmen cultivate a siege mentality, so that citizens worry more about basic threats to the social order and less about problems like economic stagnation, inequality, and broken public services. At the same time, they stifle protest about governmental failures through more restrictive laws and heavy-handed policing.

Strongmen play on two types of threats to the nation. One is the enemy abroad. For Xi and Putin, the danger is the West, which schemes for regime change within their countries and denies their rightful global status. Modi also condemns the "colonial mindset" of the West and warns about the threat posed by neighbouring Pakistan. For Donald Trump, the external enemies are countless. The United States, he said in 2025, has been "pillaged, raped, and plundered by ... friend and foe alike."[29]

Strongmen do not just warn about external threats: they act on them, through military build-ups, military and economic saber-rattling, and actual conflict. Vladimir Putin's popularity within Russia spiked after he invaded Chechnya in 1999 and Georgia in 2008, annexed Crimea in 2014, and invaded Ukraine in 2022. Modi's success in the 2019 Indian election was bolstered by his decision to launch an airstrike against Pakistan in retaliation for terrorist attacks, two weeks before the election was called. In China, Xi has bolstered domestic support through his aggressive policy on Taiwan. In the United States, Trump's shredding of tariff agreements in 2025 won the approval of an overwhelming majority of Republican voters.

Strongmen also warn against internal threats—"the forces of disintegration," as Indira Gandhi called them in 1975, or "the fifth column" (Putin, 2014), or "the enemy from within" (Trump, 2024).[30] These internal threats are sometimes real, if exaggerated—acts of terrorism and organised crime—and sometimes completely fabricated. Usual suspects include intellectual and cultural elites, ethnic and religious minorities demanding autonomy or independence, racial minorities seeking redress for past oppression, and unauthorized immigrants. Strongmen respond with crackdowns that they claim will restore order and protect traditional ways of life.

At the same time, strongmen make a concerted effort to suppress dissent about system failures and oppression by the centre. They increase surveillance, bully unfriendly

media outlets, adopt laws prohibiting disloyal or disrespectful speech, and use existing laws to punish dissidents and "traitors." Paramilitary forces are expanded and deployed more aggressively to shut down protests about failures of the centre.

All this reminds us about the high moral costs of strongmanism. Strategies of distraction and repression inevitably mean the destruction of rights and freedoms. People and communities who are targeted as internal enemies suffer intensely, as do the people living in countries that suffer military and economic aggression. Some strongmen are frank about their indifference to these moral costs. The Communist Party under Xi has dismissed "individual rights" as a Western imposition, while Vladimir Putin said in 2019 that liberal talk about rights was "obsolete."[31]

The objection to strongmanism is not just moral. It is also practical. Strongmen promise to cure the pathologies of centralisation, with the medicine of even more centralisation. But the treatment does not work. The pathologies persist and even intensify.

This is partly because strongmen are not as brilliant or talented as they imagine. Rex Tillerson, Donald Trump's first Secretary of State, described a president "who is pretty undisciplined, doesn't like to read, doesn't read briefing reports, doesn't like to get into the details of a lot of things."[32] Other advisors also portrayed a president who was

easily bored and inattentive to details. For other strongmen, the gap between representation and reality may be smaller. Even so, they are mortals rather than supermen, whose record of accomplishment is typically more modest than advertised.

In fact, strongmen face a burden that would be impossible even for the most talented executive. The strongman formula ratchets the problem of overload to an entirely new level. Strongmen promise to move boldly on all fronts, and also to monitor the details of every one of their campaigns. They must do this in an environment where the flow of information is compromised by the "competitive sycophancy" of advisors, while the capacity to execute is weakened by assaults on the career bureaucracy.[33] Under these conditions, the odds are increased that strongmen will miscalculate on policy or fumble the execution of their plans.

Added to this are political realities. Strongmen cannot simply float above the game of politics, shuffling pieces without regard to the losses that are imposed on other players. Survival in office always depends on the support of some critical constituencies—often the security apparatus, oligarchs, and hardcore followers. The ability of strongmen to undertake sweeping reforms, or even to cleanse inefficiency and corruption within the state apparatus, is bounded by their dependence on these key constituencies.

In sum, strongmanism is unlikely to eliminate the pathologies of stupidity, gridlock, and sclerosis. However, it is likely to increase systemic instability. By this I mean a

growing tendency for the system to behave in ways that cannot be anticipated and understood by the people and organizations who are affected by its actions.

Strongmanism increases instability for three reasons. The most obvious is the system's dependence on the moods of the strongman himself. Bob Woodward described Donald Trump during his first administration: "rarely fixed, erratic ... mercurial and unpredictable."[34] Trump explained in 2016 that unpredictability was actually a virtue and that he cultivated it because it gave an edge in negotiations. The risk of erratic behaviour also increases as strongmen are worn down by age and work. Putin, for example, now seems "more reckless" than twenty years ago.[35]

Instability is also compounded by the problem of succession. Strongmen resist pressure to leave office—either because they are convinced of their own indispensability, want to avoid lame duck status, or fear prosecution after stepping down. The Russian and Chinese constitutions have been amended to allow Putin and Xi to remain in charge, while Trump attempted to overturn the 2020 election results and in 2025 speculated about a third term. At the same time, all strongmen have tried to undercut potential rivals. Their intention is to eliminate doubt about who is in charge, but the actual effect may be the reverse. As years pass, subordinates become increasingly obsessed with preparations for the inevitable struggle for power.

There is a final factor that compounds instability. Strongmanism does not reverse the conditions that encouraged its emergence in the first place—such as frustration over economic stagnation, inequality, and inadequate public services. At the same time, strongmanism generates new forms of discontent among people who have been censored, punished and marginalized by the regime. Strongmen try to keep the lid on this boiling pot as long as they can, by means of even more distraction and repression. But this becomes harder as pressure in the pot intensifies.

9. THE CHALLENGE FOR CANADA

Reformers over the last century made positive arguments in favour of centralisation, promising it would make government work better. They also relied on negative arguments about the alternative. Any system in which authority was widely dispersed would misbehave in many ways. Parts of the system would make unwise and parochial choices, adopt inconsistent and conflicting policies, miss economies of scale, consume resources in pointless squabbling, and dither in moments in crisis. At worst, regions would rebel against the centre, or destroy the system by leaving it. In the eyes of reformers, centralisation was the medicine to cure all these ills.

The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.[1] Reformers saw the pathologies of decentralisation but did not anticipate how centralisation might create its own problems. The most charitable explanation is that centralisation on this scale had never been tried before, and that reformers dismissed problems that seemed speculative at the start.

Today, we are in a better position to see the dangers of centralisation. Great states, like empires before them, can suffer from the stupidity of giants. Central authorities often make bad decisions, with consequences that are catastrophic because the raw power of the centre is so great. Alternatively the centre may seize up and fail to make decisions at all,

thereby compromising the ability of the entire polity to adjust to new conditions. Or the centre constructs vast administrative structures that fail to work efficiently and cannot be easily reformed. This also compromises the ability to adjust as circumstances change. Frustrated citizens may call on strongmen to save the day—a gambit that surrenders fundamental freedoms while failing to solve the underlying problems of stupidity, gridlock, and sclerosis.

In a perfect world, what we want are political systems that are capable of elastic centralisation. That is, we want systems that can centralise when circumstances demand it—a major war or economic emergency, for example—but also decentralise when the emergency has passed, or when it becomes apparent that the costs of centralisation have exceeded the benefits. However, elastic centralisation seems unattainable in practice. Instead, centralisation operates on a ratchet: once power is concentrated, it is not easily dispersed by peaceable methods.[2] People who are advantaged by centralisation usually have the formal or informal power to block a return to the *status quo ante*. And people who are frustrated by centralisation find it easier to imagine relief through even more centralisation—that is, strongmanism—rather than much less.

For experts or citizens engaged in debates about governmental reform in great states, and perhaps in large polities more generally, there are three lessons. The first is to operate with a strong predisposition against centralisation—not simply because it

generates problems that tend to be underestimated, but also because the choice to centralise may be difficult to reverse. In the field of environmental regulation, there are some who advocate for a "precautionary principle," which encourages action to prevent severe harm to the environment even when the evidence of potential harm is limited or confused. Essentially the argument is better safe than sorry.[3] We ought to have a precautionary principle regarding centralisation as well—one that warns against concentration of power even when the merits seem to tip in its favour, precisely because the consequences may be severe and irreversible.

Along with this precautionary principle, there should be a warning against emergency thinking. As we have seen, crises of different types—wars, economic collapses, terrorist attacks, pandemics—are often the pretext for concentrating authority. The argument for centralisation in such contexts can be compelling, especially in the heat of the moment. But it is also true that the quality of public reasoning decays in moments of stress, authority remains concentrated well after the crisis has passed, and power that has been amassed to solve a crisis in one area is often redeployed in areas where there is no crisis at all. The better path is to be suspicious of emergency thinking and to insist that the concentration of power in response to crisis should be timebound or contingent on clear proof that the crisis persists.

There is a third way of avoiding the pathologies of concentrated power. Centralisation often seems unavoidable because lower-level authorities are incapable of responding competently to social or economic problems. An alternative to centralisation, therefore, is simply improving the capabilities of lower-tier governments. In the United States, for example, state governments are hobbled in many ways. One difficulty, ironically, is a serious deficit in executive authority: if the American president is too strong, American governors are too weak. In both the United States and India, state governments also suffer from limitations on their formal powers—more so in India—and their ability to raise and spend money. In the United States, these fiscal restrictions are mainly self-imposed: state governments have hobbled themselves and become dependent on Washington for help in emergencies.

For Canadians, and other people living in smaller countries that depend in one way or another on the United States, the question is how to manage an increasingly irascible elephant. One temptation is to engage in wishful thinking. We might imagine that the problem with American government is really the incumbent president, Donald Trump, and that once he departs the presidency, normality will be restored.

Such was the reasoning in a December 2025 column in the *Toronto Star*. "Until Trump is dead or driven from office," Stephen Maher wrote, "Canada's position is

insecure."[4] This was a warning of short-term dangers, but also an implicit expression of hope: Trump will eventually go, and our problem of a fickle neighbour will pass. But this hope is misguided. The United States will remain an unpredictable and potentially dangerous neighbour even after Trump.

This is so for several reasons. The first is that the institutional conditions that enabled a Trump presidency will persist even after he is gone. Power will remain concentrated in Washington, and within Washington it will remain concentrated in the presidency. In fact, the president's powers may be even broader after Trump, as a result of Supreme Court decisions that validate his efforts to stretch the boundaries of presidential authority.

The next president may not be as mercurial as Trump, but they will still be burdened with immense and exhausting responsibilities. As a result they will still run the risk of doing stupid shit, as Barack Obama once said. Because of continuing gridlock in Congress, presidents will still be motivated to act through discretionary powers rather than legislation. And presidents will still rail against a vast and unreformable bureaucracy.

Nor are underlying political conditions likely to change after Trump. Americans remain angry about economic precarity and inadequate public services. Political culture and the media environment still encourage citizens to direct this anger toward Washington

rather than state capitals. The country remains deeply polarized as well, and voters will continue to see presidential elections as existential contests. Regardless of party affiliation, American voters will continue to prefer candidates who promise bold and sweeping action—either to undo the damage done by predecessors, or to move the ball as far down the field as possible before they are replaced.

Imagine, for example, that a Democratic candidate won the 2028 presidential election. We know that their administration will start with another swath of executive orders, aimed at reversing those of the Trump administration. We also know that the pendulum will swing again if a Republican wins the 2032 presidential election. This sort of policy instability is caused by the persisting interaction of over-centralisation, political polarization, and public discontent.

The political scientist Jonathan Kirshner observed after the first Trump administration: "The world cannot unsee the Trump presidency ... From this point forward, countries around the globe will have to calculate their interests and expectations with the understanding that the Trump administration is the sort of thing that the US political system can plausibly produce."[5] Kirshner's warning was not widely heeded. Many experts thought in 2021 that the inauguration of Joe Biden meant "a return to normalcy" in domestic and foreign policy.

Those experts were wrong and Kirshner was right. Trump is not a passing aberration in American politics but a symptom of deeper structural problems. Other countries must make their own plans on the assumption that the direction of American policy will oscillate for years to come—toward Trumpism, or away from it, or in another direction entirely.

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Since January 2025, Canadians have had a crash course in techniques for managing a rogue elephant. The first is *appeasement*: gaining favour through flattery, submissive behaviour, gifts and concessions. Prime Minister Mark Carney was engaged in appeasement when he appeared at the White House in October 2025 with a bold red tie—"I wore red for you," he said—and lauded Trump as a "transformative president."[6] Carney was also appeasing Trump when he abandoned a tax on American digital giants and promised measures to control the much-exaggerated flow of fentanyl across the Canada-US border.

The next technique for managing unpredictability is *decoupling.* This means terminating relationships that increase dependence on an unreliable partner. The Carney government flirted with decoupling when it reopened the decision to purchase F-35 fighter jets from the United States, and so did Ontario premier Doug Ford when he cancelled the

province's contract with Starlink, a telecommunications company owned by Elon Musk, a confidante of Trump at the time.

A third technique, closely tied to decoupling, is *diversification*—which means finding many other partners so that the whims of any single partner are less consequential. Diversification has become a priority for the Carney government. It has intensified negotiations on trade and defence procurement in Europe and Asia so that it is less reliant on the United States for commerce and security.

A fourth technique is *internal development*, sometimes known as self-reliance. This is another form of diversification. Internal markets are bolstered so that the country is less dependent on neighbours. The Carney government has pushed for the removal of barriers to trade between provinces, encouraged the adoption of buy-Canadian policies, and offered incentives for investment in critical industries.

A fifth technique is *leveraging.* This means producing commodities, goods, and services that are valued by other nations, and which may increase their dependence on Canada, so they will think twice before making harmful decisions. The Carney government's attempt to expand mining of critical minerals, and its willingness to support the increased export of oil, are both examples of leveraging.

The final technique for dealing with an unpredictable neighbour is *buffering,* in the sense of husbanding resources and making contingency plans for sudden and harmful

behaviour. Governments can prepare for future shocks by keeping their debts as low as possible, assigning bureaucrats to monitor for potential disruptions, and anticipating how they will distribute relief to hard-hit industries and workers.

All these techniques are costly to execute. While they may reduce the burden of living next to an unpredictable neighbour, they cannot remove that burden entirely. The hard reality is that smaller states become poorer when great states become unpredictable.

Many of these techniques also demand difficult tradeoffs. Appeasement may seem like a distasteful compromise of national honour; diversification with countries like China may require a softer line on human rights; leveraging through resource extraction may mean reversals on environmental protection and the rights of Indigenous communities; buffering would mean less money for other priorities such as healthcare.

In addition, some of these techniques work at cross purposes. The Carney government wants to spend billions in the short-run on industrial development and infrastructure, which will advance self-reliance, diversification, and leveraging. But this spending will increase indebtedness and limit the government's ability to provide relief during future shocks. The gamble is that action today will diminish the need for relief tomorrow.

The choices facing Canadians are complicated by another consideration. Understandably, public attention has been fixated on shifts in American policy. But all

great states are affected by a tendency toward centralisation and suffer from its pathologies. For Canada, this means that a policy of diversifying away from the United States toward countries like China and India may not make life easier. Canada would be less exposed to the caprices of one great state, but more exposed to the caprices of others.

Sixty years ago, Pierre Trudeau suggested that the Canadian predicament was knowing how to live next to a sometimes-restless elephant. We need to update that metaphor. Canada, like other smaller states, now lives amidst a herd of restless elephants. This would be easier if the mood of one elephant were not affected by the mood of others. But herds do not usually behave that way.

Throughout 2025, Prime Minister Carney reminded Canadians that the nation is at a critical point in its history—a "hinge moment" and "rupture" that will require "difficult choices" and "sacrifices."[7] Carney is undoubtedly right. The world is changing in important ways—not just through the shifting behaviour of great states, but also other factors like the climate crisis and technological advance. The policies that Canada deployed to advance its national interest over the last forty years will not work in this new world. Canadians need to reconsider their priorities for coming decades, and the paths by which those priorities were pursued. As they do this, Canadians will have to address the hard tradeoffs that I described a moment ago.

In other words, Canada needs a new grand strategy. By this I mean a shared understanding among Canadians about challenges facing the country over coming decades, the kind of country they want to build over that time, and the broad lines of domestic and foreign policy necessary to accomplish that work.[8] Such an understanding existed in Canada before 2025, premised on an assumption about the desirability and feasibility of deeper integration with the United States. 2025 was a shock for Canadians because it made clear that their old understandings about national strategy were no longer tenable.

Building a shared understanding about national strategy has always been difficult in Canada. This is partly because we are a federation in which authority is more broadly diffused than in the United States. Cross-country dialogue is also hampered by geography, linguistic and cultural differences, the weakness of our national media, online platforms that are overwhelmed by American content, political parties that are allergic to deep thinking about policy, a lack of well-funded think tanks, and a chronic failure to provide students and immigrants with adequate civic education.[9]

Still, forging a broadly shared understanding about national strategy is tremendously important. After all, this is the essence of democracy: citizens participating in fundamental decisions about the future of their country. And for leaders, there are practical benefits. If Canadian governments are on the same page about national strategy, they will coordinate their actions more easily, especially during crises. And if the general

public has a shared understanding about national priorities, they are less likely to protest when painful choices are made.

Canadians have confronted hinge moments in the past—in the aftermath of the Great Depression and World War II, and again in the 1970s and 1980s when the post-war consensus on economic policy broke down. In both of those moments, Canadian governments took steps to encourage a cross-country conversation about the realignment of national strategy. They understood that a national conversation was essential and unlikely to happen—given Canadian realities—without governmental support.

As I explained in a recent book, *The Adaptable Country,* the federal government used a variety of devices to encourage conversation in earlier hinge moments. It launched large-scale public inquiries like the Macdonald Royal Commission of the 1980s, and created independent advisory bodies like the Economic Council of Canada and Science Council of Canada—both eliminated on austerity grounds in the 1990s. For much of the post-World War II era, annual conferences of national leaders also focused public attention on long-term economic and social challenges.[10]

One of the main failings of the Carney government is its refusal to take similar steps to promote a national dialogue today. Instead, Prime Minister Carney has promised "big things ... done fast."[11] His government has committed to "generational investments" in infrastructure, and many of its other decisions—on trade, defence, and climate policy—

will have decades-long consequences as well. But Canadian citizens have largely been excluded from the rooms where these once-in-a-lifetime choices are being made. Policymaking under the Carney government has an elitist and technocratic style. It is dominated by ministers, bureaucrats, diplomats, and corporate executives.

Canadian politics has always suffered from a tendency toward closed-door, elite-accommodation politics. Carney may also find it familiar from his earlier work as governor of the Bank of Canada and Bank of England. Central banking is a field dominated by technocrats and traditionally cloaked in secrecy. As a central bank governor, Carney had firsthand experience of the 2007-2008 global financial crisis, which was largely resolved through intensive and secretive negotiations among government and corporate leaders.

Carney sees a parallel between earlier financial crises and the Trump shock of 2025. "I've been here before," Carney said during Canada's April 2025 federal election, "I've managed crises my entire career."[12] For Carney, the global financial crisis drove home the importance of responding to events quickly and with "overwhelming force."[13]

This is a lesson that has been reinforced by Carney's observation of President Trump. "I've learned lots of things from Trump," Carney said in an October 2025 interview. "I've learned the value ... [of] flooding the zone, of doing multiple things at the same time." Carney continued: "When you're in a crisis you need not just to act decisively, but be seen to act decisively, and that's what we are doing."[14]

This sense of 2025 Trump shock as an existential crisis requiring a rapid and massive response now permeates Canadian political conversation. In January 2026 the editors of the *Globe and Mail* took the same position as Carney: Canada faced a "national emergency" demanding "urgency of action."[15]

Earlier I called this emergency thinking and warned about its dangers. Leaders and citizens find it hard to think clearly about important choices under stress and severe time constraints. Bad choices are even more likely when governments commit to the model of "flood the zone" policymaking. We should remember that flooding the zone is a strongman tactic, spawned out of the morass of American great-state politics. Flooding the zone means overwhelming checks and balances and shutting down public debate.

In some respects, of course, there are parallels between the 2025 Trump shock and the global financial crisis of 2007-08. Like the financial crisis, the Trump shock happened suddenly and demanded quick action to help Canadians who were immediately harmed by events. However, there are important ways in which the Trump shock was *not* like the global financial crisis. Resolving a financial crisis is a technically complicated effort that is focused on a narrow and generally accepted goal: preserving financial and economic stability. What Canada confronted in 2025 was something different. The Trump shock demands a broader reconsideration of national priorities and policies. The country faces

questions that are predominantly moral and political rather than technical. These are the sort of questions that should only be settled through broad public discussion.

Such discussion requires time and thoughtfulness. A drumbeat of emergency rhetoric, aimed at building support for rapid and sweeping action, undermines the possibility of a healthy debate. Certainly there are some subjects on which rapid action is essential—relief for workers who have lost their jobs because of tariffs, for example. But there are other choices that can be given more time without risk of the country collapsing. Existential questions require urgent attention, but not always urgent resolution.

What Canada needs at this moment is a two-track policy. On one track there are things that ought to be done quickly, either to repair or prevent immediate harm, or because there is already broad agreement about the need for action—removing barriers to inter-provincial trade, for example. On the other track are the big choices with decades-long consequences, which demand a robust national conversation. A basic question to be resolved in that conversation is how a middle-sized country like Canada can thrive in a world dominated by lumbering and sometimes dangerous giants.

NOTES

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CHAPTER 2

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CHAPTER 3

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