The condition of crisis has become so familiar in our politics, we forget what crisis really is and what it can do to us. Crippling polarization, climate catastrophe, military overreach, moral degeneracy—these and other threats to the American juggernaut are real. Are we ready for our crises to finally catch up to us?

This is a very un-American question, but it is a reasonable one. Every empire comes and goes, even fabulously wealthy ones with armies stationed all over the world, even ones whose language and pop culture has become a universal tongue, that hold such dominion and then demand of themselves even more greatness. Every period of alleged greatness is also a precursor to decline.

Recall the most shocking political lesson that Jesus taught his Jewish followers, who craved liberation from foreign rule: Rather than being a revolutionary leader, he died on a cross. Rather than bringing the troubled Roman Empire renewed glory, Christianity helped usher in its collapse.

What if our political culture were to ask not just how we will cling to some version of greatness but how this country will enter its eventual post-great future?

This lesson is the social version of that medieval reminder, *memento mori*—remember that you will die. And from such remembering comes *ars moriendi*, the art of dying. At a time of plague and brutal wars, when decline was the general condition, handbooks spread across Europe for how a person can make the best of death, through the example and guidance of Christ. They instructed not just patients but their families and loved ones. The art of dying is not just personal; it is social.

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Is there an art of dying for empires, too? What if our political culture were to ask not
just how we will cling to some version of greatness or be even greater, but how this
country will enter its eventual post-great future? Will we go down with guns blazing and
nukes bursting, burning the planet to a crisp and locking ourselves in behind
impenetrable walls? Or will America’s decline bring about a more peaceful and
equitable world, where more people can have opportunity and voice regardless of where
they are born?

This is an unspeakable subject for our politicians, whose profession requires bowing to
the idolatry of our greatness. Their range of motion extends only from whether
America is already great or should be great again. But we can read between the lines to
notice who among them is and is not able to imagine a universe not eternally subject to
American might. Do they have a theory of graceful decline?

The work of *ars moriendi* requires a humility and self-giving that American politics is not presently
capable of—and never has been, I suspect.

So far, the Democratic presidential nominees have been asked little about their foreign
policy visions. This should change since presidents have more power over war and
peace than any domestic legislation. For his part, President Trump has danced a
perplexing dance with decline—withdrawal troops from the most sensitive conflicts
while escalating military spending and testing out several new conflict opportunities,
like with Iran and China. He seems to enjoy living in a tinderbox, while President
Obama and Hillary Clinton preferred more calculated forms of world domination
through secret drone strikes and sweeping trade pacts.

Decline is not only pertinent abroad, however. We tolerate our crises of poverty and
inequality on the assumption that with the next round of greatness there will be riches
enough to drown them. A *memento mori* culture would have no such dream to suffer
toward; it would accept that the present abundance might be all we get and take on the
hard questions of how to distribute that abundance more equitably. Rather than
forestalling basic justice until greatness, what if we were to let ourselves experience
more justice now?

I wonder what a politics would look like that could tolerate discussing the inevitability
of decline. What would politicians say if we had a debate on what should follow the Pax
Americana? What would their constituents expect them to say? Like the Iroquois
Confederacy, what if our Constitution required that leaders plan for seven generations
after our own?

The work of *ars moriendi* requires a humility and self-giving that American politics is
not presently capable of—and never has been, I suspect. But that does not have to stop us from trying to practice the art of dying, in politics as well as in our lives. Can we help bring about a world that has grown out of the need for a superpower? Do we trust God to reign or only ourselves?

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