2 Imperial Decay

Empires persist for long, but they do end. Scholars generally agree on what happens. Vigorous and powerful realms progressively become ossified and weak: bureaucracies grow, spending booms, economies falter, battles are lost, rebellions succeed. Most scholars also agree on why breakdown occurs: empires become inefficient and, over time, cease to "work." Not surprisingly, although the following passages are purposely drawn from different contexts and historical periods, they still manage to tell a coherent story that corresponds to the conventional wisdom:

> Throughout history, keeping administrative field officials loyal and obedient to central authorities has been one of the persistent problems of government. Field officers have always exhibited a strong tendency to act independently . . . carv[ing] out little empires for themselves in many places. And although such developments did not necessarily impede the mobilization of resources and the coordination needed to maintain systemwide defenses and construct regionwide public works . . . they tended to make such concerted action more difficult.[1]

> More and more supervision and regimentation by the central bureaucracy was required to keep the administrative machine in motion. The bureaucracy was expanded in number, its quality inevitably sank, and it became increasingly difficult to control its abuses. . . . The expanded bureaucracy, though ill paid, involved a heavy charge in salaries—or,

rather, rations and uniforms; and because it was ill paid and diluted in quality and difficult to control, it was inefficient, corrupt, and extortionate.[2]

In his pamphlet on the *Death of the Persecutors*, Lactantius charges Diocletian with having quadrupled the armed forces and vastly expanded the civil service to the point that soon, as he concludes, "there will be more governors than governed." Bureaucrats swarmed in the late Byzantine Empire, and as Bernard Lewis writes, an "inflated bureaucracy" plagued the economy of the late Arab Empire. About 1740, Macañaz ranked the excessive number of civil servants first in his enumeration of the causes of the decline of Spain. . . . Complaints of this kind are commonly heard in mature Empires.

One of the remarkably common features of empires at the later stage of their development is the growing amount of wealth pumped by the State from the economy. In the later Roman Empire taxation reached such heights that land was abandoned. . . . In sixteenth-century Spain the revenue from the two taxes . . . increased from 1504 to 1596 by more than five times. . . . Figures relating to tax revenues, however, do not always tell the whole story. In the later Roman Empire, in the late Byzantine Empire, in seventeenth-century Spain, inflation was rampant. Debasing the currency is just another form of taxation.[3]

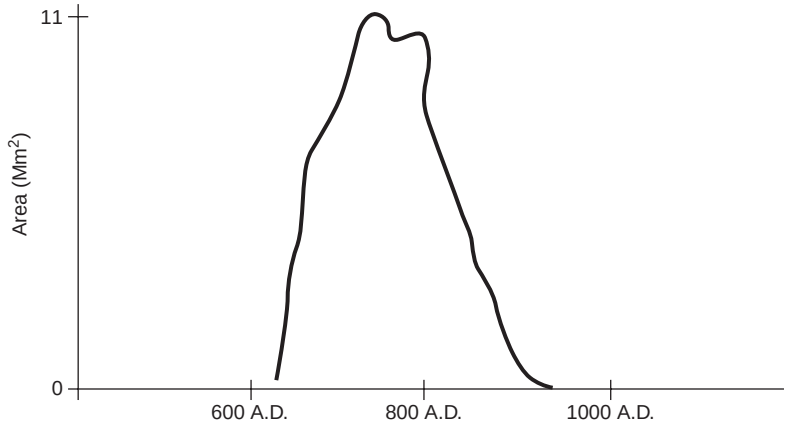
[The Han exchange network] was delicately balanced and could be upset by disturbances such as war or natural calamity, which could break down the national network into several regional networks. Further breakdown could then occur, disintegrating a previously integrated system into a group of communities sustained by local self-sufficiency. The exchange network therefore was rather fragile to serve as the bond holding China together for prolonged periods, vulnerable as it was to foreign invasions, civil wars, and natural calamities.[4]

My story of imperial decay is little different from this one. I have no reason to disagree with the description of decline or with most of the reasons adduced for it. But my account differs from others in the two respects noted at the end of chapter 1. First, I claim to be able to explain not the entire parabolic trajectory but only its downward slope. Second, I root decay in

imperial structure and not choice. I thereby avoid the false promise of theories of everything and the false leads of agency-oriented, choice-centered, intentionalist accounts.

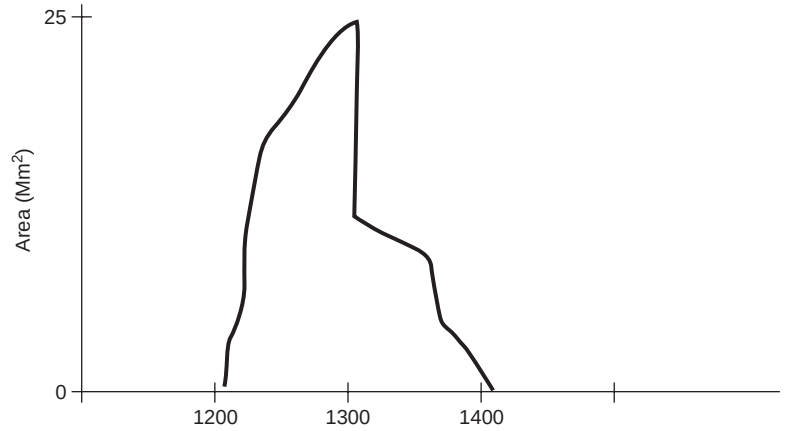
Taagepera's Parabolas

Rein Taagepera's great achievement is to have demonstrated that imperial trajectories resemble parabolas of various heights and slopes.[5] The Arab Caliphate (figure 2.1) required about one hundred years to reach its maximum size, around 700 A.D., and then disintegrated during the next two centuries. Similarly, the Mongols (figure 2.2) expanded enormously from about 1200 to 1300 and then, almost immediately thereafter, went into decline, fading away by about 1400. The Ming dynasty (figure 2.3) grew as rapidly, but far less spatially, from the middle of the fourteenth to the middle of the fifteenth centuries and then declined during the next two hundred years. It took the



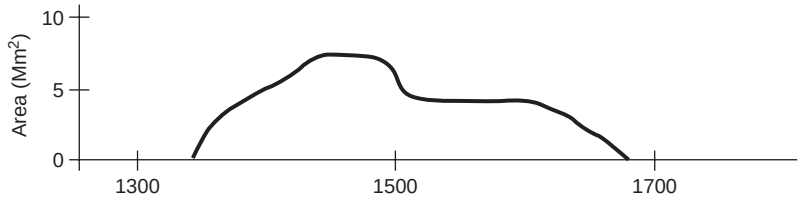
Note: 1 megameter = 1,000 km; 1 sq. megameter (Mm^2) = 390,000 sq. miles.

FIGURE 2.1 The Arab Parabola.
Source: Rein Taagepera, "Expansion and Contraction Patterns of Large Polities: Context for Russia," *International Studies Quarterly* 41 (1997): 482.



Note: 1 megameter = 1,000 km; 1 sq. megameter (Mm^2) = 390,000 sq. miles.

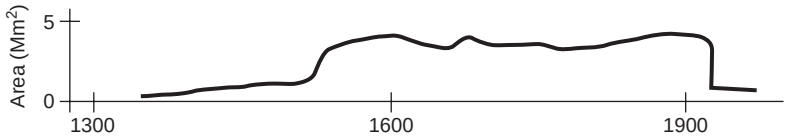
FIGURE 2.2 The Mongol Parabola.
Source: Rein Taagepera, "Expansion and Contraction Patterns of Large Polities: Context for Russia," *International Studies Quarterly* 41 (1997): 483.



Note: 1 megameter = 1,000 km; 1 sq. megameter (Mm^2) = 390,000 sq. miles.

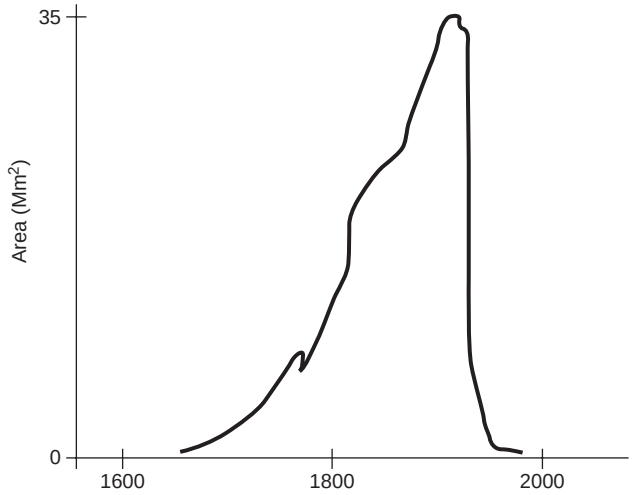
FIGURE 2.3 The Ming Parabola.
Source: Rein Taagepera, "Expansion and Contraction Patterns of Large Polities: Context for Russia," *International Studies Quarterly* 41 (1997): 483–84.

Ottomans (figure 2.4) about two hundred years, from the mid-fourteenth through the mid-sixteenth centuries, to reach the height of their power; they then remained at the top of the parabola for about three hundred years, before losing most of their possessions in the nineteenth and twentieth cen-



Note: 1 megameter = 1,000 km; 1 sq. megameter (Mm^2) = 390,000 sq. miles.

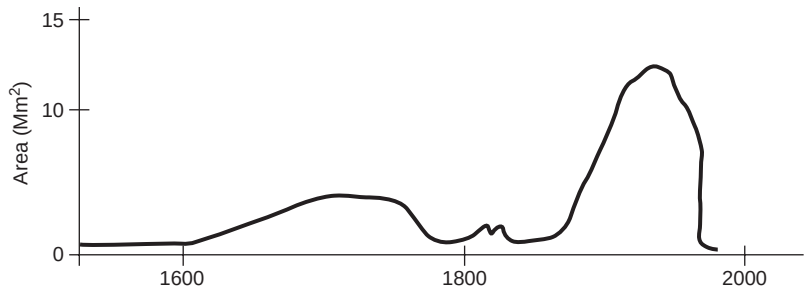
FIGURE 2.4 The Ottoman Parabola.
Source: Rein Taagepera, "Expansion and Contraction Patterns of Large Polities: Context for Russia," *International Studies Quarterly* 41 (1997): 483–84.



Note: 1 megameter = 1,000 km; 1 sq. megameter (Mm^2) = 390,000 sq. miles.

FIGURE 2.5 The British Parabola.
Source: Rein Taagepera, "Expansion and Contraction Patterns of Large Polities: Context for Russia," *International Studies Quarterly* 41 (1997): 484.

turies. Finally, not unlike the Arabs and Mongols of earlier times, the British and the French (figures 2.5 and 2.6) expanded rapidly and enormously in 1750–1800, reached their peak a century later, and then lost it all within several decades of the twentieth century.

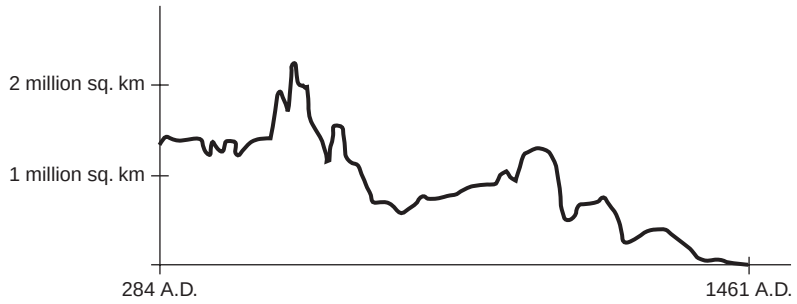


Note: 1 megameter = 1,000 km; 1 sq. megameter (Mm^2) = 390,000 sq. miles.

FIGURE 2.6 The French Parabola.
Source: Rein Taagepera, "Expansion and Contraction Patterns of Large Polities: Context for Russia," *International Studies Quarterly* 41 (1997): 482, 484.

Clearly, there are significant variations in parabolic trajectories. Some empires grow and decline quickly; others appear to do so at a leisurely pace; still others proceed along parabolas that resemble plateaux. None rose, persisted, and fell smoothly, without temporary blips on the upward, flat, or downward slopes. Indeed, the parabolas more closely resemble the long-term movement of stock market prices. Overall patterns conceal numerous deviations; in some cases, such as that of the Byzantines (figure 2.7), the deviations can be quite substantial, resembling stocks with a "high beta." As Warren Treadgold summarizes Byzantium's development:

> The years after 284 brought major reforms, including the administrative division between East and West, that mark the beginning of the Byzantine period. Although the West soon resumed its decline and disappeared, the history of the East was less simple, with many declines and recoveries. These are apparent from the East's gains and losses of territory. . . . For the East, [figure 2.7] shows a moderate loss between 300 and 450, the result of defeats by the Persians and Huns. Then a major gain occurred, as much of the former western empire was reconquered by the emperor Justinian. Justinian's gains disappeared by 620, because of new invasions by the Germans, Persians, and Avars.



Note: 1,000,000 sq. km = 390,000 sq. miles.

FIGURE 2.7 Territorial Extent of the Byzantine Empire.
Source: Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 8.

> By 750 another major loss occurred, as the Arabs conquered a large part of Byzantine territory. But this second decline was made good by 1050, when after many reconquests the empire was scarcely smaller than it had been in 300 or 620, and slightly larger than it had been in 450. Then came another severe decline, caused by losses to the Seljuk Turks. Interrupted by a partial recovery, this decline lasted until 1204, when Constantinople fell to the Fourth Crusade, and the provinces that remained under Greek rule were divided among several successor states. Finally the main empire and the smaller Greek states recovered for a time, before shrinking to nothing by 1461, conquered by the Ottoman Turks.[6]

Treadgold's brief account of the decline of the eastern Roman Empire reminds us that, on the one hand, no theory of imperial decline can account for contingencies in general and such momentous contingencies as the Fourth Crusade in particular and that, on the other hand, the actual trajectory of decline cannot possibly be the smooth process that the image of a parabola conveys. Byzantium experienced a variety of ups and downs in the course of its existence; only over time, and in the aggregate, can we plausibly say that its slope was negative and thus that its trajectory was parabolic.

Accounting for these ups and downs, as Taagepera, Christopher Chase-Dunn, and Thomas Hall attempt to do—by arguing, for instance, that empires have gotten larger over time or that the longer it takes for empires to grow, the longer it will take for them to decline—is not my goal.[7] Nor, as I have already argued in chapter 1, can—or should—it be. Even though a theory of everything is beyond our grasp, we are not therefore condemned to abject modesty. That the trajectories of actual empires approximate parabolas permits us to treat parabolic trajectories as baselines, as something *like* algorithmically compressible, virtually lawlike, empirical generalizations.[8] They permit us to claim that rise, persistence, and decline are the norm and thus to argue, plausibly and persuasively, that nonattrition and collapse are deviations from the norm. As a result, we are entitled, first, to explain parabola-like trajectories of decline in terms of some endogenous feature of empire—such as structure—and, second, to account for nonattrition and especially collapse in terms of intervening variables, exogenous factors, and the like.

We could of course insist that parabolic trajectories are the exception and that collapse is the rule. For a structural theory, however, the resulting theoretical claim, that collapse is business as usual while attrition is not, would lead us into a cul de sac. Chapter 1 has already noted that structural theories require exogenous events to account for collapse. If collapse were the norm, the theory would be placed in the untenable position of having to explain not the rule (i.e., its own theoretical domain) but the exceptions to it. Such a denouement would force us to abandon a structural approach for one that is more agency oriented, choice centered, and intentionalist. Bad leaders would, accordingly, lose empires by making bad decisions and bad choices.[9] But as agency, choice, and intention have their own well-nigh fatal flaws, we would be back to our starting point. If so, treating parabolas as the norm and trying to explain decline in structural terms may be, once again, less bad than the alternative; in any case, it certainly seems to entail the construction of fewer face-saving epicycles.

Bringing Totalitarianism Back In

Because the analysis that follows rests on the structural isomorphism between empires and totalitarian states, it may be worth acknowledging that I fully appreciate that totalitarianism is a highly contested concept that—like

empire—has been in academic disrepute for many years.[10] Does this unsavory reputation doom any explanatory enterprise that draws on totalitarianism for inspiration and respectability? Only if the concept or term truly terrifies us or only if we believe that all criticism is, merely by virtue of its having appeared, infallible.

Neither stance is justifiable. As a concept, totalitarianism is no better—and no worse—than any other concept. It can, argues Giovanni Sartori, be constructed badly or used unproductively or infused with political content, but so can every other concept.[11] One is fully entitled to hate the totalitarian concept but not because it is inherently hateful. One may also hate the term, but replacing it with an adequate substitute—*shmo*talitarianism perhaps?—is then imperative. As to totalitarianism's critics, they are, like all critics, fallible. We have as little reason to reject totalitarianism as a concept because a generation of scholars at one time rejected it as we have to accept the concept because a different generation accepted it.[12] We would be ill advised to reify any slice of academic time. In this case as in every other, the appropriate question should be whether the critique, or the endorsement, was justified.

As I have argued elsewhere, much of the critique centered on the descriptive inappropriateness of ascribing to the post-Stalinist USSR all the features of totalitarianism developed by Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski.[13] Obviously, if totalitarian states must be terroristic, nonterroristic states cannot be totalitarian. Another strand of criticism, with regard to both Hitler's Germany and Stalin's USSR, pointed to the obvious: that the defining characteristics of totalitarianism—in particular, the notion of the state as a monolith or behemoth—were not as sharply present in either system as the ideal type seemed to require.[14] This observation, although true, missed the boat entirely: no set of defining characteristics of anything can ever apply—completely, fully, totally, and absolutely—to some empirical situation.[15] All concepts are ideal-type constructs that always only approximate life. Seen in this light, determining the empirical referent of the concept of choice is, for instance, no less difficult than finding a real live totalitarian state. I may be able to isolate people, neural impulses, words, quizzical expressions, and bodily movements, but where, exactly, among all these things is choice?[16] The last critique of the totalitarian model—that it could not explain change—was both wrongheaded and wrong. To the extent that the model's supporters claimed to be able to explain persistence, to accuse them of not accounting for change was simply unfair. But the critique is

also wrong, because, as Karl Deutsch showed, totalitarianism can explain change.[17]

Deutsch and Decay

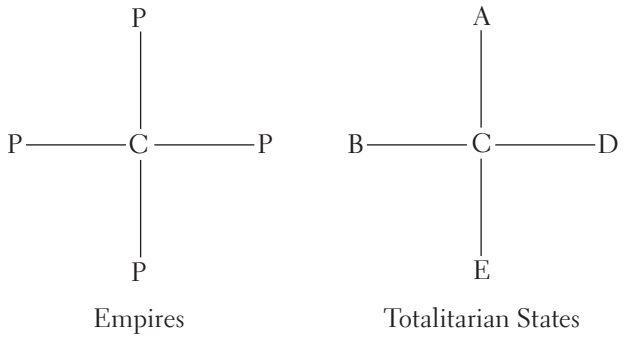
Empires "work" when resources flow from the periphery to the core and back to the periphery (*P-C-P*). Empires cease to work when these flows are disrupted and resources remain in the periphery or in the core or in both. Naturally, all political systems work when resources flow efficiently and do not work when they flow inefficiently. Inasmuch as empires as empires are defined by a peculiar kind of structure that also defines the flow of resources, however, the efficient flow of resources is of overwhelming importance to the stability—or self-maintenance—of empires.[18] As a Deutschian perspective would lead us to argue, the efficient flow of resources presupposes adequate information about the resources available in the periphery, about the agencies that channel them to the core and back to the periphery, and about the ends that the resources are supposed to meet. That is, the effective functioning of empire entails information aggregation about the empire *and* about the core state, the peripheral administration, and their relationship: imperial elites must be informed about the condition of their territories, about both sets of bureaucracies, and, most important perhaps, about resource flows from periphery to core to periphery.

In turn, information aggregation and resource distribution presuppose an information-gathering and information-processing apparatus: that is, an effective state in the core and an effective administration in the periphery. Regardless of the size and overall tasks of that apparatus, its ability to function presupposes information about itself. Indeed, information about that apparatus is no less critical than information about the empire to effective decision making in the core and efficient *P-C-P* resource flows. It is here—in the relationship between information aggregation and the information-gathering and -processing apparatus—that a systemic contradiction is lodged. For if information about the information-gathering and information-processing apparatus is not collected, aggregate information will always be incomplete and especially so with respect to the machinery on which it depends. If that information is collected, the information-gathering machinery will grow in complexity in order to gather and process information about the empire and itself. Thus the more the machinery grows and systemic

complexity increases, the greater the imperial system's requirement of information and resources. But the greater the information and resource needs of the imperial state and the peripheral administration, the more effective the information-gathering and resource-processing apparatus must be, the more information it must aggregate, and the greater the information and resource needs of the core become. Like oversized automobiles, empires greedily consume the fuel that keeps them going. Indeed, the further empires go, the more information and resources they need. Should such gas-guzzling behavior prove to be unsustainable, empires will be in trouble. Should an empire's growing information and resource needs be incompatible with its own structurally induced incapacity to meet them, the empire will, inescapably, fall victim to a systemic contradiction that will, in the long run, force it to wither away.[19]

At this point the structural isomorphism between empires and totalitarian states becomes crucial to my argument. Totalitarian states of the kind discussed by Deutsch are, as I have already emphasized, far more intrusive than empires—civil societies and market economies are inconceivable in the former but perfectly possible, indeed commonplace, in the latter[20]—but both systems have a distinctly hublike structure. Totalitarian states have a functional structure, involving a core elite and state and functionally defined peripheral elites and agencies—which, obviously, happen to be located in particular places. Empires have a territorial structure, involving a core elite and state and territorially defined peripheral elites and societies. Imperial peripheries are thus geographically bounded areas inhabited by distinct populations; totalitarian peripheries are territorially clustered institutions sustained by distinct elites, classes, or groups. The units comprising the two structures are thus quite different, but the structures are, as figure 2.8 illustrates, *identical*.

The USSR, as the world's only totalitarian empire, arguably represents as pure a structural example of both empire and totalitarianism as one can imagine. The "circular flow of power" that characterized Communist rule exactly mirrored the imperial rule that the core party-state exerted over the republics. In both cases, the Politburo and general secretary made decisions that party and state organs at lower levels voted upon, invariably endorsed, and implemented. The totalitarian side of party rule was functional, extending into organizations, workplaces, and homes; the imperial side was territorial, extending to geographic agglomerations of functional units known as satellites, republics, provinces, and the like. Empire and totalitarianism re-



Note: *C* = core; *P* = periphery, and *A*, *B*, *D*, and *E* are different clusters of institutions.

FIGURE 2.8 Structure of Empires and Totalitarian States

inforced each other precisely because they had identical structures and so neatly overlapped.[21] As Valerie Bunce puts it,

> The power of the Soviet Union over its client state in Eastern Europe was secured through bilateral ties controlled by the Soviet Union; through Soviet regional dominance in ideology, political authority, national security, markets, and primary products; and through the Soviet role as a regional hegemon defining and defending the boundaries of the bloc and monopolizing interactions between the bloc and the international system. The Soviet bloc, therefore, was highly centralized and radial in its structure—much as was the case with domestic socialism and, for that matter, empires.[22]

That a variety of scholars writing about the USSR and other communist states have shown how the structure of totalitarianism leads to decay is thus of obvious significance to my case.[23] Włodzimierz Brus's analysis of a centrally planned economy summarizes the general argument:

> With the economic targets growing more and more complex and the list of priorities broadening, the chances diminish of meeting conditions favouring the effective operation of a strictly centralized organization of a planned economy. An attempt at keeping such an organi-

> zation alive . . . may lead to diminishing efficiency. . . . It is to be expected that the central level, under the heavy burden of growing current problems, may lose its ability to concentrate on main macroeconomic questions. . . . The effectiveness of decentralization becomes enhanced.[24]

The most important contribution to the theory of totalitarian decay belongs to Deutsch. In an article published in 1954, Deutsch constructed an ideal-type "totalitarian decision system," a key function of which, "unity of command and of intelligence, requires some machinery either to insure a single source of decision, or a set of arrangements or devices to insure consistency of decisions among several sources."[25] Crucial to his scheme is what I have called the core: "A single source of decisions is in effect an arrangement by which all important incoming information available to the system is channeled to a point where it can be confronted with data recalled from a single integrated memory pool."[26] Deutsch then went on to show how such a system necessarily had a "limited capacity of centralized decision-making," with the result that it would be "overloaded with decisions with which it can no longer cope, except at the price of either intolerable delays or an increasing probability of potentially critical mistakes."[27] Equally debilitating was the concomitant "instability of hierarchical power"—that is, of the hub-like structure. As Deutsch writes,

> The difficulties that militate against the viability of any permanent system of totalitarian centralization are paralleled, in a sense, by the difficulties in the way of any permanent hierarchical distribution of power. A hierarchy of power requires that all power should be located at the apex of a pyramid, and that all power should lead downward in terms of a transitive chain of command, transmitting orders from the single power holder or the few power holders at the top to the many soldiers or policemen at the bottom. However, every such pyramid of power is inherently unstable. To maintain transitivity it must be steered by orders coming from the apex. Yet the shortest communication routes to all relevant sub-centers and sub-assemblies of power is not from the apex, but from some location farther down.[28]

His conclusion strikes an especially resonant chord: "In the long run there is thus perhaps inherent in every totalitarian system of government a ten-

dency either toward overloading of its central facilities for the making of decisions, or toward an automatic corrosion of its original centralized structure and its disintegration into increasingly separate parts."[29]

Deutsch's theory is structural: it focuses exclusively on the relationships between and among the units comprising a totalitarian system, and it eschews completely all reference to agency, choice, and intention. Equally important, Deutsch's theory has been proved "right," or as right as any theory can be: "If similar considerations should apply to the totalitarian regimes of Russia and China . . . then we might expect the 1970's or 1980's to bring a slowing of the expansive pressure from these two regimes, or a growing divergence of policies between them, or among some of their constituent regions, or some combination of all these changes, leading in either case to a diminution in 'classic' patterns of totalitarian behavior."[30] About forty-five years after his article appeared, the totalitarian states of east-central and eastern Europe fell apart for just the reasons he adduced. Moreover, the history of post-Stalinist communist states can persuasively be interpreted as a ceaseless struggle to deal with the very pathologies Deutsch identified.

The gist of my theoretical claim therefore comes down to these propositions:

- Empires and totalitarian states are structurally isomorphic.
- Structural theories of breakdown in general and of imperial decay in particular are less unpersuasive than agency-oriented, choice-centered, intentionalist accounts.
- Deutsch's theory is persuasive with respect to totalitarian states.
- A successful structural theory such as Deutsch's resembles a weak version of a covering law and, eo ipso, applies to other structurally isomorphic systems—namely, empires.
- Deutsch's theory of totalitarian degeneration is thus a theory of imperial decay.

In brief, because empires and totalitarian states are structurally identical, the structurally generated pathologies identified by Deutsch's theory affect imperial systems no less than they affect totalitarian states.

We now have the final piece of our theoretical puzzle. Johan Galtung highlighted the importance of structure; Taagepera established that all empires would, ceteris paribus, follow a parabolic course of decline. Deutsch

provides the theoretical underpinnings for Taagepera's algorithm. We can now claim—with all the tentativeness that theory in general and structural theory in particular requires of us—that empires follow the course of a downward-sloping parabola because imperial structure produces decay. We still have to get from decay—the loosening of *C-P* ties—to attrition, the actual loss of peripheral territories, but the process, as I demonstrate shortly, is relatively straightforward once decay is in place.

Attrition

Although uneven in its effects, decay appears to proceed inexorably. Empires, like totalitarian states, experience, in Deutsch's language, either "overload" in the core or "disintegration" in the periphery or, most likely, both. Overload disrupts the efficient flow of resources from the periphery to the core and back to the periphery. As resources remain lodged in the periphery and/or core, the "centralized structure" experiences "corrosion" and begins to disintegrate into "increasingly separate parts."

Geoffrey Parker makes the same point: "A further characteristic of the period of decline concerns the spatial distribution of economic power. This entails a shift of the state's economic centre of gravity away from its historic core to a new economic centre located elsewhere in its territory. . . . As a result of this an entirely new centre of population emerges which is likely to have very different social and cultural values from those of the core state."[31] Just such a shift occurred in the western Roman Empire. "Boundaries, physical and spiritual, were changing and being redefined," writes G. W. Bowersock. "The centers were being moved; and the relegations of imperial authority from Rome to Constantinople, and ultimately to Milan, Aquileia, and Ravenna in the north and west, are also metaphors for the tendency to move toward the periphery."[32] Indeed, the barbarianization of the empire was, in this sense, really tantamount to the emergence of autonomous peripheries and a weak core. Barbarians not only seized control of outlying provincial administrations; they also provided the bulk of the armies stationed in those regions.[33] But, according to Geir Lundestad, "once lower units are formed, it appears that sooner or later they almost inevitably will compete with the imperial center."[34] Indeed, as some peripheries develop complementarities and some *P-P-P* relationships become more efficient than the imperial norm, *P-C-P*, a growing harmony of interests between periphery

and periphery will supplant the harmony of interests that earlier characterized core and periphery.

As the hublike structure changes—and the "wheel" progressively loses its spokes and gains a rim—the empire becomes susceptible to attrition. Overloaded and disintegrating, empires will, like decayed totalitarian states, fail to keep pace with improvements in technology and thus to modernize.[35] With skewed resource flows and technological backwardness in place, the state debt is likely to grow at the same time as bureaucracies become parasitic and state decline sets in. Militarily weakened and bureaucratically bloated core states will be less able to meet challenges to their rule. Sooner or later, they will lose bits and pieces of territory as a result of outside aggression or internally driven "liberation struggles."[36] Kaufman notes:

> Things . . . spiral downward. The downward spirals would set off chain reactions. . . . Under these conditions, the central organs would have found it increasingly difficult to maintain adequate defense forces as well as to preserve internal order and maintain large-scale public works. Bandits, raiders, and other freebooters from beyond the perimeters of the polities could roam more freely, but most of all, adjacent political systems would be tempted to invade and seize territory.[37]

Historically, wars have been business as usual for empires, as for all great powers. We may not be able to predict when they will occur, but we do know that they have occurred, with greater and lesser degrees of intensity, destructiveness, and scope throughout all recorded history, including the twentieth century.[38] Ceteris paribus, vigorous empires will be able to hold their own in any military conflict short of a cataclysmic war; decaying empires, in contrast, will not. They will win some wars, lose others, and barely scrape by in most. Sooner or later, parts of the empire will be lost to competitors or break away.

Liberation struggles are also likely to occur and to succeed in decaying empires. As the disharmony of interests, informality of rule, and the possibility of *P-P-P* and *Z-P-Z* relations grow, some peripheries will attempt to wrest more autonomy or even independence from the core. Because Britain's American colonies had developed extensive economic and political linkages long before 1776, they could mount organized opposition to His Majesty's imposition of various taxes and successfully rebel.[39] Nationalism, patriotism, and the quest for cultural authenticity need not be present; it

suffices that, to put the case metaphorically, conditions be ripe, peripheral elites seek their day in the sun, windows of opportunity be open, and the core be distracted.[40] As with wars, some struggles will fail and some will succeed; over time, however, peripheries will manage to secede.

With regard to both wars and liberation struggles, core elites may lose contests or they may choose not to fight for occupied territories and resist liberation struggles, thereby effectively abandoning peripheries to their fate. Whatever the case, the real choice—if indeed it is a choice—is not *to end empire* but *not to resist imperial decay*. Withdrawal in this sense is not so much a choice as the long-term culmination of adjustments, choices, and nonchoices—the many straws that broke the camel's back—that in retrospect appear to amount to a momentous decision to abandon long-held territories. Or withdrawal is the immediate effect of overwhelming circumstances that literally force the imperial power to step back: it is thus not so much a choice as a "recognition of necessity."[41] Bernard Porter's analysis of the British retreat from empire is instructive:

> [The fall of the Empire] was probably inevitable. It was certainly unavoidable from the viewpoint of power, because as a world power the Empire would have had to muster the same amounts of material and military power as the Soviet Union and the USA after World War II. Britain could not measure up against these two powers. Some imperialists had believed that this would have been possible had the enormous natural and human resources of the Empire been utilized more efficiently, but that would have required a deeper and broader imperial engagement than the British people and their imperial brothers, sisters, and subordinates had ever shown. There had never been an engagement for a common, clear vision, for a goal and the determined means for reaching it. The manner in which the Empire had evolved—accidental, minimal, and without much consideration or consequence—made it impossible.[42]

Decaying Empires

Although the sequence of steps culminating in decay and attrition was derived logically, it does correspond to the composite story of imperial decline with which I began this chapter. As Taagepera's parabolas lead us to

expect, not every empire will go through such recognizably discrete stages. Moreover, the timing of decay and attrition cannot be predicted: all we can say is that they will set in, probably in the long run. Even so, we expect the histories of empires to correlate, even if imperfectly, with this logically constructed narrative. The following examples provide some grounds for optimism.

Later Han China (23–220 A.D.) experienced decay as the result of two mutually reinforcing trends. First was a growing conflict between the imperial throne and the literati, who "served as cultural carriers and social critics as well as bureaucrats and community leaders."[43] In particular, writes Cho-yun Hsu,

> the literati acquired intellectual autonomy by systematizing knowledge, which gave them the power to legitimize the regime. Self-regeneration through bureaucracy and control of economic resources such as land gave them sufficient self-confidence that they became indispensable to the state. Their demand that the political authority meet their standard, in addition to their obvious autonomy, was enough to alienate the throne from their intimidating influence.[44]

Second was the competition between the core and the peripheral areas that had grown "in a general trend of demographic redistribution and economic development."[45] According to Cho-yun Hsu,

> In the peripheral areas social power most likely would be concentrated within small groups of elites, since leadership tended to be monopolized by the local establishment. . . . Regional differentiation was strengthened by the difficulty of incorporating peripheral areas into the national resource-flow network and was further bolstered by the Confucian focus on local concerns, encouraged by the constant tension and frequent conflicts between the literati and the throne.[46]

With generalized decay as the backdrop, the Han empire became enervated by a "decade of continuous conflicts" (141–151 A.D.) with its version of Rome's barbarians, the Ch'iang tribes, and the devastating Yellow Turban peasant revolt initiated by the warlord Tung Cho in 188 A.D. Significantly, an earlier struggle against the Xiongnu nomads had been far more costly than the war against the Ch'iang, but the empire, still unaffected by decay,

had survived intact.[47] In 220 the last Han emperor was deposed, and China split into three kingdoms.

The Roman Empire, according to Michael Doyle, was "bound to weaken. The army and the bureaucracy grew to be enormous organizations supported by the declining, taxable, productive part of the population." Worse, "the west was tending to see a concentration of property and income within an ever smaller landlord class that was reorganizing economic life into near-feudal patterns." As a result, "when the state sought resources from society in the west, it had to grant special concessions to the powerful rich who not only owned the land but staffed the bureaucracy, and each new state demand progressively increased the enfeudalization of the economy." In the end, "a vicious circle of privatization and tax avoidance left the state impoverished, the rich wealthy, and the mass of the people destitute and dependent."[48] Similarly, Alexander Demandt isolates four factors that transformed the "coercive state" (*Zwangsstaat*) into a "giant with clay feet." First was the "bureaucratic state apparatus itself, which was either unable or unwilling to work in the spirit of the Emperor." Second was the "large landowners," who resisted paying taxes and providing recruits. Third was the church, which "removed itself from the directives of the Emperor." Fourth was the military, which developed its own interests.[49]

Although the imperial administration consisting of a "rudimentary apparatus of officialdom" did not match the "dimensions of the empire," decay assumed alarming proportions only in the third century A.D., as rebellious frontier troops routinely placed their commanders on the imperial throne.[50] In turn, barbarians attacked, while the Persians attempted to reconquer Mesopotamia. Conditions stabilized after the emperor Aurelian defeated the Goths in 268–269 and withdrew from Dacia while redeploying his forces in Egypt and Gaul. Diocletian and Constantine reformed the army and bureaucracy, in both the core and periphery, but at great cost to the economy. The peasants suffered, while landowners and noblemen generally succeeded in evading taxation and increasing their holdings. "The contrast between the formidable weight of the Roman military machine and its inefficiency is thus striking," writes Philippe Contamine.

> The Roman army was an impressive organization, impeccably structured in theory, but which in practice kept seizing up. The Emperors . . . were unable to use the opportunities represented by facility of communication, an abundance of information and rapidity in the dis-

> patch of orders. Furthermore, the bureaucracy which sustained their efforts was small, easily overloaded or discouraged; it expected only delays and adopted an obstructive role.[51]

The relocation of the imperial court to Constantinople in 330 may have consolidated Constantine's rule, but it also diminished Rome's stature and enabled military commanders in the west to act autonomously. The barbarianization of the army proceeded apace, partly in response to the declining number of available recruits and partly as a means of appeasing potential invaders. Revolts and civil wars left the western empire vulnerable to full-scale attrition. The Alans, Sueves, and Vandals overran Gaul in 406–407; the Visigoths sacked Rome in 410; Attila the Hun raided the Danube provinces in 435–453; the Vandals captured Carthage in 439; and the Ostrogoths occupied Pannonia in 454.[52]

The Ottomans reached the height of their power in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Soon thereafter the central government became increasingly ineffective, military and technological modernization lagged behind that of other powers, and centrifugal tendencies multiplied. "The bureaucratic and religious institutions all over the Empire," writes Bernard Lewis, "suffered a catastrophic fall in efficiency and integrity, which was accentuated by the growing change in methods of recruitment, training and promotion. . . . The same fall in professional and moral standards can be seen, though perhaps in less striking form, in the different ranks of the religious and judicial hierarchy. Most striking of all was the decline of the Ottoman armed forces."[53] Small wonder, continues Lewis, that

> the central government ceased to exercise any check or control over agriculture and village affairs, which were left to the unchecked rapacity of the tax-farmers, the leaseholders, and the bailiffs of court nominees. During the seventeenth century some of the more permanently established lease-holders began to coalesce with the landowners into a new landed aristocracy—the *ayan-ımemleket* or country notables, whose appearance and usurpation of some of the functions and authority of government were already noted at the time.[54]

The "greatest portion"—approximately two-thirds—of government revenues came from the tithes and livestock taxes paid by peasants.[55] Local elites not only contributed little to the state budget; they also profited handsomely from their roles as tax farmers and tithe collectors.[56]

For most of the late Ottoman Empire (1876–1909) elites struggled to cover mounting expenditures with insufficient tax revenues and the accumulation of state debt. One major drain on the budget was the growth in and transformation of the Sublime Porte into a modern bureaucracy.[57] At the same time, military outlays comprised about 40 percent of total budget expenditures.[58] The large sums spent on the armed forces and gendarmerie notwithstanding, the Ottoman military continued to lag behind its west European competitors. According to Parker,

> There were three important respects in which the military revolution was imperfectly practiced by Europe's most dangerous neighbor. First, and best-known, was the Ottoman decision to build their military big, whereas the Western powers concentrated on increasing the mobility and numbers of their guns. . . . [Second], Ottoman troops were expert imitators, but poor innovators. . . . [A] third source of Ottoman inadequacy in the military sphere [was] metallurgical inferiority.[59]

The eighteenth century witnessed the beginnings of attrition. The territories north of the Black Sea and the Crimea fell to Russia; the Ottomans lost Hungary and parts of Serbia and Wallachia to the Habsburgs; Iran exerted pressure in the east. Matters only deteriorated in the nineteenth century. As the Serbs rebelled in 1804 and 1815, the Greeks pursued a war of independence in 1822–1830, and Egypt became quasi-independent under Muhammad Ali, the Ottoman realm also came under increased pressure from Russia, Austria, Britain, and France, which seized substantial chunks of Ottoman territory in northern Africa and the Balkans. The Congress of Berlin in 1878 crowned Ottoman humiliation by partitioning Bulgaria, slicing off Bosnia-Hercegovina, granting Serbia, Romania, and Montenegro independence, and handing control of Tunisia to France and Cyprus to Britain.[60]

Treadgold notes that in the eleventh and twelfth centuries "the wealth and power of the [Byzantine] empire's landholding and commercial classes increased. . . . The magnates' share of land and official posts continued to grow until the empire began to have a hereditary ruling class, as before it had not. . . . Because such men were harder to rule than ordinary subjects, the power of even the most determined and capable emperors tended to diminish, or at least become harder to use."[61] George Ostrogorsky is harsher in his judgment: "The wealthy landlords absorbed the property of peasant and soldier, turning the former owners into dependents. Thus the very foun-

dations on which Byzantium had built ever since its revival in the seventh century were swept away, with the result that the strength of the armed forces and of the revenue declined, and the consequent impoverishment weakened the military power of the state still further."[62] In time, although "Byzantium still clung to its imperial unity, . . . the structure of the state steadily disintegrated and the relationship between the center and the provinces grew rapidly looser."[63]

Treadgold's estimates of Byzantine budgets (table 2.1) also show that expenditures for the bureaucracy and the military gradually increased in the last five hundred years of the empire's existence and, with the exception of the late sixth and seventh centuries, were on the rise since the empire's inception.

As the "many exemptions enjoyed by the big landowners diminished the revenue from the land tax" and Byzantine control of Mediterranean trade was ceded to the Venetians and Genoese, "Byzantium's financial ruin was," according to Charles Diehl, "inevitable." As a result, writes Diehl,

> since the Byzantine government clung to its tradition of magnificence and display . . . and was determined to keep up appearances, it found increasing difficulty in balancing revenue and expenditure. Attempts were made to economize, regardless of the Empire's safety. Thus from the end of the thirteenth century the fleet . . . was allowed to decay,

TABLE 2.1 Bureaucracy and Military as Percentage of Byzantine Budgets, 300–1321

Year	**300**	**450**	**518**	**540**	**565**	**641**	**668**	**775**	**842**	**959**	**1025**	**1321**
Bureaucracy (%)	9	10	9	10	13	13	25	21	16	15	14	n/a
Military (%)	81	69	65	71	72	78	60	58	65	69	70	68
Total (%)	90	79	74	81	85	91	85	79	81	84	84	n/a

Source: Warren Treadgold, A *History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 145, 277, 412, 576, 843. Percentages were calculated on the basis of Treadgold's data. Military expenditures include the pay of bodyguards, soldiers, and oarsmen; uniforms, arms, and rations; fodder, horses, and mules; campaigns; and other military expenses.

> on the pretext that its upkeep was a needless expense. . . . Other essentials such as fortresses and armaments were likewise pared away.[64]

As Franz Georg Maier summarizes the process:

> The instances of internal weakness in the late Byzantine state are not to be underrated. In a more and more disintegrating political system with declining financial and military resources a frequently minimally capable government attempted without success to master religious troubles, conflicts over the throne, and civil wars internally and to prevent further losses of territory externally. The emperor became increasingly dependent on the large noble families, whose growing independence finally undermined his own position.[65]

Starting with the eleventh century, attrition proved unstoppable. The Seljuk Turks advanced relentlessly from the east, and by 1300 most of Asia Minor was in their hands. In turn, the Crusaders destabilized the empire. Indeed, the "Fourth Crusade shattered a tradition of unified government in the Aegean basin that dated back to the Roman Republic, and wrecked institutions that were as old as Diocletian and Constantine I."[66] Rebellions and civil wars became increasingly commonplace, especially in the Balkans.[67] Finally, the Ottoman encirclement of what remained of Byzantium culminated in the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and Trebizond in 1461.

The American colonies held by Britain and Spain followed similar paths of increasing autonomy vis-à-vis their respective cores. Doyle finds the "root cause for the collapse of the English empire in America" in England's failure to "create a politically autonomous center of empire in the metropole." Because the "colonists had become accustomed more to suzerainty than to empire in the eighteenth century," they perceived England's attempt to establish "full bureaucratic control" as a threat to "traditional liberties" and resisted.[68] The fall of the Spanish Empire was an even more clear-cut case of decay. Doyle provides a useful step-by-step account:

> First, there was a deterioration in the efficiency and honesty of the bureaucracy. Particularism, as in Rome, led to a quasi-feudalization of bureaucratic posts as offices were sold to creole elites in order to raise immediate revenue and new offices were created to reward peninsular Spaniards with colonial spoils. The autonomy of imperial direction

> suffered; fewer resources could be mobilized or made available for economic development. . . . Second, the economy of some colonies tended toward ruralization and concentration of property, dissolving ties of economic reciprocity with Spain and leaving only the economic tie of taxation—a chain of servitude. Third, other colonies, among them Cuba, Argentina, and Venezuela, were economically much more dynamic, and as Spain's own economy declined, the constraints of the mercantilist system proved increasingly irksome to colonials. Fourth, the creole elite perceived itself as caught between resentment of Spanish domination and fear of a slave, peasant, or Indian rising.[69]

The attrition of the Spanish Empire in Latin America for the most part involved a concerted series of liberation struggles prompted by two wars. The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) had resulted in Spain's loss of territory in the Netherlands. No less important, as Renate Pieper points out, was that "Spain came into a deep political, military, and financial crisis as a result of the territorial losses of the Thirty Years War and could no longer therefore send sufficiently trained administrators and troops to Spanish America."[70] That crisis eventually came to a head with Napoleon's invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in 1808. In addition to occupying Spain, Napoleon forced King Ferdinand VII to abdicate and replaced him with his own brother Joseph. At the same time, the Portuguese royal family fled to Brazil. In effect if not in intent, Napoleon subverted both imperial orders. On the one hand, he delegitimized Spanish rule in Latin America—very much in the manner that the Bolshevik coup in late 1917 would later delegitimize Russian imperial rule in the non-Russian borderlands—and provided peripheral elites with the opportunity to pursue their own interests.[71] On the other hand, the flight of Portugal's court transferred the center of imperial rule to a colony and effectively promoted it to the status of a quasi-partner of the former core.

Because creole elites had long since been implicated in a disharmony of interests, it was not surprising that liberation struggles broke out soon after these momentous changes in the core-periphery relationship.[72] Foreshadowing Franz Joseph's later policy toward Hungary, the Portuguese prince regent Dom João granted Brazil the status of a kingdom in 1815. In Spanish America a series of liberators emerged—Simón Bolívar, José de San Martín, and Bernardo O'Higgins were the most prominent—to lead struggles against contintental rule. By the late 1820s almost all peripheral provinces in Latin America had attained independence. Most of Spain's remaining colonies—

the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico—would be lost to the United States in the 1890s, while Portugal's peripheral holdings in Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea would acquire independence as a result of homegrown liberation struggles in the 1970s.[73]

French and British imperial holdings were lost to a combination of wars and liberation struggles. The Great Depression severely shook France and Britain, leading to massive unemployment and social unrest, radically reducing trade, inducing "business [to] turn inwards," and thereby loosening core ties to their peripheries.[74] In addition, two world wars within three decades strained both empires economically and militarily; the post–World War II emergence of the United States as the world's leading power further constrained Britain and France in their activities throughout the world.[75] Most important perhaps, total war had advanced decay by devastating many of their colonies in North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia and thereby upsetting existing colonial practices, forcing local populations to mobilize in self-defense, and promoting peripheral leaders. Not incidentally, nationalism also took off, to be championed by the world's other great power, the Soviet Union. John Darwin summarizes this process as follows:

> The war produced a dangerous conjuncture of international, domestic and colonial pressures, whose effects were mutually reinforcing. The struggle to uphold their great power position, together with domestic imperatives, left the British no alternative but to pursue colonial policies that were riskier and riskier. At the same time, the very international changes which prompted these policies—the rise of American and Soviet power—also made it progressively more difficult for the British to contain the colonial and semi-colonial unrest their own actions were helping to generate. They increasingly lost the ability to manage the nebulous but potent influence of "world opinion," especially at its principal forum at the United Nations.[76]

The British had already had to contend with nationalist forces in India and Palestine. The former was partitioned, and Pakistan and India gained independence in 1947; Palestine became independent Israel in 1948. Induced by problems at home, cold war rivalries, and nationalist demands abroad, British withdrawal from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa continued and was completed more or lest uneventfully by the 1960s. The French followed suit, especially after their humiliating defeat in Vietnam and costly

victory in Algeria proved beyond doubt that their hold on empire was exceedingly tenuous.[77] "To many outside observers," writes Paul Kennedy, "especially the Americans, [the French] attempt to regain the trappings of first-class power status while so desperately weak economically—and so dependent upon American financial support—was nothing more than a *folie des grandeurs*."[78] In sum, writes Charles Tilly, "the situation favored European withdrawal: the USSR had no colonies in the major areas of European colonization, and the United States had few, while the European powers were preoccupied with recovery from the ravages of war."[79] Significantly, although direct rule eventually ended, imperial relations of a more informal kind actually intensified. Both Great Britain and France continued to exert enormous influence on formerly peripheral elites granted nominal independence within a set of relationships that were hegemonic and informal.[80]

Blips and Impossibilities

It is probably impossible to say which form of attrition will affect which empires, and it is certainly impossible to predict when exactly wars or struggles will occur and with whom. Naturally, expansionist neighbors will be more of a threat than nonexpansionist ones, and well-governed empires should experience less discontent and thus fewer internal challenges than poorly governed realms. True enough, perhaps, but the first proposition borders on the obvious and the second on the irrelevant: after all, as the empires under consideration are all decayed, they must, ipso facto, be more or less poorly governed. In the final analysis, we can only say, along with Joseph Tainter, that decay increases significantly the mathematical probability that wars and liberation struggles will, at different points in time, interact with decayed and dissolving imperial systems to produce attrition.[81]

Although we expect all empires inexorably to proceed downward on Taagepera's parabolas, they need not do so with equal alacrity. Adjustments in the resource flow—brought about by policies, leaders, economic and social change, and various contingencies—are inevitable. In particular, increased production—the result of either greater infusions of capital and labor or improvements in technology—could meet the growing resource requirements of the core state. But economic growth, while possible, will not be sustainable beyond the short run. Greater infusions of productive factors are unlikely to be forthcoming as long as resource extraction remains high. To

the contrary, we expect the imperial population either to apply itself less or to evade taxation or both, perhaps not immediately but surely over time.[82]

The picture with technologically driven improvements in productivity is more complicated. On the one hand, a resource-hungry state will discourage innovation no less than it will discourage effort. On the other hand, the leaders of a large, intrusive, hypercentralized state—which will return to the scene in chapter 3—could intervene directly in the economy and promote technological change. Whether such a state can sustain such an effort for more than the short run, however, is doubtful.[83] Its own bloatedness militates against the efficient use of resources; its information deficiencies argue against the successful targeting of growth technologies. In sum, we expect some state-driven growth, but we do not expect it to save the day and extricate the empire from its structural dilemmas.[84]

We also expect decay to be affected by the type of empire concerned. First, decay should be greater and more intense in larger empires than in smaller ones. The more peripheries there are, the larger the demands on information aggregation and resource allocation, the greater the likelihood of overload and disintegration.[85] Second, imperial maintenance should consume more resources in discontinuous empires than in continuous ones. Compact empires are easier to defend—the lines of supply are shorter, transportation costs are lower, and administration is simpler. Constantine the Great arguably acted on this principle by dividing the Roman Empire into two administrative halves, thereby ensuring Byzantium's survival for another millennium. As distance translates into higher costs, into more complex and more expensive imperial relationships, discontinuous empires should be especially susceptible to disruptions in resource flows and thus to decay and attrition.[86] Third, informal empire is tantamount to the institutionalization of greater resource retention by peripheral elites. As a result, we expect the resource squeeze to afflict informal empires sooner than formal or less informal ones.

How far will attrition proceed in any particular case? Structural theories have no way of knowing. An empire could, like those of Rome or Constantinople, disappear completely; it could contract to encompass only the core, as happened to the Ottomans and the Habsburgs; or it could stabilize at some size larger than the core. Any one of these individual outcomes can be explained historically, but any overall generalization would flirt with some notion of optimal state size. All we can say with any degree of certainty is that the more empires contract, the smaller and less discontinuous they

become. It follows that attrition should slow down as empires decay and become progressively more compact and that empires may stabilize at some smaller size that may or may not correspond to an integrated state or some approximation of a nation-state. Byzantium may illustrate this dynamic, having survived as little more than Constantinople and its suburbs for about a century.