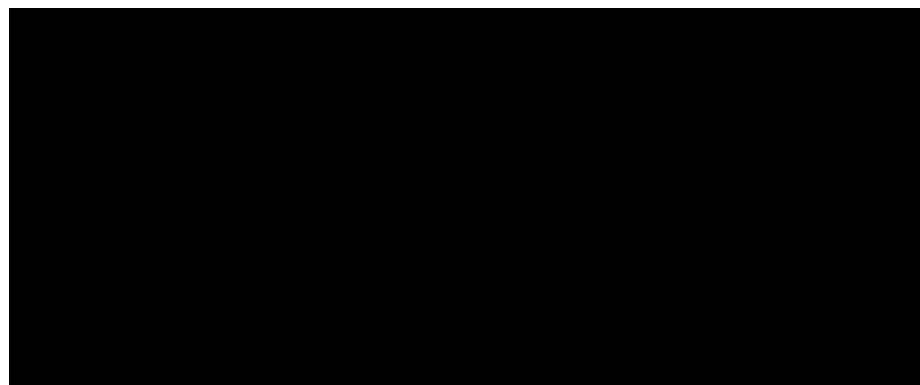


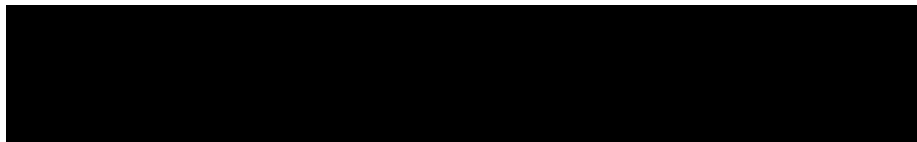


IPS-Nathan Lectures by Mr Lim Siong Guan: Lecture I - “The Accidental Nation”, 12 September 2017

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Mr Lim Siong Guan’s speech

Introduction

This series is really based on the theme of, “Can Singapore Fall?”, but you will realise in the course of my speech that the real question that I want to ask is, “Will Singapore Fall?”, except that, if I were to set it as “Will Singapore Fall?”, it would sound a little predetermined. It might be a little too pessimistic for everyone, so “Can Singapore Fall?” is a more neutral question, but obviously, when you ask a question like “Can Singapore Fall?”, the answer must be, “of course, provided you make the conditions as bad as you can possibly imagine.” Let’s get on and discuss this issue, and hopefully along the way, we can learn from each other, and gather ideas from each other on how we can act in a way to minimise the possibility or likelihood of Singapore falling.

The Melian Dialogue

The Peloponnesian War was a war fought between Athens, leading the Peloponnesian League, and Sparta, leading the Delian League. It stretched from 431 to 404 BC, and included what has come to be known as the famous Siege of Melos.

Melos is an island in the Aegean Sea more than 100 km to the east of mainland Greece. It was a prosperous island. The Melians were of the same ethnic group as the Spartans, but they chose to remain neutral in the war. Athens invaded Melos and asked Melos to pay tribute to Athens. The Melians had never paid tribute to Athens before, and refused to do so now.

Thucydides, the Athenian historian, wrote about what has come to be known as the Melian Dialogue. It describes the negotiations between Athens and Melos. The Athenians’ approach was to appeal to the Melians’ sense of pragmatism, pointing to the Athenian army’s overwhelming strength and their “reasonable” terms for surrender. The Melians, on the other hand, appealed to the Athenians’ “sense of decency”. Whether or not Melos was truly neutral, ships could freely resupply there; this made Melos strategically important for Athens. On the other hand, subduing Melos would reduce the reach of Sparta’s navy.

In substance, the Melian dialogue went as follows:

Athens:	Surrender and pay tribute to Athens, or be destroyed.
	Refusing to argue with the Melians on questions of morality, the Athenians simply assert, “The strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.”

Melos:	We are a neutral city, not an enemy, so there is no need to conquer us in your war with Sparta.
Athens:	If we accept your neutrality and independence, we would look weak. Our people would think that we have left you alone because we are not strong enough to conquer you.
Melos:	If you invade us, it will alarm the other neutral Greek states, who will then turn against you lest the same fate befalls them.
Athens:	The Greek states on the mainland are unlikely to act this way.
Melos:	It would be shameful and cowardly for us to submit without a fight.
Athens:	It is only shameful if there is a reasonable chance of defeating the attacker. There is no shame to submit to a superior opponent.
Melos:	Although you are much stronger, we would regret not trying to fight as there could still be a chance to win.
Athens:	This is a foolish hope. It does not come from rational analysis and is just an emotional response.
Melos:	The gods will help us because our position is morally just.
Athens:	The gods will not intervene. It is natural that the strong dominate the weak.

Melos:	Sparta will help defend us.
Athens:	Sparta are a practical people. They will not put themselves at risk when their interests are not at stake. Besides, we have the stronger navy. There is no shame in submitting to a stronger enemy offering reasonable terms. What makes sense is to submit to superiors, stand firm against equals, and be moderate to inferiors.

The Melians stuck to their position. Athens mounted a siege and finally captured the city in 416 BC, executing the men, and enslaving the women and children. Some modern historians look at it as an act of genocide, a wiping off the face of the earth of an entire nation, culture and civilisation.

The Melian dialogue is often quoted as a classic case study in “political realism”, where power is assumed to be the primary goal of political acts.

Don’t Be Weak

I asked a foreign friend whether the Melian dialogue carried a lesson for Singapore. His response was immediate and direct. “The lesson for Singapore is straightforward. **Don’t be weak.** Don’t be weak in how you are perceived externally by others. Don’t be weak internally.”

I start my series of IPS-Nathan Lectures with this reference to the Melian dialogue because Don’t Be Weak explains so much of Singapore. The continuous existential question for Singapore is how to respond to the argument that “**What makes sense is to submit to superiors, stand firm against equals, and be moderate to inferiors**”, and especially on how Singapore can live under the observation that “**The strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.**”

Singapore’s struggle for survival and self-determination has been with us from at least 1959, when Singapore attained internal self-government. Our quest for independence and sovereignty will continue for all our coming years.

Singapore, to my mind, is “**The Accidental Nation**”, a nation unplanned in its creation and unexpected in its survival. My lecture today would be to survey how we came to be, and how we should think of the future. How can “Don’t be weak” explain our past, and how must “Don’t be weak” make our future?

My next lecture will be on “**The Fourth Generation**” of Singaporeans since independence. It is the generation whose days will include SG100. And my third and final lecture will be on “**The Way of Hope**”, discussing my beliefs on how we can best secure a future for our

generations to come.

The “Accident” of Independence

The founding political leadership of Singapore led by Mr Lee Kuan Yew had not believed that Singapore could be on its own or should be on its own. This was the real world the rational pragmatist could not escape from.

Singapore was a British colony, part of the Straits Settlements comprising Penang, Melaka and Singapore. Geographically part of the Malay Peninsula, keeping Singapore separate from the Federation of Malaya was to go against the facts of geography and history even from the days before Sir Stamford Raffles founded modern Singapore in 1819.

Yet, the British had carved Singapore out of Malaya while integrating Penang and Melaka into the Federation of Malaya because Singapore hosted the largest British military establishment east of Suez. Singapore was critical for the sustenance of the British Empire.

Thus, the British granted the Federation of Malaya independence on 31 August 1957 while only granting Singapore full internal self-government in 1959, where the colonial administration controlled external relations and security, including internal security.

The People’s Action Party led by Mr Lee Kuan Yew had, as a prime feature of its election manifesto for the General Elections which brought it to power in 1959, the aim of seeking to be reunited with Malaya. The principle of “Don’t be weak” drove Singapore to find strength in the bigger political entity. Malaya did not welcome the idea of merger with Singapore. Singapore’s predominantly Chinese population would have tilted the overall racial balance in an unwelcome way.

That Malayan politics was very much built upon ethnic lines did not make merger with Singapore an attractive proposition. On the other hand, the possibility of Singapore turning communist at that time under the tutelage of Mao’s China was a most unpleasant prospect. A communist Singapore at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula would have perhaps been a worse nightmare to the Malaysians than a communist Cuba would have been to the Americans.

In 1963, the Prime Minister of Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman, was persuaded that he had to consider the idea of merger as something that would be good for Malaya. The prospect of Kuala Lumpur being the Washington DC of the merged entity, the political centre, with Singapore as the New York, the commercial centre, had its attractiveness. The challenge of ethnic distribution was ameliorated by including Sabah and Sarawak in the merger while offering the British a way out for granting independence not just to Singapore but also its Borneo colonies.

I can clearly recall the strains of songs which spoke of the hopes of being in Malaysia, in particular:

Let’s get together, Sing a happy song, Malaysia forever, Ten million strong.

Land of the free, Marching as one.

Ready to share in every way,

So let's get it done – get it done, get it done.

We're all in the same boat, Steady as you go.

Let's pull together,

Everybody row – row, row, row.

It's right, It's the answer,

There's no other way,

To be good neighbours everyday

Malaysia forever, evermore, United for liberty,

Home of the happy people,

Just you wait and see – wait and see, wait and see, wait and see.

Let's get together, Sing a happy song, Malaysia forever, Ten million strong.

We're ready for merger, Let's open the door,

To Malaysia forever, Ever more!

You get the idea – it's quite a nice song. Maybe that's why people voted for merger with Malaysia! The logic of Malaysia was so intuitive that few questioned it. And even fewer in Singapore believed that Singapore could go it alone as an independent and sovereign nation.

Thus Malaysia Day, 16 September 1963, came with much hope and happiness, like long-lost siblings brought back together to make the family complete again.

But the family reunion was not to last. Two racial riots, in July and September 1964, brought to the fore racial distrust between the Malays and the Chinese.

In the economic sphere, Singapore sensed that the economic benefits to be expected from the merger of equal partners might not be forthcoming. Signals from Kuala Lumpur portended a weakening of Singapore, both economically and politically. As the political differences grew more acrimonious over the months, both Kuala Lumpur and Singapore came to the conclusion that the best way forward would be for Singapore to leave Malaysia.

Singapore became an independent, sovereign state on 9 August 1965. What had been deemed by Mr Lee Kuan Yew and his economic *czar*, Dr Goh Keng Swee, to be an impractical way forward for Singapore, became the only practical way forward. Thus was born The Accidental Nation: not planned for, not hoped for, but the best of bad options. “Don't be weak” drove us to merger in 1963. And “Don't be weak” turned us towards independence in 1965.

Singapore, The Little Red Dot

If you look at an atlas of the world, Singapore, the country, fits quite nicely in the letter “o” in its name. I do not know whether you’ve ever thought about it that way. If you look at this map, there’s a big red circle. That’s not Singapore. Singapore is the dot in the center of the circle, and even then, the dot is bigger than what Singapore is, geographically, for that map. Singapore fits in the letter “o” in the name of the country. Maybe that’s something most of us don’t quite realise until its mentioned. The question, of course, is, how do you make the country sovereign and independent despite its smallness. Indeed, in most atlases, they have to make a point of skewing the scale by enlarging the dot which represents Singapore so that it may be pointed out. That is how small Singapore is.

What are the implications for survival, security and success for a little state like Singapore? Singapore had to find its own way while facing racial tensions internally and unfriendly forces externally, with little by way of an army to defend herself. Singapore was extremely vulnerable. Malay ultranationalists were denouncing Singapore, and Indonesia was still conducting *konfrontasi* (military confrontation) against Singapore because Indonesia had deemed the formation of Malaysia in the merger of the Federation of Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore in 1963 a neo-colonialist plot.

When President B J Habibie of Indonesia referred to Singapore as a “little red dot” in 1998, he might have meant it as a disparaging remark. Little would he have expected that Singaporeans would take it up as a badge of honour – a symbol of succeeding despite the odds. Singapore had reached out beyond its immediate surroundings and “leapfrogged” the region to adopt the whole world as its hinterland, its source of capital, investment, research and technology, management capability, and, most of all, markets. There is no point working on industrialisation and having all the factories if you produce stuff which cannot be sold anywhere. Singapore is the result of human imagination and endeavour.

In less than two generations, Singapore had attained First World status economically, and had become a guide and a hope for other developing countries. From 1965 to 2015, Singapore’s per capita Gross Domestic Product at Current Market Prices increased over a hundred fold, from US\$516 to US\$53,630. Let us think of what it was that had enabled Singapore to succeed.

The Legacy of Lee Kuan Yew

In 2015, Singapore commemorated its 50th year of independence with much celebration and stirring pride.

It was also a year marked by national mourning, with the demise of its founding father, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, on 23 March 2015.

In the days following Mr Lee’s passing, there were many comments on Mr Lee’s legacy — quite a few equated Singapore’s physical transformation into a modern metropolis and imaginative developments, such as the Marina Barrage, with Mr Lee’s legacy.

However, this would be a superficial way to think of Mr Lee’s legacy. The material

accomplishments of Singapore are but evidence that what Mr Lee and the founding generation of leaders dared to do was right. The real legacy of Mr Lee Kuan Yew is the indomitable spirit that drove him and our founding fathers to do all that they could to secure the survival and well-being of the nation and its people. “Don’t be weak” as a crucial principle for national survival and success never escaped Mr Lee’s heart and mind. And he was fully vindicated with Singapore’s peace, progress and prosperity in the years since independence.

Singapore’s success in its first 50 years is the story of a brand — a nation brand of trustworthiness. We all understand the meaning of brands, whether it is in the way you choose your clothing or the way you decide on where to go, the way you decide on the shoes you’re going to buy. Whatever it is, brands mean something, and if a brand has a high standing, that’s the brand you go after, if you can afford it. Nations also have nation brands. Singapore is a story of having success out of nothing. Finding an antidote to being no more than a “little red dot”. No natural resources. No natural markets. A small population. A tough neighbourhood.

Honouring our *word* is one critical aspect of the Singapore brand as a nation. There is a second critical aspect, which also relates to *honour*, but this time about society. It is about Singaporeans honouring each other, appreciating our social differences, our diversity, and at the same time seeking strongly to maintain social harmony as a common good for all.

Singapore has, from its early days, been multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious. Mr Lee Kuan Yew had recognised from the start that race, language, culture, and religious issues are visceral; they go to the very heart of our individual identities and drive emotions which can easily overwhelm reason. People kill each other for reasons of race or religion. So much of what we see in the media day after day affirm this point. But internal discord will break Singapore asunder. Mr Lee Kuan Yew, in his wisdom, decided from early on that religion, for example, shall be safeguarded as a matter for individual choice, but the rules must be strict so that no one may exercise his right on religion in a way which impedes his neighbour’s freedom to similarly exercise his choice of religion.

Honour, the Singapore Brand

In summary, Singapore is a construct built upon two strong legs of honour. The first is the nation brand of trustworthiness, we are a country and a people who *honour our word*. The second is being a nation where diversity of race, language, culture and religion is recognised as a fact of life to be sustained in social harmony by a people who *honour each other*.

Brand Finance, a leading international brand valuation and strategy consultancy firm based in London, identified Singapore as the top nation brand in 2015, in its ranking of nation brands across the world. It found Singapore to be the top nation brand again in 2016, with Hong Kong as No. 2 and Switzerland as No. 3, followed by other European countries and New Zealand, with Japan coming as No. 10. The United States was not in the list of top 10 nation brands. Do note, however, we are talking here about the brand strength where Singapore is No. 1; when it comes to brand value, the United States is No. 1.

Brand Finance, in the Foreword of its Nation Brands 2016 report, stated:

“The effect of a country’s national image on the brands based there and the economy as a whole is now widely acknowledged. In a global marketplace, it is one of the most important assets of any state, encouraging inward investment, adding value to exports and attracting tourists and skilled migrants. The results of this year’s *Brand Finance* Nation Brands report show the benefits that a strong nation brand can confer, but also the economic damage that can be wrought by global events and poor nation brand management.”

In its Executive Summary of Nation Brand strength, *Brand Finance* wrote:

“Singapore last year claimed the title of World’s strongest Nation Brand and has held off close challenges from Hong Kong and Switzerland to do the same again this year. Nation Brand value is reliant upon GDP (i.e. the revenues associated with the brand). Singapore’s small size means it will never be able to challenge for the top spot in brand value terms, because its brand simply cannot be applied extensively enough to generate the same economic uplift as ‘brand USA’ for example. However, in terms of its underlying nation brand strength, Singapore comes out on top.”

As for religious diversity, The Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan American think tank based in Washington, DC, which provides information on social issues, public opinion, and demographic trends shaping the United States and the world, found Singapore in 2014 to be the most religiously diverse country in the world. What is remarkable is how social peace has been maintained and sustained despite this huge diversity.

Singapore has managed to survive and prosper as an independent country since 1965, despite even Mr Lee Kuan Yew himself not believing this was possible when he sought merger with Malaya. It was an achievement founded on fundamental perspectives of building a nation which had nothing by way of natural resources, little by way of land and population, and a diversity of race and religion which many countries would find an imponderable challenge. But *will* the success last? *Can* the success last?

Can Singapore Fall? Will Singapore Fall?

The Chinese have a saying “富不过三代” or “Wealth does not last beyond three generations”. After celebrating its 50th year, Singapore is moving into its third generation. Will Singapore’s wealth and stability last?

Sir John Bagot Glubb (1897 – 1986) was a British soldier, scholar, and author, who led and trained Transjordan’s Arab Legion between 1939 and 1956. After his retirement from the British army, he wrote a profound essay, “The Fate of Empires and Search for Survival”, which analyses the lifespan of great nations from their genesis to their decline.

Glubb notes that over the last 3,000 years, the “periods of duration of different empires at varied epochs show a remarkable similarity”. Glubb explores the facts and notes that most great nations do not last longer than 250 years (or 10 generations), and many last much

shorter periods of time.

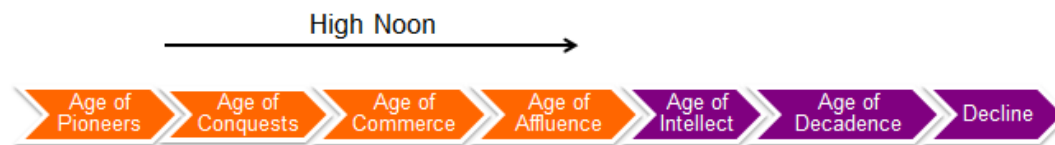
Here is his summary:

The nation	Dates of rise and fall	Duration in years
Assyria	859-612 B.C.	247
Persia (Cyrus and his descendants)	538-330 B.C.	208
Greece (Alexander and his successors)	331-100 B.C.	231
Roman Republic	260-27 B.C.	233
Roman Empire	27 B.C.-A.D. 180	207
Arab Empire	A.D. 634-880	246
Mameluke Empire	1250-1517	267
Ottoman Empire	1320-1570	250
Spain	1500-1750	250
Romanov Russia	1682-1916	234
Britain	1700-1950	250

Glubb also observes that “immense changes in the technology of transport or in methods of warfare do not seem to affect the life-expectation of an empire” – it merely changes the “shape of the empire”.

In his essay, Glubb describes many of the stages of empire and many of the reasons why they break down and eventually disappear.

According to Glubb, the stages of the rise and fall of great nations seem to be as follows:



Let us examine the stages.

First, the **Age of Pioneers**. A small nation, treated as insignificant by its contemporaries, suddenly emerges and conquers the world. This age is characterised by an extraordinary display of energy and courage.

Pioneers are ready to improvise and experiment: “Untrammelled by traditions, they will turn anything available to their purpose. If one method fails, they try something else. Uninhibited by textbooks or book learning, action is their solution to every problem.”

The first stage of life of a great nation is a period of amazing initiative, enterprise, courage, and hardihood. These qualities produce a new and formidable nation.

The second stage of expansion, consists of more organised, disciplined, and professional campaigns. Methods employed tend to be practical and experimental.

Let us then consider the **Age of Conquests**.

The nation acquires the “sophisticated weapons of old empires” and a great period of expansion ensues. The principal objects of ambition are glory and honour for the nation.

The conquests result in the “acquisition of vast territories under one government”, thereby birthing commercial prosperity. Basically, the observation is that, in the age of conquests, the young man thinks that the best thing he can do for himself is to be a soldier; to fight for king and country.

So we come to the **Age of Commerce**.

The main purpose of this era is to create more wealth.

The first half of this age seems to be splendid: “The ancient virtues of courage, patriotism, and devotion to duty are still in evidence.”

The nation is proud and united, and boys are still required to be manly. In addition, courageous initiative is displayed in the quest for profitable enterprises all around the world.

But the acquisition of wealth soon takes precedence over everything else. The previous objectives of “glory” and “honour” are but “empty words, which add nothing to the bank balance” for the people.

This is the period of time when values start shifting from the self-sacrifice of the initial pioneers to self-interest.

Thus we come to the **Age of Affluence**.

Money causes the people to gradually decline in terms of courage and enterprise.

Wealth first hurts the nation morally: “Money replaces honour and adventure as the objective of the best young men... the object of the young and ambitious is no longer fame, honour, or service, but cash.”

Instead of seeking wealth for their nation or community, men seek wealth for their own personal benefit.

Education is also affected negatively. Instead of seeking learning, virtues, and qualifications that serve the nation, parents and students seek qualifications that enable them to grow rich.

The divide between the rich and poor increases and the wealth of the rich is flaunted for people to see. People enjoy high standards of living and consume in excess of what they need.

The transition from the Age of Conquests to the Age of Affluence is a period that Glubb calls “High Noon”.

While the immense wealth of the nation impresses other nations, this period reveals the same characteristics in each case he studied, namely:

- The change from service to selfishness
- Defensiveness

Describing the change from service to selfishness, Glubb says during this period, “enough of the ancient virtues of courage, energy, and patriotism survive to enable the state successfully to defend its frontiers. But beneath the surface, greed for money is gradually replacing duty and public service.”

As for defensiveness, the rich nation is no longer interested in glory or duty, but is preoccupied with the conservation and maintenance of its wealth and luxury. Money replaces courage, and subsidies are used to “buy off” enemies.

History indicates that nations decline not because its people do not have a conscience, but because of:

- A weakening sense of duty
- An increase in selfishness and the desire for wealth and ease

The Age of Affluence describes the pinnacle of the empire. Next comes the **Age of Intellect**.

During this stage, wealth is no longer needed for necessities or luxuries, and there are also abundant funds for the pursuit of knowledge.

Business people that made their wealth in the age of commerce seek fame and praise of others by:

- Endowing works of art

- Patronising music and literature
- Founding or endowing institutions of higher education

It is ironic that while civilisations make advancements in science, philosophy, the arts, and literature, and the spread of knowledge seems to be one of the most beneficial of human activities, history shows us that every period of the decline is characterised by the expansion of intellectual activity.

Why is this so?

The answer is NATO – No Action, Talk Only. Intellectualism leads to discussion, debate, and argument, which is often seen around the world today. But this “constant dedication to discussion seems to destroy the power of action.”

Intellectualism, selfishness, and the lack of a sense of duty to one’s family, community, and nation, all appear simultaneously in the nation.

The most dangerous by-product of this Age of Intellect is the birth and growth of the notion that human intellect can solve all the problems of the world, when in fact the survival of the nation really depends on its citizens.

In particular, in order for that nation to thrive and survive, its citizens must display:

- Loyalty
- Self-sacrifice

So finally we come to the **Age of Decadence and Decline**.

Decadence is a mental, moral, and spiritual disease that disempowers its people to the extent that they do not make an effort to save themselves or their nation because they do not think that anything in life is worth saving.

The Age of Decadence comes about due to the following factors:

- Extended period of wealth and power
- Selfishness
- Love of money
- Loss of a sense of duty

It is marked by seven characteristics:

- Defensiveness
- Pessimism
- Materialism
- Frivolity

- An influx of foreigners
- The welfare state
- Weakening of religion

Let us consider each of these characteristics.

Defensiveness: People are so consumed with defending their wealth and possessions that they fail to fulfil their duty to their family, community, and nation. Glubb also notes that another remarkable and unexpected sign of national decline is civil dissension and intensification of internal political hatreds. Various political factions hate each other so much that instead of sacrificing rivalries to save the nation, internal differences are not reconciled, leading to a weaker nation.

Pessimism: As the nation declines in power and wealth, universal pessimism invades its people and accelerates its decline.

Materialism: People enjoy high standards of living and consume in excess of what they need.

Frivolity: As the pessimism invades its people, people start to think: “Let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” The people forget that material success is the result of courage, endurance, and hard work, and spend an increasing part of their time indulging in sex, leisure, amusement, or sport. The heroes in declining nations are the athlete, the singer, or the actor; not the statesman, the general, or the literary genius.

Influx of Foreigners: In his essay, Glubb also observes that one frequent phenomenon in the decline of cities is the influx of foreigners. Foreigners are attracted by affluence, and take on jobs which often the citizens do not want to do themselves. But they can be weak links in the society for various reasons, such as:

- they will be less willing to sacrifice their lives and property for the nation
- they form communities of their own that protect their own interests above that of the nation

Glubb states that, just by being different, they tend to introduce cracks and divisions in the society. The important point is that the citizens themselves would have to stand up for the nation, because they cannot leave the defence of the nation to foreigners.

The Welfare State: As history shows, the decline of a nation is often preceded by a tendency towards philanthropy and sympathy.

As stated by Glubb: “The impression that it will always be automatically rich causes the declining empire to spend lavishly on its own benevolence, until such a time as the economy collapses, the universities are closed, and the hospitals fall into ruin.”

The welfare state is just another milestone in the life story of an ageing empire in decline.

Weakening of Religion: Glubb defines religion as “the human feeling that there is

something, some invisible Power, apart from material objects, which controls human life and the natural world.” Religion does not only mean institutionalised faith, but represents a set of moral values which in turn influence social norms.

Without morality, men are more likely to snatch than serve, and the spirit of self sacrifice is weak.

The nation is characterised by defensive-minded militaries, decaying morals, loss of religion, frivolous consumption of food, entertainment, sex, and the complete focus on individual interests.

Where is Singapore?

You may be wondering at this point: Glubb’s essay is about empires. Could it apply to a small state like Singapore?

Glubb mentions in his essay that “if the small country has not shared in the wealth and power, it will not share in the decadence.” Has Singapore shared in the wealth and power?

If we accept that Glubb’s essay is possibly applicable to Singapore, which age is Singapore in?

Based upon social observations of increased materialism and consumerism, could it be that Singapore has experienced its “High Noon” and is somewhere between the Ages of Affluence and Decadence? While the immense wealth and growth of our nation has “dazzled other nations”, many Singaporeans have possibly observed a decreased sense of public duty with a change from service to selfishness; there is a growing defensiveness and desire to grow and retain individual wealth.

As Glubb described in his essay, the Age of Affluence is one where “the object of the young and ambitious is no longer fame, honour or service, but cash.” Does that describe Singapore in some way?

Singapore also registers certain markers of the Age of Intellect, which is a stage where wealth is no longer needed for necessities or luxuries, and there are also abundant funds for the pursuit of knowledge.

Another sign that Singapore could be thought of having reached the Age of Intellect is the increase in discussions, debates, and arguments, especially on online social media, without a focus on action, or leaving the action as something for others to do.

Please do not get me wrong. I am not here to make judgments on what is good or bad about our individual choices; I am only making observations on where many Singaporeans seem to be, and what implications these portend if we think Glubb has a relevance for Singapore.

It is interesting to note that, in the rise of nations to the Age of Affluence, it is the striving for economic wealth that was the prime motivator. And in the social decline and decay which followed in the empires, it is affluence that was the prime enabler. Thus **affluence is at the root of both the rise and the fall of the nations** as one empire gives way to another that is

more energetic, more imaginative, and more determined to establish the strength and influence of their nation.

Of the seven characteristics of the Age of Decadence, we could note that there are already signs of at least five of them in Singapore, namely:

1. Defensiveness
2. Pessimism
3. Materialism
4. Frivolity
5. Influx of foreigners

Of the remaining two characteristics of the “welfare state” and the “weakening of religion”, we could note that:

Welfare State: In Singapore’s early years of nation-building, the emphasis in its social policies was self-reliance. But in recent times, there has been a shift to collective responsibility. While the government has been quick to emphasise that this shift to collective responsibility does not mean self-responsibility is less important, this shift could be a slippery slope if the people and government were to let their guard down, and collective responsibility slowly takes on the face of collective irresponsibility.

I offer you another story from ancient Greece that we can learn from. Ancient Greece was the pioneer of democracy 2,500 years ago. How did democracy in ancient Greece come to an end?

One of the experts on the history of the period was Edith Hamilton (1867–1963). In her book,

The Echo of Greece (W.W. Norton 1957) on Athen’s decline, she wrote:

“What the people wanted was a government that would provide a comfortable life for them, and with this as the foremost object, ideas of freedom and self-reliance and service to the community were obscured to the point of disappearing...

Athens was more and more looked on as a co-operative business possessed of great wealth in which all citizens had a right to share. The larger and larger funds demanded made heavier and heavier taxation necessary, but that troubled only the well-to-do, always a minority, and no one gave a thought to the possibility that the source might be taxed out of existence. Politics was now closely connected with money, quite as much as with voting. Indeed, the one meant the other. Votes were for sale as well as officials...

The whole process was clear to Plato. Athens had reached the point of rejecting independence, and the freedom she now wanted was freedom from responsibility. There could be only one result. (...) If men insisted on being free from the burden of a life that was self-dependent and also responsible for the common good, they would cease to be free at

all...

Responsibility was the price every man must pay for freedom. It was to be had on no other terms...

But, by the time, Athens had reached the end of freedom and was never to have it again.”

Weakening of Religion: While the Pew Research Center study had found Singapore to be the world’s most religiously diverse nation in 2014, the Singapore Census, which is done every 10 years, shows that the number of citizens who do not profess to have a religion has been increasing.

Glubb’s observations are, of course, by no means predictive. But we can benefit at least by being reflective over it.

Where Do We Go From Here?

I began my Lecture by explaining why Singapore was the Accidental Nation. We achieved independence, which was unplanned and unexpected. But we survived and we succeeded for 50 years.

Can our future be our conscious decision to work towards a specific strategic end?

What I have presented to you is a way to think about the future. Is the decline Glubb writes about inevitable and unavoidable? Can we choose to make the future? Can we start again a new age of Pioneers? I think it is a choice we have. But we can keep talking and never make a choice. That would be another accident – this time of our choosing, or at least of our incapacity to choose.

I well remember my first meeting with Mr Lee Kuan Yew when he was Prime Minister and I was his Principal Private Secretary. He told me that in the course of my work, I would be dealing with foreigners, and advised: “Always look the foreigner in his eyes. Never look down. You are dealing with him as a representative of Singapore. Conduct yourself as his equal.”

As I look back, I plainly see that in this wise instruction lay the reason for what has made Singapore so much of what it is — well-regarded by the world, respected, self-aware, pushing always against the boundaries of possibilities. “Don’t be weak” was never absent from his mind.

So where do we go from here? I began with the story of Melos, and then moved on to explain how Singapore had managed to survive and progress since independence because we paid a lot of attention to honour. We honour our word, always, by being trustworthy and dependable; we honour each other, always, by appreciating and respecting one another, keeping the peace, and being united. And we have kept in mind this dictum: Don’t be weak, externally and internally.

Finally Glubb. The striving for Affluence drove the rise of successful nations. But Affluence also facilitated their fall. The rise was mostly economic; the fall was mostly social. These

are the critical questions for Singapore:

- What kind of Singapore do we want in the next 10, 20, 50, 100 years?
- Can there be a way to begin a new Age of Pioneers and thereby ameliorate the effects of the Age of Decadence and Decay (extrapolating from Glubb’s model in the rise and fall of nations)?

Basically, to understand why I posed the questions about the future in this way, if you could go back to Glubb’s model – he talks about a country reaching its pinnacle of affluence, getting into decline – it is because the decline is mostly in social terms. The question in Singapore is whether there is a way for us to deal with social issues so that this decline is not necessarily predetermined and unavoidable. And even if they are unavoidable, can we at least ameliorate the effects? And the other question is whether there is a way to deal with the future by saying “Can we go back to a new Age of Pioneers and start that cycle again?” So at least in economic terms, is there a way to think about the future, in terms of getting back to the Age of Pioneers.

These are the questions I look forward to addressing in my next two lectures. We have reached the status of a First World Economy. What is the First World Society we would wish to be? What would be right for Singapore and Singaporeans, not just for the current generation but for the generations to come. In the end, it is the kind of society we want to be and the sustainability of such a society that are the crucial issues.

