

Lessons for S'pore on the rise and fall of empires

When Singapore became independent in August 1965, it was an accidental nation, unplanned in its creation and unexpected in its survival, said former top civil servant Lim Siong Guan. The question now is what kind of nation Singapore wants to be in the coming years and whether its people have what it takes to carve out a new age, added Mr Lim in an IPS-Nathan lecture yesterday.

In the first of a three-part lecture series, he discusses the social challenges Singapore's economic prosperity has brought. This is an excerpt from the speech by Mr Lim, who was previously head of the civil service and Group President of GIC.

Lim Siong Guan

TODAY, 13 September 2017

The Chinese have a saying: "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 life-span of great nations, from their genesis to their decline.

Glubb notes that, over the past 3,000 years... most great nations do not last longer than 250 years (or 10 generations), and many last much shorter periods of time.

The stages of the rise and fall of great nations seem to be as follows and he says all the empires he analysed went through the same (seven) stages.

First, the Age of Pioneers

A small nation, treated as insignificant by its contemporaries, suddenly emerges and conquers the world. 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 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.

So we come to the Age of Commerce (the third stage).

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

The divide between the rich and the 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 a change from service to selfishness and defensiveness.

Describing the change, Glubb says that 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.

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, and founding or endowing institutions of higher education.

It is ironic that while civilisations make advancements in science, philosophy, the arts and literature ... 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”.

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.

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 nations because they do not think that anything in life is worth saving.

The Age of Decadence comes about because of the following factors: An extended period of wealth and power; selfishness; love of money and loss of a sense of duty.

It is marked by defensiveness, pessimism, materialism, frivolity, an influx of foreigners, the welfare state and a 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 and 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.

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 stage 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”... 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 there are 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 prompt 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, 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 the Government were to let their guard down, and collective responsibility slowly takes on the face of collective irresponsibility.

Weakening of religion: While a Pew Research Centre 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 plus 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 wrote 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? 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 or 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)?

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 see? 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.