

# A gendered analysis of US decline: a cautionary tale

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## Abstract

This article offers an innovative gendered analysis of the thesis of US decline, a prominent theory shared amongst International Relations scholars and US foreign policy experts about the impending end of US hegemony and the US-led international order. Inspired by feminist International Relations, it demonstrates that masculinism underscores the theory in three important ways: the methodologies used to (dis)prove US decline, the values declinism privileges and reinforces, and the way US decline appeals to phallogocentric imagery. The article illustrates this argument through a discourse analytical reading of hi/stories of decline since the end of the Cold War in which I argue that US declinism paved the way for ‘Make America Great Again’ (MAGA) and the return to a hybrid masculinity embodied by Donald Trump and his supporters. The article thus acts a cautionary tale against declinism by showing the constitutive effects of alarming scenarios of falling empires. It offers an original inquiry in the thesis of US decline and advances wider studies on declinism, and in so doing, contributes to International Relations scholarship.

## Keywords

US hegemony, hybrid masculinity, masculinism, phallogocentrism, Trumpism, declinism

## Introduction

Decline is a prominent concept pervading the discipline of International Relations. It generally refers to negative perceptions about the evolution of society, a sense of relative deprivation and the belief that a nation or culture is decaying, a problem which is often blamed on the political elite.<sup>1</sup> Decline has been applied in a myriad of contexts, for instance in relation to the rise and fall of great powers,<sup>2</sup> the dwindling of British economic performance after the British empire,<sup>3</sup> and the decrease of inter-state wars since the end of the Cold War. Decline is particularly salient in US politics and US foreign policy as a

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theory that circulates (overtly and implicitly) to various cultural sites, including the US foreign policy establishment, about the end of US hegemony.<sup>4</sup> Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the proclamation of a ‘unipolar moment’,<sup>5</sup> foreign policy experts and IR scholars have questioned the sustainability of US’ primacy in the world.<sup>6</sup> The thesis of US decline, or ‘US declinism’, portrays the US as ‘a nation winding down economically, living beyond its means, losing its competitive edge to more dynamic peoples, sagging under the burdens of empire, and suffering from a variety of intensifying social, economic and political ills’.<sup>7</sup> As a result, ‘important changes in US grand strategy are necessary to prevent the decline in America’s global position from accelerating’.<sup>8</sup>

This article offers an innovative reading of US declinism, by examining decline as a gendered and sexualised discursive construct that has allowed Trumpism and a specific form of masculinity, to be framed as their natural response. Declinism is predicated on a masculinist mode of thinking that privileges particular ways of ‘being in’ and ‘knowing’ the international system, reproduces gender hierarchies and seeks to maintain US supremacy. Gender works in the thesis of decline in ways that not only makes decline real but as Robert Pape advises, also demands ‘important changes’ in US politics and US foreign policy.<sup>9</sup> The latest of these transformations in the US has manifested through the rise of an ideology that ‘mobilises an antagonistic politics based on gendered dynamics, combining misogyny, anti-elitism and racism’.<sup>10</sup> While declinism has a long history in the US which largely pre-dates former President Trump, ‘Trump’s election was facilitated by his rhetorical exploitation of declinist themes’<sup>11</sup> and was essential to his presidency. Indeed, at the heart of ‘Making America Great Again’ (MAGA) was the idea of a broken America that needed repair,<sup>12</sup> which resonated with warnings of ‘unprecedented decline’.<sup>13</sup> In asking for ‘significant changes to jolt the course of events onto a different track’<sup>14</sup> to avoid further descent, US declinism is at the heart of the rise of Trumpism and a ‘noticeable “remasculinisation” of international politics’.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the article is a cautionary tale against the declinist literature and pays attention to the political and constitutive effects of alarmist scenarios about the end of US supremacy and self-narratives of a nation in recurrent existential crises.<sup>16</sup> In demonstrating this argument, the article contributes to IR scholarship by offering a gendered analysis of hi/stories of US decline, which has so far remained absent in IR and feminist IR scholarship.<sup>17</sup> Feminist IR can teach us a lot about the masculinist logics that are at play in declinism, for example in questioning the ways declinism is ‘known’ by the malestream, in highlighting how declinism over-values masculinist values such as autonomy, independence and power, and in shedding light on the sexual imagery that permeates notions of decline. Moreover, ‘putting gender in’<sup>18</sup> declinism not only produces broader insights in global politics but also forewarns the possible responses to ‘prevent the decline in America’s global position’. While this article focuses on the US, it brings together multiple ideas, discourses and interpretations of declinism in a single context and analysis, which I hope can be replicated to other settings and declinist themes beyond the US. This article thus also advances broader studies on declinism.

The article develops its analysis in three parts. Following Nicholas and Agius, I first unravel three ways in which masculinism, as a logic and a ‘totalising worldview that implicitly universalises and privileges the qualities of masculinity’,<sup>19</sup> pervades ideas of decline: in the type of methodologies employed by declinists, the values privileged and reinforced in the thesis of decline and the phallogentrism of the discourse of decline. The

second section provides a discourse analytical reading of key US Foreign Policy, US politics and IR texts<sup>20</sup> on US-American decline, examining statements, representations and images of the end of US hegemony. I illustrate how masculinity operates in this thesis, in particular how US decline is associated to the feminisation and emasculation of the US and show that each crisis of decline enables the construction of a different and new kind of ideal masculinity within an overarching, stable and ‘persistent’ masculinist architecture.<sup>21</sup> Masculinities are ever-evolving, multiple, paradoxical and incongruent, and as *processes* rather than biological attributes of men, they are constructed in relation to the shifting contexts in which men live.<sup>22</sup> Trump embodied a particular form of masculinity that can be called ‘hybrid’ which has a distinctive place in US history and returned triumphant following the constructed crisis ushered in by former President Obama. Hybrid masculinity here is defined as men’s strategic integration of performances of traditionally subordinated masculinities and femininities,<sup>23</sup> which Trump realised by borrowing from identity projects usually labelled as ‘black’. Indeed, Trump and his supporters performed a hybrid masculinity that integrated performances coded as ‘inferior’ in two ways: first by being charged with animality and brutality, traits that were traditionally introjected into Indigenous and Black men in US history, and second, by strategically and culturally appropriating from ‘Others’ whose identities were formed through long struggles for recognition and justice.<sup>24</sup> This form of hybrid masculinity allows Trump and its supporters to (continue to) frame themselves as marginalised, subjugated groups<sup>25</sup> and constitutes a contemporary expression of masculinity that reaffirms broader masculinist logics in international relations.

## **Masculinism and masculinities in IR and US decline**

### *The ubiquity of decline in IR and the absence of (gender) analysis on US declinism*

Narratives of decline are nothing new nor unique to the US. Anxieties and fears of diminishing influence features in the politics of every major power since the Roman Empire.<sup>26</sup> The declinist literature is extensive and, in the US context, this spirited debate spans from the end of US dominance and the implications of a post-American world,<sup>27</sup> to the US’ decreasing ability to lead the world,<sup>28</sup> the crisis of legitimacy after Iraq,<sup>29</sup> the unravelling of American soft power,<sup>30</sup> the decaying of the American nation, culture and institutions,<sup>31</sup> and finally to the collapse of the US-led liberal international order and the crises of international liberalism.<sup>32</sup> Declinist arguments are also widespread in debates about regional influence and world orders such as the fall of ‘the West’ and the rise of China and the Asian security order,<sup>33</sup> and in national contexts beyond the US, including the decline of Great Britain,<sup>34</sup> and Russia’s loss of great power status (which has played a key role in the invasion of Ukraine).<sup>35</sup> The notion of decline is also used in other analytical areas such as inter-state wars and political violence.<sup>36</sup> At the beginning of the 2000s, for example, prominent IR scholars established a research programme<sup>37</sup> that not only claimed that global violence in the post-Cold War era was declining, but that this was due to the incorporation of women into institutions of power,<sup>38</sup> which was ‘methodologically flawed and morally troubling’ for some.<sup>39</sup>

IR scholarship has too often treated noise about decline as a consequence of objectively measured decline.<sup>40</sup> Declinists assess decline in terms of brute facts, or objectivist terms, by supporting or countering the thesis with the use of quantitative or/and qualitative empirical measures. They seek to answer the question ‘how real is it?’<sup>41</sup> and prove that decline is, objectively, either occurring or absent, through causal analyses of poor and declining economic, social, cultural, material and military performance metrics. For example, In *The better Angels of Our Nature*, Steven Pinker evidences the claim that we live in an ‘unusually peaceful time’ by reminding us of ‘incriminating facts about the past’, with ‘dates and data’,<sup>42</sup> such as a historic comparison of the rate of death in war in nonstate and state societies.<sup>43</sup> Barnett explores British protracted industrial decline since the end of the Second World War through an audit of British performance during the war, encompassing technological performance, the level of national education, the capability of management and the governing class, and the attitudes and cultural values of the government.<sup>44</sup>

Few exceptions to this objectivist approach include Ralston, who attends to declinism as the ‘explicit articulation of an argument regarding the nation’s international decline, irrespective of the “objective conditions” that face the country’.<sup>45</sup> Another exception to the objectivist approach is Biegon, who employs a Critical Discourse Analysis framework to examine the ways in which themes of decline can be mobilised within a populist discourse.<sup>46</sup> While Biegon’s analysis acknowledges that decline is not ‘mere facts’ and takes into account the linguistic importance and discursive power of decline, by following Norman Fairclough’s CDA model, Biegon also appraises US decline against the relative decrease of US ‘actual’ material capabilities<sup>47</sup> and thus retains, to some extent, aspects of this objectivist approach. Following Ralston, we should be cautious about explaining decline with positivist metrics for several reasons. First, because national security is less about the realities of a superpower’s capabilities and real imminent threats than about the stories and self-narratives about perceptions of global positioning. Indeed, narratives about decline have ‘repeatedly run further and faster than underpinning power realities’.<sup>48</sup> Second, challenging declinists ‘involves horse-trading in statistics’ which rarely ends in a definitive and authoritative ‘truth’.<sup>49</sup> Third, declinists seek to evaluate US power in terms of quantifiable metrics and relative power, and this fails to engage with structural and relational forms of power that the decline debate necessitates.<sup>50</sup> Finally, an objectivist approach to decline is inconsistent with a gendered/feminist analysis that is ‘avowedly political’<sup>51</sup> and ‘driven as it must undeniably be by the goals of bringing to the fore marginalized feminine and feminist perspectives, and of reducing asymmetries in power between men and women’.<sup>52</sup> By and large, not only is gender absent from the declinist literature but declinist analyses favour positivist methodologies that seek to validate or falsify abstract hypothesis, which do not always align with the feminist view that theory is constitutive of reality and that ideas shape our world.<sup>53</sup>

This article presents a different view of decline, one which does not attempt to establish that the United States is *really* descending or its influence *really* diminishing (as declinists do). In other words, I do not examine US decline as a ‘given’ or as a reality. As English and Kenny,<sup>54</sup> this article engages with decline interpretatively, so that what is a ‘*state of mind* relatively autonomous of the actual’, becomes more apparent. In addition, my concerns with declinism are not to do with explaining when and why declinism

becomes salient in the domestic politics of major powers, as Ralston successfully demonstrates. The puzzle of this article rests instead on decoding gender and more particularly masculinism in US declinism and the political effects of the ‘persistence of masculinism’<sup>55</sup> in the thesis of US decline. Instead of answering ‘is decline real?’, I ask the question ‘what do ideas about decline do?’. This allows us to better grasp not only how Trump is able to harness declinist themes but also how Trump skilfully responded to the constructed loss of US male power, which will be explored in the final section. I use the term ‘gender’ away from physical properties belonging to men and women and instead adopt gender as a practice and a system that centres and illuminates power relations. The following segment reveals how masculinism informs the concept of decline through three dynamics. Masculinism is ‘the ideology that justifies and naturalises gender hierarchy by not questioning the elevation of ways of being and knowing with men and masculinity over those associated with women and femininity’.<sup>56</sup> First, declinism is predicated on masculinist logics as it sustains US primacy and preponderance in International Relations thereby reaffirming gender hierarchies; second, declinism privileges masculinist epistemologies and ontologies; and third, it constitutes a phallogocentric discourse centred on male power and sexuality.

### *The masculinism of US declinism*

In shifting from the ‘woman question’ to problematising men and masculinities in the 1990s, Zalewski and Parpart successfully showed that masculinism underscored International Relations, its theories and practices.<sup>57</sup> The emphasis on women had not only not achieved making women more visible<sup>58</sup> but ironically, it rendered them as problems and ‘troublesome mysteries’.<sup>59</sup> Along with other prominent feminist IR scholars,<sup>60</sup> they convincingly showed that celebrated concepts such as the ‘three levels of analysis’,<sup>61</sup> ‘anarchy’, ‘great power politics’, and the ‘security dilemma’<sup>62</sup> were not only excluding women but were ‘subordinat[ing] and “other[ing]” alternative ways of understanding, knowing and being’.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, masculinist characteristics such as autonomy and independence<sup>64</sup> have tended to be over-valued in the discipline’s canons, and actions and behaviours like interdependence, cooperation and connectedness, traits traditionally associated to women, have often been downgraded.<sup>65</sup> The cast of autonomy and minimal obligations – the foundation of masculine identity according to Sylvester<sup>66</sup> – is intricately threaded in US declinism. For US declinists, an indicator that the days of a great power’s hegemony are numbered is when it loses its ability to ‘gets its way’.<sup>67</sup> US declinism implies that a defining feature of superpowers is that they can do what they want without the permission of others and thus can pursue some form of isolationism or a ‘go it alone’ approach.<sup>68</sup> The US has traditionally been able to take unilateral action, for example in intervening in Iraq in 2003, withdraw from international agreements such as the Paris Agreement, and impose economic sanctions on other countries without international support. Declining, on the other hand, entails the wearing away of the capability to choose when to go it alone or when to act multilaterally. Trump’s slogan ‘America First’ spoke directly to this loss of capability and sought to address concerns that the US could no longer act autonomously.<sup>69</sup>

In addition, masculinism permeates US declinism by driving competency and mastery, and projecting global hierarchies as the natural order of the international system. The use of categories like ‘hegemons’, ‘middle-level powers’ and ‘weak states’ is integral to the US decline repertoire. In this configuration, the decline of the US implies that the ‘marked asymmetry of influence in its favour’ is weakening,<sup>70</sup> which is to be feared since a unipolar order led by the US can provide a safer system than a multipolar or anarchical one.<sup>71</sup> Thus, US declinists warn that the end of US-led unipolarity will lead to instability, and in so doing, reinforce a world where not only hierarchies are celebrated,<sup>72</sup> but where the US should prevail. US declinism is therefore deeply masculinist as a ‘logic, discourse, impulse, and moral voice that maintains and naturalises subtle and overt forms of domination’.<sup>73</sup>

Declinism is also imbued with masculinism for elevating particular ways of knowing above others. As discussed earlier, decline is often studied from an objectivist standpoint that attempts to prove scientifically that decline is occurring. This mode of inquiry excludes other ways of interpreting decline, marginalising questions of positionality, by distancing the analyst/researcher from the world and decline they’re ‘describing’. Conclusive and authoritative statements about US decline such as ‘Pax Americana [. . .] is fast winding down’<sup>74</sup> or that ‘the fall of American power will be more precipitous with the passage of time’<sup>75</sup> are not only unambiguous but represent the ‘god trick of seeing everything from nowhere’<sup>76</sup> that feminists have for so long challenged. Instead of universality and objectivity, feminist knowledge-making is about *situated, located* and *embodied* knowledges, ‘for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible’.<sup>77</sup> While IR has often privileged objectivity and aspired towards a distant understanding of an object matter,<sup>78</sup> feminist research ‘has emerged from a deep scepticism about knowledge which claims to be universal and objective but which is, in reality, knowledge based on men’s lives’.<sup>79</sup> Especially in the US context, declinist theorists predominantly located in the Anglosphere make no attempt in acknowledging their position on the impending end of US influence in the world (which may affect them). They may not agree on the best course of action to counter decline, and perhaps surprisingly, some scholars prescribe strategies of restraint and retrench<sup>80</sup> instead of increased US unilateralism,<sup>81</sup> yet there is a tacit agreement amongst both proponents and exponents of US decline that a responsible, perhaps more democratic and multilateral form of US hegemony is desirable.

Finally, it is worth noting that declinism constitutes a phallogentric discourse rooted in a deep-seated anxiety about the loss of the US erected phallus. According to Charlotte Hooper,<sup>82</sup> the basic argument of a phallogentric discourse relies on a particular interpretation of anatomy and sexuality which associates the phallus with power and activity, and defines female genitals as passive because of the female role in heterosexual intercourse. Phallogentrism is widespread in the thesis of US decline, most notably when the decline of US unilateral and sovereign power is equated to an inferior and ‘Other’ position. In Lacanian theory, the female sex is presented as ‘not-whole, a lack, an Other’<sup>83</sup> and thus to be represented as lacking or losing particular capabilities through claims that US unipolar position is waning implies that US decline will lead the US to assume a ‘less than’ female sex role, which is to be feared. Phallic imagery and symbolism also colour debates about US decline, not only through the image and nomenclature of ‘decline’ itself, but

through explicit appeals to masculine prowess, competitive male sexuality and hyper-vigilance against US impotency. Appeals to sexual imagery are common in this phallogocentric discourse. Scholars and US pundits alike represent the US as ‘impotent’,<sup>84</sup> ‘sagging’,<sup>85</sup> ‘losing control’, ‘unwinding’,<sup>86</sup> its performance as ‘dwindling’, its economy and military as ‘running out of steam’<sup>87</sup> and ‘must prepare for the end of dominance’.<sup>88</sup> Feminists have for a long time challenged the sexual metaphors that infuse the language of war, militarism and weapons<sup>89</sup> for perpetuating violence. Within the discourse of US decline, sexual metaphors mobilise ‘gendered associations in order to create excitement about, support for and identification with’<sup>90</sup> US male and heterosexual power, which in turn, reinstates the gender order. In her well-known analysis of defence intellectuals, Carol Cohn asked how it would be possible to consider disarmament if disposing of weapons was constructed as emasculation? Similarly, if US decline is constructed as sexual impotency, how can we possibly envisage a more equal global order free from US domination? To sum up, while decline is ubiquitous in IR, little interpretivist and feminist scholarship has been devoted to the relationship between gender, sex and decline. Yet, as this first part argued, there is ample space for feminist analysis to contribute to these recurrent debates. To further rectify this gap, the following section offers a gendered reading of hi/stories of US decline since the end of the Cold War.

## **A new gendered analysis of US decline since the end of the Cold War**

In this section, I focus on the post-Cold War era because the various ‘waves’ of decline flagged in the 21st Century find their root in the challenges of the ‘unipolar moment’ triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, as Kitchen and Cox admit, debates about US decline are cyclical and ‘those arguing that the United States is now in decline are joining a long history of commentary’.<sup>91</sup> The analysis below shows that while masculinism provides the underlying logic beneath the discourse of US decline, US declinism can be broken down into specific crises that are attributed to particular masculinities. Indeed, each constructed crisis is produced as the result of an embodied form of failed US sovereign masculinity intimately entwined with a style of presidency and president. Masculinities are different to masculinism in that they are constructed in relation to bodies, are dynamic and (re)negotiated processes rather than unchanging categories. Cannen’s concept of ‘presidential masculinities’ is thus apt in this context.<sup>92</sup> This concept helps to examine how Presidential masculinities are renegotiated and reconstructed during and after periods of decline, as well as deepens our understanding of the relationship between US decline, US sovereign masculinity and political leadership as new presidential masculinities will emerge to respond to claims that the US has turned ‘weak’. This confirms the changing and evolving nature of masculinities as well as the closeness of Presidential masculinities and hegemonic masculinities.<sup>93</sup>

### *Crisis one: the end of the Cold War and the ‘gay 1990s’*

Contemporary US foreign policy textbooks locate a crisis in US power and the fast winding down of *Pax Americana* – the post-1945 era that advanced the US-led international

order – at the end of the Cold War.<sup>94</sup> Globally, US foreign policy commentators claimed that the watershed moment of the collapse of the Soviet Union engendered a climate of unease, confusion and miscalculations, and a ‘lack of purpose’ in US foreign policy.<sup>95</sup> Layne and Waltz argued that US-led unipolarity would be short-lived as new great powers would counterweight US hegemony.<sup>96</sup> As result, the US would not be able to preserve its unipolar position.<sup>97</sup> The era ‘between the Bushes’, ‘between the benevolent external shock of 1989 (the fall of the Berlin Wall) and the malevolent external shock of 9/11’ is considered a distinct phase in US foreign policy history and is characterised by apprehension over US role in the world.<sup>98</sup> The absence of international threats and male competitiveness in the 1990s triggered anxiety and nostalgia towards the Cold War as a ‘simpler time’<sup>99</sup> and a system that was ‘durable and acceptable’.<sup>100</sup> The phallogocentric categorisation of US foreign policy as ‘lacking purpose’, ‘in need of a grand strategy’ and ‘uneased’ not only conjures up passive femininity but it demands the reassertion of male certainty, agency and power. In US foreign policy parlance, this moment came to be referred as the ‘Kennan sweepstakes’, an effort on the part of the Clinton administration to find a post-Soviet ‘statement of purpose to rival George Kennan’s early Cold War concept of “containment” of communism’.<sup>101</sup>

This sense of international unease coincided with US domestic politics in the 1990s. This decade brought unprecedented visibility and access to the LGBT<sup>102</sup> community in the US,<sup>103</sup> which triggered a new kind of conflicted masculinity – less rigid, more sensitive, less heterosexist and racist – one that Bill Clinton apparently embodied during the ‘gay nineties’.<sup>104</sup> Yet, the inclusion of non-heteronormative subjects did not come without a price. Indeed, the image of the ‘gay 1990s’ as a decade of sexual freedom for LGBT people was accompanied by a new homonormativity, ‘a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption’.<sup>105</sup> This was compounded by warnings against the feminisation of US politics, visible through the participation of women in the US foreign policy establishment, whose biological and innate tendency towards non-aggression, ‘would be a liability’.<sup>106</sup> Clinton’s foreign policy of democratic enlargement, assertive humanitarianism (i.e. dropping ‘humanitarian’ bombs) and his seemingly progressive domestic politics and conflicted masculinity thus only deepened US anxiety about its role in the world without the Soviet Union. Despite an acknowledgement by some that the 1990s provided huge opportunities for the US to strengthen its hegemony and that Clinton had gotten the ‘economy right’,<sup>107</sup> declinists decried that ‘Americans could not come together to define the national interest’<sup>108</sup> and that the Clinton years were ‘pregnant with America’s post-millennium decline’.<sup>109</sup>

### *Crisis two: the emasculation of the US on 9/11*

The September 11 attacks set in motion a second crisis of decline where phallogocentric narratives of gender, sexuality and national sovereignty blended. Heteronormative paradigms informed accounts of 9/11 and the War on Terror by seeing the nation as a female virgin land being assaulted by a masculine aggressor.<sup>110</sup> So configured, 9/11 can be read as the violent destruction of the US-American phallus or as a double act of penetration: two erect



towers at the heart of New York being penetrated by hijacked airplanes.<sup>111</sup> Masculinist anxiety thus re-appeared through the imagery of the US as an 'impotent, emasculated man unable to protect his possessions from being violated and destroyed'.<sup>112</sup> To respond to the gross emasculation of the nation, the US launched the Global War on Terror, which 'restored masculine confidence in American civilisation'.<sup>113</sup>

The War on Terror signified a 'manly moment'<sup>114</sup> and indicated an 'increased virility',<sup>115</sup> which Maruska called 'hypermasculine'.<sup>116</sup> Contrary to the hegemonic model of masculinity, hypermasculinity is reactionary, excessive and distorted.<sup>117</sup> Indeed, 'hypermasculinity is the sensationalistic endorsement of elements of masculinity, such as rigid gender roles, vengeful and militarized reactions and obsession with order, power and control'.<sup>118</sup> During the War on Terror, US-American culture and political institutions projected extreme gendered stereotypes to generate support for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq,<sup>119</sup> for example President George W. Bush embodying the hypermasculinised protector state who promised to protect women from harm.<sup>120</sup> It was also through the casting of the al-Qaeda terrorist as civilisationally and sexually barbaric that US hypermasculinity was asserted. The al-Qaeda terrorist was produced as a sexual perversion whose religion sanctioned a patriarchal polygamy and privileged selfish male desire, and thus a threat to the white, able-bodied, nuclear family, and consequently, who must be contained.<sup>121</sup> As Weber posits, 'by freezing this nonwhite, fanatical "civilisational other" in its place in the postcolonial world, the "West" to some degree succeeds in its own terms in demarcating dangerous "Islamic fundamentalists" from innocuous, white "Western" ones'.<sup>122</sup> Lastly, hypermasculine reactions were evident through the overwhelming force targeting racialised subjects that appeared 'Arab' or 'Muslim', including the violence of private security companies like Blackwater and particularly the torture that took place in the Abu Ghraib prison and CIA black sites.

### *Crisis three: Obama's restraint and the (re)feminisation of US-America*

Circa the end of the Bush administration, the spectre of decline and falling empire re-animated US foreign policy circles.<sup>123</sup> By late 2007, 'whispers of American decline [. . .] began to creep into the foreign policy debate'.<sup>124</sup> Concerns over an economic decline and the failures to win the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq beyond toppling the Taliban and Baathist regimes, were a sign that the US had become an 'impotent power'.<sup>125</sup> As an emasculated power, the US was unable to compel other states to act in line with Washington. The arrival of President Obama at the White House did not reassure some declinists that US decline would be overturned. As Robert Singh declared, 'Obama's presidency has left America weaker and the world more unstable than when he entered the White House'.<sup>126</sup> Obama's 'retrenchment and accommodation' doctrine, a foreign policy designed to retrench foreign military presence and accommodate international actors diplomatically to focus on progressive policies at home,<sup>127</sup> showed restraint in the use of US-American power. The consequences for strategic retreat and 'leading from behind' were profound.<sup>128</sup> For Dueck, while Obama's pivot to Asia symbolised a confident position towards the region and more particularly China, Obama's military posture in Afghanistan and Iraq was in the end, ineffective.<sup>129</sup> Obama's foreign policy sent the message that the US was amenable to others' demands

and thus controllable and docile, an inferior subject position often reserved for women. Despite the US being an unrivalled military power, 'the United States [wa]s now less able to convene a coalition, forge trade agreements, build support for sanctions, broker compromise on an important multinational dispute, or persuade others to follow it into conflict than at any time in the past seven decades'.<sup>130</sup>

It was not only Obama's international strategy that was the source of US decline, but his very essence and personal traits were at the heart of decline. According to Quinn, Obama seemed 'to have a disposition well fitted to leading the nation into the opening states of an era of decline'.<sup>131</sup> Moreover, his race as first Black President, and his effort to represent himself as 'the very exemplar of social diversity and inclusion',<sup>132</sup> also tied in with the feminisation of the US. Obama carefully navigated the complexities of race and gender during the 2008 US elections campaign trail. As contended by Frank Rudy Cooper, Obama had to perform his feminine side to avoid the stereotype of the angry Black man and reassure white fears about electing a Black President.<sup>133</sup> Obama thus played up his femininity to offset his blackness, a strategy that also had important trade-offs with the African American communities in the US. Importantly, Obama was known for his cool, carefully constructed rhetoric, and emphatic style of governing,<sup>134</sup> an expression of masculinity that clashed with Bush's hypermasculinity and the hypermasculine violence of the War on Terror. As Cannen argues, 'Bush embodied the evil white empire, but Obama, a globally popular, seemingly pragmatic, young African American man, d[id] not'.<sup>135</sup> Obama's presidential masculinity transgressed traditional white male leadership and was characterised by a 'post-hip-hop ghetto-style cool'.<sup>136</sup> Yet crucially, Obama's emphatic and carefully packaged rhetoric concealed ongoing US militarism.<sup>137</sup> Thus, on the face of it, Obama's softer, more feminine, and reconciling masculinity was perceived as responsible for US inability to 'get its way', act unilaterally and thus to blame for the loss of masculine autonomy. This created opportunities for Trump to reconfigure US sovereign masculinity away from the cool, collected, eloquent masculinity embodied by Obama towards a hybrid form of masculinity, driven instead by animality and bestiality.

### **Response to crisis three: Trumpism and the return of US hybrid masculinity**

Attitudes about masculinity shape voters' behaviour, and as Deckman and Cassese demonstrate, views about the US being 'too soft and feminine' had a real impact on the 2016 US elections.<sup>138</sup> Voters with gendered nationalist attitudes saw Donald Trump as the masculine figure who could address the weakening of the US and were likely to vote for him.<sup>139</sup> However, Trump not only performed a hegemonic masculinity but also instrumentalised performances from subordinated masculinities that directly responded to claims that the US had turned 'soft' under Obama. While not static or fixed, hegemonic masculinity is conventionally associated to a hyper-violent form of masculinity. When Trump declared he would be a tough as a President, sexualised women, attacked gender non-conforming individuals and mocked the masculinity of his opponents,<sup>140</sup> Trump enacted an idealised hegemonic masculinity. Yet, I interpret the ascendancy of Trumpism

not merely as an indicator of the liveliness of hegemonic masculinity, but to the primacy and return of a hybrid form of masculinity which appeared to resolve US decline. To shed light on the concept of hybrid masculinity, I draw on the work of Gail Bederman<sup>141</sup> and Bonnie Mann<sup>142</sup> and situate its emergence and uniqueness in US history, then show the ways in which Trumpism embodied this unique form of masculinity, and finally illustrate how hybrid masculinity came to be read as the solution to the constructed and repeated crises of decline, especially the one engendered by Obama.

### *US hybrid masculinity as unique in US history*

Throughout US history, US sovereign masculinity did not always align with European masculinity in the bond between masculinity and reason, or masculinity and civilisation.<sup>143</sup> In the late 19th Century, US sovereign masculinity marginalised and minimised reason as civilisation was thought to soften the white male body.<sup>144</sup> Reason and restraint became increasingly perceived as emasculating and leading to impotence.<sup>145</sup> This was compounded by white fears that the masculinity of Black and Indigenous men might triumph over the masculinity of White ‘civilised’ men. Michael Kimmel points out that the masculinity of American men has largely been defined in relation to other men, rather than in relation to women, who are too low in the social ladder; indeed, ‘masculinity is largely a homosocial enactment’.<sup>146</sup> Throughout American history, American men have been driven by anxieties that other men will dominate them, have power and control over them (and thus lose autonomy).<sup>147</sup> As a result, ideals of masculinity underwent a transformation at the turn of the 20th Century to prevent Indigenous and Black men from ‘winning’ masculinity<sup>148</sup> and to overcome other masculinities which might tower over white American masculinity. In the 19th Century, American theorists thus began to call for a return to a primal style of masculinity,<sup>149</sup> which was thought as one of the distinctiveness of subordinated masculinities. Strength and animality, which had previously been assigned to Indigenous and Black men, were now central to US white masculinity.<sup>150</sup>

According to American historian Anthony Rotundo, American sovereign manhood was ‘infused with a new sense of primal manhood very different from moral Victorian manliness’.<sup>151</sup> US masculinity reconfigured itself as ‘hybrid’ in the sense of combining instinct and brute strength with technical sharpness, to construct a ‘seductive, heroic figure’.<sup>152</sup> Contrary to the configuration of white European masculinity, US sovereign masculinity turned ‘rough’ between the decades of 1880 and 1920.<sup>153</sup> During this period, a primitive kind of masculinity became attractive to white middle-class men who coined the phrases ‘sissy’ and ‘pussy-foot’ to designate overly effeminate behaviour.<sup>154</sup> Both Bederman and Mann draw on the figure of Tarzan to demonstrate how racial superiority and savagery infused US-American masculinity in the late 19th Century. One of the best-selling novels of the 20th Century, Tarzan’s memorable feature was that of an invincible and perfect masculinity, which first derived from his white racial supremacy as well as from his childhood spent in the jungle with the primitive apes.<sup>155</sup>

US hybrid masculinity, in this context, suggests the strategic integration of identity projects of what are culturally labelled as ‘Black’ or ‘Indigenous’. Bridges and Pascoe argue that this strategic borrowing allows men in privileged social categories, often White straight men whose masculinity appears as hallow, to produce themselves as

socially meaningful groups.<sup>156</sup> In this way, the masculinity of White straight men can be reframed as purposeful and significant through the cultural appropriation of identities of 'Others' who have historically fought for justice and recognition.<sup>157</sup> Importantly, the performance of hybrid masculinity means that inequalities become more difficult to identify since White men are able to position themselves as victims and as part of a disadvantaged and disenfranchised community. Despite hybrid masculinities being set apart from hegemonic masculinities, hybrid masculinities also reinforce hegemonic masculinity by 'appropriating those elements of nonhegemonic masculinities that are functional for the perpetuation of patriarchy'.<sup>158</sup> Hybrid masculinities thus not only reproduce gender power, but also obscure gendered, raced and sexual inequalities by rendering subordinated masculinities visible and integral to hegemonic masculinity. In many ways, this qualifies Trump's presidential masculinity, most notably how he exploited victimhood to make MAGA tangible, which will be explained next.

### *Trump's hybrid masculinity: a response to multiple crises of decline*

Trump lays claim to a particular form of idealised masculinity called 'hybrid masculinity' in manifold ways. First, hybrid masculinity is at the core of Trumpism as an openly white supremacy phenomenon. White people are narrated as indigenous to the US and as the rightful superordinate group, and in so doing, Trump reaffirms whiteness as a legitimate political category.<sup>159</sup> To appease the identities of the White masses,<sup>160</sup> Trump projects himself the 'keeper of the White nation'<sup>161</sup> and has celebrated White power through the administration's dalliance with White supremacy, from Trump's failure to condemn the white nationalist perpetrators of the 2017 Charlottesville attacks,<sup>162</sup> to his refusal to denounce militia groups, and asking the Proud Boys – a far-right, anti-immigrant and all-male group – to 'stand back and stand by' during the 2020 US elections campaign.<sup>163</sup> Yet, and importantly, Trump also defined white people as victims and foregrounded American victimhood in MAGA, which allowed Trump to re-establish and reclaim American power in a context of American decline.<sup>164</sup> According to Johnson, Trump and his supporters can 'imagine themselves as victims of a political tragedy centred around the displacement of "real American" from the political centre by a feminised political establishment'.<sup>165</sup> As such, Trump realises a hybrid masculinity that culturally appropriates identity performances from African American communities whose identities have been forged by common struggles against injustice. Trumpism assimilates practices and identities from what are usually coded as 'Black' to 'boost his masculine capital' but it is important to note that these performances do not challenge stereotypical notions of masculinity or advance alternative identity projects. On the contrary, hybrid masculinity, in this context, sustains minoritised groups as Others and have destructive racial consequences.<sup>166</sup>

Second, Trump has a history of aggressive and violent behaviour especially targeting women, both verbally and physically, with multiple allegations of sexual misconduct.<sup>167</sup> The release of the Access Hollywood tape in which Trump bragged about 'grabbing them by the pussy'<sup>168</sup> without their consent, was not only a clear incitement to sexual violence but it also signalled the return of an accepted masculinity that exhibits overtly animalistic behaviour. Trump's 'compulsive heterosexuality'<sup>169</sup> rescued US masculinity from its politically sensitive trajectory and re-oriented it towards a masculinity more

unique to the US. Engaging in misogynistic behaviour signalled that manhood was redefined in terms of a 'natural order' whereby men can return to be violent and impulsive,<sup>170</sup> have strong sexual desires,<sup>171</sup> and importantly mend US-American vulnerability after myriad waves of decline.

Lastly, Trump's rhetorical style was the anti-thesis of Obama's eloquent and effeminate oration. Indeed, that Trump would brag about groping women, and that this was 'just locker room talk',<sup>172</sup> constituted an 'explicit sexist appeal'<sup>173</sup> within a wider repertoire of overt xenophobic and racist views.<sup>174</sup> This counteracted Obama's efforts to talk diplomatically and package information delicately, or as a 'sissy'. By contrast, Trump is willing to offend and call Mexicans 'rapists',<sup>175</sup> African countries, Haiti and El Salvador 'shitholes'<sup>176</sup> and women 'fat pigs', 'slobs' and 'disgusting animals'.<sup>177</sup> In so doing, Trump breaks away from Obama's Victorian expressions of masculinity as reasoned and effeminate, thwarts concerns over the weakening of the white male body, and projects a masculinity that is instead reconfigured as a 'wild man'. Trump's overt return to a primitive speak therefore resonates with the figure of Tarzan in the American imaginary and strikes a chord with white Americans interested in reconstructing masculinity following multiple anxieties about US role in the world, fears of a loss of sovereignty and autonomy, and the decline of the US erected phallus.

## **Conclusion: a cautionary tale**

The contributions of this article sought to advance knowledge about the operations of gender in hi/stories of US decline since the end of the Cold War. I first unpicked three ways masculinism is central to US declinism: how US decline is studied and apprehended, how US declinism legitimises US hegemony and, lastly, how the discourse of US decline elicits sexual imageries that generate anxieties about the deterioration of US male heterosexual power. Through a discourse analytical reading of scholarship of US decline in the new post-Cold War era, I then demonstrated that American decline is entwined with sexualised and gendered assumptions that masculinity eroded since the 'gay 1990s', disappeared further after 9/11 and the inclusion of (some) LGBT subjects in the national imaginary, and firmly lost after Obama's civilised and effeminate presidency. Narratives of decline are thus not unique to a particular president but are cyclical and repetitive.

While the discourse of decline frames the US as less able to influence and compel others in an increasingly multipolar world, it also conjures up nostalgia and enthusiasm for US supremacy. Protectionist slogans such as 'Make America Great Again' gain currency when they are placed in alarming scenarios about the end of US hegemony and claims that the US can no longer 'get its way'. While declinists warn the US foreign policy establishment of the dangers of waning US-American power for the prospects of global peace and the preservation of a rules-based system, the thesis of decline simultaneously opens other risks. The dangers of the 'after unipolarity'<sup>178</sup> era, may not, as declinists argue, come from revisionist states like China and Iran, the dwindling of economic and military power or particular 'soft' US Presidents, but may emerge from the discourse itself, as US declinism invites the re-masculinisation of the US in ways that reinforce global and domestic asymmetries of power through the strengthening of a

US-dominated world order. The analysis presented here should thus caution US foreign policy scholars and US domestic politics experts who are invested in the declinist trade (and who are probably far from sympathetic to Trump) to pay attention to the *political effects* of their theory. Indeed, this article acted as a cautionary tale against the thesis of US decline, which is at the heart of the ‘masculinist revival’<sup>179</sup> in international politics and hopes this analysis can shed light on other declinist arguments beyond the US.

In addition, I showed that the return of masculinist power in the US is not simply restored by hegemonic masculinity, but by a particular form of masculinity unique to the US, which Trump successfully performs. The masculinity essential to Trumpism is raced white and is hybrid, in the sense that it co-opts identity projects from subordinated masculinities traditionally labelled as ‘inferior’ by reconfiguring White American straight men as a marginalised and persecuted group. The insurrection at the Capitol by Trump’s supporters on 6 January 2021 shows that hybrid masculinity and the violence it projects is not only a potent message that has mobilised beyond Trump’s presidency but has real consequences. According to Agius, Trump’s masculinist logics of power are not an aberration in US history but show lines of continuity across administrations and self-narratives of the US nation.<sup>180</sup> Thus, as the discourse of decline is cyclical, it means that re-masculinisation will continue to thread and permeate US politics. This article thus forewarns the ‘end of American century’ theorists of the (unintended) ramifications of their writing. Instead of asking to ‘jolt the course of events onto a different track’<sup>181</sup>, this analysis calls on to shift the ways in which decline is studied and apprehended. As feminists have long argued, knowledge claims that are not situated or present themselves as ‘scientific’ – as a majority of declinist claims – are ‘irresponsible’ in the sense of being ‘unable to be called into account’.<sup>182</sup>

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## Notes

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