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Make Us Great Again: The Causes of Declinism in Major Powers

Robert Ralston

ABSTRACT

Narratives of national decline occur frequently, often independent of "objective" measures of decline. What causes declinism? First, I argue that declinism most often comes from opposition brokers. Brokers bring otherwise unconnected groups and individuals together in a coalition. This coalition is well positioned to blame the nation's decline on the establishment. Second, I argue that negative events or conditions help narratives of decline resonate with audiences. Using text analyses of UK parliamentary speech, I show that declinism was rampant in late-1970s Britain. I show how two brokers—Margaret Thatcher and Keith Joseph—brought together previously unconnected groups to create a coalition that centered on British decline. Negative events, particularly the "Winter of Discontent," helped declinism resonate, something the coalition recognized and exploited. Finally, I trace the foreign policy consequences of Thatcher's declinism, particularly with respect to the Falklands War.

Donald Trump entered the American political scene with a singular message, built on the notion of American decline and a promise to "Make America Great Again" after a two-term Obama presidency and decades of what Trump saw as the national mismanagement. "The decades of decay, division and decline will come to an end. The years of American Greatness will return … We are going to make American Great Again," he promised.[1] Four years later, in his 2020 State of the Union address, Trump changed his tune: his administration had ended the "American carnage" that he lamented in his inaugural address; his administration had put America's "enemies on the run," its "fortunes on the rise." Trump promised: "We are moving forward at a pace that was unimaginable just a short time ago, and we are never ever going back."[2]

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[1]Donald J. Trump, "Remarks in Virginia Beach, Virginia," American Presidency Project, 11 July 2016, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-virginia-beach-virginia-0.

[2]Donald J. Trump, "Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union," American Presidency Project, 4 February 2020, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-27.

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Such narratives of decline are nothing new. Fear of falling down the ranking of states appears in the politics of every major power stretching back to the Roman Empire.[3] The "radical, non-conformist, undeferential" Joseph Chamberlain championed a message of British decline and renewal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[4] More recently, the leader of the Japan Restoration Party, Tōru Hashimoto, engaged in such a narrative, arguing that "our glorious country Japan has fallen into a state of decline" during his announcement that he would run for national leadership in 2012 following the "triple disasters" in Japan the previous year.[5] American politicians have also deployed narratives of international decline, with perhaps most notably John F. Kennedy voicing his concerns over Soviet missiles and declining US prestige, and Ronald Reagan's promising to "make America great again" against the backdrop of what he thought was a serious diminution of American power under Jimmy Carter.

International relations scholarship has largely ignored when narratives of international decline become politically salient—what I term "declinism"—or has implicitly treated declinism as simply a byproduct of "actually occurring" decline. However, declinism can be independent of decline.[6] There can be significant declinism even when there is little or no observed decline, and vice versa. This suggests a puzzle: Why is declinism at times independent of decline? Why and when does declinism run rampant in the domestic politics of major powers?

In this article, I argue that domestic political factors and events rest at the heart of declinism. I develop a theoretical argument that stresses two key factors in explaining declinism's causes. First, I argue that opposition brokers are best positioned to advance a message of decline. These brokers are affiliated with opposition parties or factions, but reside outside the party establishment, and occupy network positions that allow them to bring otherwise disconnected groups and individuals together in a new coalition. This coalition is well positioned to lay blame for the nation's decline on the incumbent government and the opposition establishment. Second, I argue that negative events, such as domestic strife, economic turbulence, or rival states' successes, render decline more likely to resonate with audiences.

To illustrate my argument, I first identify a period in which declinism became prevalent in the domestic politics of a major power: the United

[3]Richard Lachmann and Fiona Rose-Greenland, "Why We Fell: Declinist Writing and Theories of Imperial Failure in the *Longue Durée*," *Poetics* 50 (June 2015): 1–19.

[4]David Cannadine, *In Churchill's Shadow: Confronting the Past in Modern Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 28–32.

[5]Sheila A. Smith, "Introducing the New Japan Restoration Party," *Council on Foreign Relations: Asia Unbound* (blog), 13 September 2012, https://www.cfr.org/blog/introducing-new-japan-restoration-party.

[6]Josef Joffe, *The Myth of America's Decline: Politics, Economics, and a Half Century of False Prophecies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014).

Kingdom. Britain is a widely examined case of decline.[7] Yet decline and declinism did not move in lockstep in postwar Britain. I examine UK parliamentary speech to track declinism in political discourse between 1945 and the early 2000s. I show that declinism peaked during the late 1970s and early 1980s—at the very time when, according to various indicators, Britain's relative decline came to a halt. Puzzlingly, declinism was comparatively low from the 1950s through the early 1970s, when Britain's decline vis-à-vis other major powers was most steep. Next, drawing on archival research, I show that declinism was unlikely to arise in early-1970s Britain as a dominant theme because the incumbent Conservative Party, led by establishment party members, could not tell a story of decline that would not make them responsible for British decline, whereas the opposition Labor Party had no brokers able to bring together otherwise disconnected individuals and groups to challenge the status quo. Alternatively, after the Conservatives' electoral defeats in 1974 a new movement emerged, spearheaded by Margaret Thatcher and Keith Joseph. Thatcher and Joseph occupied a brokerage position between the Conservative Party and various outside groups brought together through the Center for Policy Studies (CPS).[8] Once Thatcher became leader, she brought declinism to the British people, blaming decline on past Labor and Conservative policies, which she tied to the "Winter of Discontent." Finally, Thatcher's declinism led to foreign policy consequences, exemplified by her response to the Argentinean invasion of the Falklands in 1982, in which she sought a military response to the invasion to reassert Britain's global prestige and standing.

This argument has important implications for international relations theory and policy. Scholarship on international decline has largely ignored narratives of decline, instead focusing on the impacts and reactions of relative decline on rising or declining states' foreign policy. By focusing on narratives of international decline, this article fills an important gap in the literature: explaining the political dynamics through which decline is narrated and acted upon in major powers' domestic politics. Second, this article contributes to a growing literature on foreign policy narratives, offering a theory that stresses actors' positionality and the role of events.[9] Finally,

[7]Richard English and Michael Kenny, eds., *Rethinking British Decline* (New York: Macmillan, 2000); Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895–1905* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Andrew Gamble, *Britain in Decline: Economic Policy, Political Strategy, and the British State*, 3rd ed. (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1990); Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, "Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment," *International Security* 35, no. 4 (Spring 2011): 7–44; Alan Sked, *Britain's Decline: Problems and Perspectives* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1987); Jim Tomlinson, *The Politics of Decline: Understanding Post-War Britain* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

[8]Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988), 147–48; Brian Harrison, "Mrs Thatcher and the Intellectuals," *Twentieth Century British History* 5, no. 2 (1994): 206–45.

[9]For other work on national security narratives, see Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); C. William Walldorf Jr., *To Shape Our World for Good:*

declinist narratives have policy consequences: they can serve both constitutive and constraining functions as opposition brokers form a political identity based on combatting the nation's decline and mobilize political coalitions to offer paths to renewal.

I proceed in four sections. First, I outline the various approaches to international decline and state/leader responses to it. Then I present my theoretical argument, which explains why declinism emerges, and outline the argument's observable implications. I then illustrate my theory by initially identifying a core period of British declinism using text analyses of British political speech. I also address the main contending explanations for declinism: that objective decline causes declinism or that perceptions of decline lag objective metrics of decline. Later in the section, I trace declinism in 1970s Britain and explain why it was not a major narrative early in the decade, before becoming dominant around the 1979 general election. I then show how Thatcher's declinism led to foreign policy consequences, particularly when it came to the Falklands War in 1982. I conclude by offering pathways for future research and implications for the United States and the rise of China.

Decline and Declinism

I define declinism as the salience of international decline as a theme in political elites' domestic discourse.[10] Declinist narratives argue that the nation is in decline, has declined, or will soon decline. I treat declinism as the explicit articulation of an argument regarding the nation's international decline, irrespective of the "objective conditions" that face the country. Declinist narratives might focus on economic arguments about the nation's relative economic weakening, or other metrics, from military prowess to status or prestige. The unifying theme of declinist arguments is that the nation is on a relative international downturn.

The conventional approach to the question of great-power decline typically seeks to examine declining or rising powers' reactions to an objective

Master Narratives and Regime Change in U.S. Foreign Policy, 1900–2011 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

[10]For other conceptualizations and definitions, see George L. Bernstein, *The Myth of Decline: The Rise of Britain since 1945* (London: Pimlico, 2004); Ian Budge, "Relative Decline as a Political Issue: Ideological Motivations of the Politico-Economic Debate in Post-War Britain," *Contemporary Record* 7, no. 1 (1993): 1–23; Cannadine, *In Churchill's Shadow*; Peter Clarke and Clive Trebilcock, eds., *Understanding Decline: Perceptions and Realities of British Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth-Century History* (Milton Keynes, UK: Penguin Random House, 2019); Samuel P. Huntington, "The U.S.: Decline or Renewal?" *Foreign Affairs* 67, no. 2 (Winter 1988): 76–96; Joffe, *Myth of America's Decline*; Jim Tomlinson, "Inventing 'Decline': The Falling Behind of the British Economy in the Postwar Years," *Economic History Review* 49, no. 4 (November 1996): 731–57; Tomlinson, *Politics of Decline*, 2; Srdjan Vucetic, *Greatness and Decline: National Identity and British Foreign Policy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021).

relative decline.[11] The literature treats decline as either an absolute decrease in important metrics of interest to states, such as economic output or military size, or the relative loss of ordinal rank with respect to other states.[12] This approach tends to focus on questions such as how major powers respond to relative decline or the variation in rising powers' strategies vis-à-vis a declining great power.

The literature on rising and declining powers either assumes that decline and perceptions of decline move in near lockstep with each other (the "objectivist" explanation) or that perceptions of decline may, for some indeterminate period, lag objective decline before finally catching up to the realities of decline (the "perceptual lag" explanation).[13] For example, in line with the objectivist explanation, Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent examine the extent of states' retrenchment "within five years of an ordinal transition."[14] Their account expects states to react promptly and rationally to decline, adjusting commitments to maintain solvency.[15] Others relax such rigid time frames, instead choosing longer periods in which to allow states to perceive and react to their decline.[16] However, in both cases, scholars in this tradition see decline as of sufficient interest to major powers—for the sake of their security—that "they have profound incentives to monitor shifts in power."[17] In contrast, as an example of the perceptual lag explanation, Aaron L. Friedberg suggests that factors such as widely distributed decision making and fragmented bureaucratic power may delay responses to decline.[18] Perceptions of decline, in this telling, may lag for indeterminate periods before decline is acted upon. Importantly, neither account seeks to explain narratives of international decline. However, given that both are dominant approaches in thinking about decline, they are

[11]For example, David M. Edelstein, *Over the Horizon: Time, Uncertainty, and the Rise of Great Powers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017); Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, rev. ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Kyle Haynes, "Decline and Devolution: The Sources of Strategic Military Retrenchment," *International Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (September 2015): 490–502; Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Vintage, 1989); Christopher Layne, "The US-Chinese Power Shift and the End of the Pax Americana," *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (January 2018): 89–111; Jack S. Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War," *World Politics* 40, no. 1 (October 1987): 82–107; MacDonald and Parent, "Graceful Decline?"; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014); Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

[12]For measuring decline, see Haynes, "Decline and Devolution"; Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*; MacDonald and Parent, "Graceful Decline?"; Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*; William Curti Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

[13]For objectivist accounts, see especially MacDonald and Parent, "Graceful Decline?" Neorealist analyses more generally assume that structure "has a causal force even over short timespans," which fits well with the objectivist explanation. See Joseph M. Parent and Sebastian Rosato, "Balancing in Neorealism," *International Security* 40, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 59. For perceptual lag accounts, which allow for a longer lag between decline and perceptions of decline, see, for example, Friedberg, *Weary Titan*, 14–17.

[14]MacDonald and Parent, "Graceful Decline?," 25.

[15]Ibid., 19.

[16]For example, Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 15.

[17]Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 38.

[18]Friedberg, *Weary Titan*, 291.

important alternative arguments to consider: declinism arises as a product of actually occurring decline, either immediately (objectivist) or after an indeterminant period of time (perceptual lag).

We should be skeptical of the objectivist approach's ability to explain declinism for two reasons. First, national security narratives often diverge significantly from seemingly objective conditions.[19] Scholars and commentators often decry moments when declinism seems overblown, or when the nation rests on its laurels.[20] If decline is so debated domestically—if scholars, pundits, and policymakers can disagree, at times vehemently, on whether decline is occurring—then it seems clear that declinist discourse is not simply a function of objective realities.[21] Declinism can run rampant in the domestic politics of major powers that are not objectively undergoing decline. For example, the then presidential hopeful John F. Kennedy railed against the so-called missile gap and declines in American prestige as the United States entered the 1960s.[22] Yet his declinist rhetoric was built around myths that could not be sustained, even early on in his presidency: National Intelligence Estimates presented to Kennedy suggested no such gap existed.[23] Moreover, Samuel P. Huntington points to five distinct waves of declinism in the United States, and Josef Joffe outlines cycles of declinism in the United States from the worries about the Russians in the 1950s to those about the Chinese in the twenty-first century.[24] Yet the United States has, throughout these discursive cycles of doom and decline, remained top dog.

Second, available objective metrics often point in multiple directions, sustaining a range of conceivable narratives.[25] Contestation over decline typically involves horse-trading in statistics. There is often no single objective interpretation of the data, but rather a multiplicity of contending alternative, equally reasonable, realities. Rather than focus on a nation's slip relative to its peers, politicians might choose to emphasize continued absolute economic growth or the nation's long-term, accumulated affluence. Rather than highlight areas of military weakness, they may focus on those of martial strength. Moreover, as Friedberg notes, not only have leaders focused on different indicators over time, but "statesmen are not always able to formulate accurate estimates of the relative power of their

[19]Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*; Walldorf, *To Shape Our World for Good*.
[20]Huntington, "U.S.: Decline or Renewal?"; Joffe, *Myth of America's Decline*.
[21]For a similar observation regarding variations in intrastate understandings of the international threat environment, see Mark L. Haas, *Frenemies: When Ideological Enemies Ally* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022), 63.
[22]Joffe, *Myth of America's Decline*, 6; Christopher A. Preble, *John F. Kennedy and the Missile Gap* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004).
[23]Joffe, *Myth of America's Decline*, 53; Preble, *John F. Kennedy and the Missile Gap*, 803.
[24]Huntington, "U.S.: Decline or Renewal?"; Joffe, *Myth of America's Decline*.
[25]See Mark L. Haas and John M. Owen IV's contribution in "Can Great Powers Discern Intentions?" *International Security* 40, no. 3 (Winter 2015/16): 206–7.

own country."[26] Indeed, as MacDonald and Parent acknowledge, "Decisionmakers may not have a clear ranking of great powers, may not even know an ordinal transition is taking place, and have only an inkling that their decline is significant and sustained."[27] If that is true, the objectivist account cannot explain declinism.

Other scholars loosen the restrictiveness of the objectivist account, allowing not only for longer lags between the reality and perception of decline[28] but also explaining why state leaders may have difficulty responding to decline.[29] For example, domestic pathologies such as poor decision making, bureaucratic fragmentation, or powerful special interests may impede leaders from acting expeditiously or responding appropriately to decline.[30] This "perceptual lag" account is helpful, but it cannot explain declinism. First, the perceptual lag account still makes assumptions about the interpretability of metrics that may point in different directions and overlooks domestic disagreement regarding whether decline is occurring. Second, it explains why leaders may or may not perceive their decline immediately, but it does not explain why some leaders weaponize decline for domestic audiences, whereas others do not. Despite the substantial contributions of these two accounts of decline, neither explains why narratives of decline become widespread and salient. We instead need to turn to domestic politics.

The Domestic Politics of Declinism: Opposition Brokerage and Events

Domestic political factors are at the heart of declinism's emergence as a dominant narrative and its resonance. My argument follows in two main steps. First, I argue that declinism often arises from opposition factions in national politics using it as a discursive tool to critique the government and to advance a different set of policies for renewal. Yet oppositional politics alone cannot explain declinism: not all oppositions engage in declinism, and such factions, in many contexts, are a constant. My argument stresses the presence of a particular kind of political actor—a broker in the opposition—who can bring together otherwise unconnected actors and form new political coalitions. Opposition brokers hold structural positions that allow them to, with the aid of outside groups in their coalition, authentically advance a message of decline. Second, I argue that negative events or conditions are necessary for declinism to take hold. Events or conditions render declinism more salient to audiences. They grease the

[26]Friedberg, *Weary Titan*, 285.
[27]MacDonald and Parent, "Graceful Decline?," 24.
[28]Haynes, "Decline and Devolution," 495; Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 15–16.
[29]Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 15–16, 37–38.
[30]Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Friedberg, *Weary Titan*.

wheels of political action and aid brokers in advancing their declinist narratives.

Opposition Brokers

Declinism is more likely to come from the opposition in national politics. Political opponents have an incentive to claim that the country is in decline because of the incumbent government's failed policy choices, as this provides the opposition an opportunity to paint their policies as bringing national renewal. Talk of decline is used as a rhetorical bludgeon to beat incumbent policies, identify enemies within to critique or scapegoat, and advocate for replacing current policies with ones of national renewal.[31] Meanwhile, when faced with declinism, incumbents struggle to push back against declinist arguments without sounding complacent or defensive. Whether they argue that "you've never had it so good," as Harold MacMillan famously did in 1957, or simply assert that the nation is not in decline, as Barack Obama did in 2012 when he said that "anyone who tells you that America is in decline … doesn't know what they're talking about,"[32] incumbents are often drawn into defending their record and painting the opposition as doomsayers.

However, a purely opposition-based account does not explain why declinism runs rampant, because oppositions and political rivals are constant—especially in democracies. Moreover, even opposition leaders may have reasons to suspect that their declinism will not sound authentic or worry that their own past performances while in power will be put under the microscope when they raise the specter of decline. Declinism typically does not involve small changes at the margins of policy. Instead, it requires a deeper, longer view of the nation's problems. Declinism is better suited to outsiders or newcomers who can not only avoid the trap of having their records intensely examined but also authentically put forward a message of decline and renewal. However, pure outsiders lack the party support and power with which to become a key political player and advance their agenda. Only a particular kind of outsider—a broker—is able at once to speak about decline authentically and to marshal the support of a winning coalition.

Brokers are "actors who bridge 'structural holes'" in networks, bringing together "actors that would otherwise remain unconnected."[33] Brokers, by

[31]English and Kenny, *Rethinking British Decline*, 157; Budge, "Relative Decline as a Political Issue."

[32]Barack Obama, "Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union," American Presidency Project, 24 January 2012, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-15.

[33]Stacie E. Goddard, "Brokering Peace: Networks, Legitimacy and the Northern Ireland Peace Process," *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (September 2012): 501; Ronald S. Burt, *Brokerage and Closure: An Introduction to Social Capital* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Katherine Stovel and Lynette Shaw,

virtue of their position, can mobilize new coalitions of otherwise disconnected groups and individuals. As Shin-Kap Han argues, "The presence of a limited number of actors toward whom most interactions converge greatly facilitates the transformation of an aggregate of largely isolated groups into a connected and coordinated movement network, as it opens up channels of potential communication and mutual recognition."[34] Brokers are crucial in forging such coalitions.

Brokers are in a prime position to coordinate different groups to discover common interests and identities.[35] According to Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, brokerage "creates new collective actors."[36] It is often tied to new collective mobilization, social movements, and political projects. These coalitions create new identities, parties, and political movements. By bridging networks and bringing together individuals and groups, brokers engage in "yoking," the process through which brokers mobilize "together different identities into a coherent corporate actor."[37]

There is a degree of agency and structure involved in this work. Brokers may find themselves placed in a position of brokerage, or brokers may craft such a position. Brokerage is rarely a completely contrived position.[38] It involves entrepreneurship, but structural positionality also matters. As Han notes, "Unless these opportunities are taken up and acted upon [by brokers], network structure itself cannot produce desired effects."[39] Agents—brokers—and their structures—brokerage—are mutually constitutive of each other.[40]

Brokers can at once act within the traditional party system and operate outside it because of their unique ties. They can, for example, be both part of a traditional party such as the Republican or Democratic Parties in the United States or the Labor and Conservative Parties in the UK, and yet, by

"Brokerage," *Annual Review of Sociology* 38 (2012): 139–58. Brokerage has been long studied in sociology and international relations. See, for example, Charli Carpenter, *"Lost" Causes: Agenda Vetting in Global Issue Networks and the Shaping of Human Security* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, Miles Kahler, and Alexander H. Montgomery, "Network Analysis for International Relations," *International Organization* 63, no. 3 (July 2009): 559–92; Selim Can Sazak, "Bad Influence: Social Networks, Elite Brokerage, and the Construction of Alliances," in "Interdisciplinarity and the IR Innovation Horizon," ed. Ursula Daxecker et al., special issue, *European Journal of International Relations* 26, no. 1 (September 2020): 64–90.

[34]Shin-Kap Han, "The Other Ride of Paul Revere: The Brokerage Role in The Making of the American Revolution," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1 June 2009): 158.

[35]Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), loc. 381, Kindle.

[36]Ibid., loc. 1811, Kindle.

[37]Stacie E. Goddard and Daniel H. Nexon, "The Dynamics of Global Power Politics: A Framework for Analysis," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 1, no. 1 (February 2016): 9.

[38]Han, "Other Ride of Paul Revere," 157; Goddard, "Brokering Peace," 506.

[39]Han, "Other Ride of Paul Revere," 145.

[40]Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, "Whence Causal Mechanisms? A Comment on Legro," *Dialogue IO* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 82.

virtue of their position within a party, (1) be separate from its establishment; and (2) bring in other voters, organizations, or movements who are otherwise not connected to join their movement.

Brokers are in a key position to embrace declinism. They are positioned within their party in such a way that they do not own the recent past and can credibly claim that they will, in combatting decline, bring about a break with the past policies and politics. Additionally, in drawing together outside groups and individuals otherwise disconnected from the party, brokers bring new perspectives and preferences to the table that do not align with the status quo. Brokers can speak to multiple audiences differently and can weave together narratives that appeal to different groups of interests. This "multivocality" is important for declinism, because declinism rarely points to a single issue as the cause of decline. Brokers can spread blame around—as well as present different prescriptions for renewal—to dissimilar audiences throughout their coalition. Brokers should therefore be willing and, importantly, able to embrace the rhetoric of decline by virtue of their position. Once decline becomes a live issue that the broker and their coalition adopt, policy proposals put forward by the coalition should be framed in terms of overcoming the nation's decline. Decline becomes a rallying cry and an organizing principle for broad coalitional goals.

Declinism is likely to fail when brokers are not present or when advanced by nonbrokers. Pure outsiders, who are not connected to relevant networks such as parties or interest groups outside the government, may sound like crazy prophets or may simply not be heard at all, because they do not hold the structural position from which to attract an audience. Moreover, in entirely fragmented social networks, in which brokers are absent, collective action and political mobilization are incredibly difficult.[41] Finally, for the pure insider, who is deeply embedded within one network—for example, the party establishment—they are unable to put forward an authentic message of decline. Pure insiders, such as long-standing members of a former government's cabinet or former leaders, find it difficult to put their record under the microscope and claim their past actions were not part and parcel of a broader set of causes of decline. When they engage in declinism, it may ring untrue because they are the establishment and were responsible for the direction of the country. My theory of declinism suggests that pure outsiders or pure insiders—nonbrokers—will not often pitch declinism and that those who do will fail.

The argument applies most clearly and most often to democracies, but it can (though less frequently) be applied to nondemocracies in certain conditions. Democracies have more obvious political oppositions, but rival

[41] Han, "Other Ride of Paul Revere," 158.

factions also exist in nondemocratic contexts. Rivals, whether newcomers or relative outsiders, can challenge the status quo. In such cases, when political opponents occupy brokerage positions, they can use their position to forge a coalition that challenges the incumbent or the establishment.

For example, Mikhail Gorbachev was a declinist and a broker. He saw the Soviet Union as stagnant, falling behind its capitalist competitors, and in need of fundamental change. The late 1970s saw food shortages in the Soviet Union and, in a nod to future events at Chernobyl, industrial accidents. Détente ended at the beginning of the 1980s, and as Gorbachev rose through the ranks, Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, and Konstantin Chernenko all exemplified the old, stagnant, and declining top of the Politburo.[42] Gorbachev was a young and charismatic backbencher.[43] He offered fresh new ideas that alarmed party hard-liners and in the early 1980s during his rise began taking advice from experts in government agencies, directors of economic research institutes, academics, and others to understand the state of the Soviet Union and formulate new ideas for its renewal.[44] As Robert English describes, Gorbachev "forged close ties with some of the most prominent ones [new thinkers]: economists Aganbegyan and Vladimir Tikhonov, sociologist Tat'yana Zaslavskaya, physicist Evgenii Velikhov, and foreign affairs analysts Inozemtsev and Arbatov. Influential in their own right, these individuals in another sense were the 'ambassadors' to Gorbachev representing a larger liberal policy-academic elite."[45] This was, according to English, "unprecedented for a member of the top leadership."[46]

Once Gorbachev became leader in 1985, "guardians of ideological orthodoxy" saw the reforms that Gorbachev advanced in the name of turning around the Soviet Union in a negative light, whereas intellectuals, artists, engineers, and others were drawn to his ideas.[47] Crucially for Gorbachev, Chernobyl exemplified the rot at the core of the Soviet system, and his "new thinking" sought to reorganize Soviet priorities in an effort at Soviet renewal.[48] Declinism was rampant within Gorbachev's circle. For example, Aleksandr Yakovlev, newly promoted head of the Propaganda Department, declared in August 1985 that "we've slept through a decade and a half. The country is growing weaker. By the year 2000 we're going to be a second-rate power."[49] In short, Gorbachev was a young outsider

[42]William Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 161.
[43]Taubman, *Gorbachev*, 173.
[44]Ibid., 179, 194–95.
[45]Robert English, "The Sociology of New Thinking: Elites, Identity Change, and the Cold War's End," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 51.
[46]English, "Sociology of New Thinking," 52.
[47]Taubman, *Gorbachev*, 227.
[48]Ibid., 252, 274. English, "Sociology of New Thinking," 60–64.
[49]Taubman, *Gorbachev*, 245.

connected to new, liberal ideas he thought could stall and overturn the decline of the Soviet Union relative to its capitalist rivals. This case suggests that, in certain conditions, rival factions within authoritarian contexts can forge new ideas and coalitions to combat the nation's decline.

Negative Events or Conditions

The second prong of my argument concerns negative events or conditions. Whereas the first half of my argument focuses on political actors' positioning and the domestic political opportunities to engage in declinism, events make declinism possible.[50] Negative events or conditions, such as domestic strife, economic turbulence, or adversaries' successes, render declinism more likely to resonate with audiences. These events or conditions grease the wheels of political action and aid the broker in advancing their declinism.[51] Absent events, declinism seems less a powerful critique of the existing leadership and more cranky carping.

Events rest at the heart of powerful security narratives.[52] Events, conceptualized often as "shocks," offer the opportunity for new or different thinking and narratives to emerge.[53] Of particular importance are events that are understood as anomalous with prevailing understandings of the world and existing paradigms;[54] that are traumatic, revealing common meanings and understandings to rest on shaky foundations; and that inflict pain on audiences.[55] For example, C. William Walldorf Jr. shows that "restraint" and "liberal" master narratives, which play a key role in shaping US regime change policies, are based upon—and are shaped by—traumatic events.[56] Walldorf demonstrates that inhumane events during the Vietnam War (for example, the torching of Cam Ne, and summary executions in Saigon) led the American public to be disillusioned with the liberal narrative sustaining the war and strengthened the restraint master narrative.[57]

It is difficult to, a priori, specify what events or conditions will aid in the resonance of declinist narratives, and some events will not be included in the narrative.[58] However, two types of events or conditions are likely

[50]Emma Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics: Collective Emotions after Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Jeffrey W. Legro, *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Walldorf, *To Shape Our World for Good*.
[51]Friedberg, *Weary Titan*, 291.
[52]Walldorf, *To Shape Our World for Good*.
[53]Haynes, "Decline and Devolution," 494.
[54]Peter A. Hall, "Policy Paradigms, Social Learning, and the State: The Case of Economic Policymaking in Britain," *Comparative Politics* 25, no. 3 (April 1993): 291.
[55]On traumatic events, see Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5; Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics*; Walldorf, *To Shape Our World for Good*, esp. 6–7.
[56]Walldorf, *To Shape Our World for Good*.
[57]Ibid., chap. 5.
[58]Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, 11.

candidates: crises and negative domestic conditions. First, declinists may use crises that throw into question the nation's standing in the world, such as unexpected defeats or rival successes. For example, the launch of Sputnik in October 1957 challenged American notions of national, military, scientific, and ideological supremacy over the Soviets.[59] This setback provided Kennedy with the fodder to claim that the Eisenhower/Nixon administration was presiding over American decline.[60] Or, as another example, the Japanese "triple disasters" or "3.11" of 2011: a mega earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster shook Japan, and the nation's leadership was widely criticized for their response. The triple disasters were used as a tool for "political entrepreneurs" such as the declinist Hashimoto to advance narratives of "putting the nation in gear" or "reversing the course" of Japan.[61]

Second, declinists may point to negative domestic conditions, even if such events are not obviously related to questions of international standing, as evidence of international decline, such as recessions or domestic contention and turmoil. For example, historians often refer to the United States in the 1970s as "the long 1970s" or as America's "post-confidence era."[62] Oil crises and recession coupled with declining competitive advantages relative to Germany and Japan.[63] The country was still reeling from the deaths of prominent leaders the decade prior. These negative domestic conditions, alongside events such as the Iranian hostage crisis, created a sense of malaise that Reagan confronted head on when he promised to "make America great again" in 1980. Both kinds of events disrupt common understandings of the nation's identity as a major power, with the latter perhaps even more salient and tangible to mass audiences.

Declinist narratives resonate because they acknowledge the pain inflicted by events, point blame, and outline paths forward for healing and renewal. As Walldorf explains, narratives that affirm or validate audiences' feelings when they are experiencing the pain events inflicted set "a course for healing, or repair ('yes, something has changed and we need to do something about it')."[64] Typical of narratives built upon validating the pain of such events, declinists point blame in the direction of political opponents and also set out a path for renewal.[65]

[59]Peter J. Roman, *Eisenhower and the Missile Gap* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 118–19; Robert A. Divine, *Foreign Policy and U.S. Presidential Elections: 1952–1960* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1974), 184–85; Preble, *John F. Kennedy and the Missile Gap*, 3–4.

[60]Divine, *Foreign Policy and U.S. Presidential Elections*, 185; Preble, *John F. Kennedy and the Missile Gap*, 37–38.

[61]Richard J. Samuels, *3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 26–27.

[62]Hallvard Notaker, Giles Scott-Smith, and David J. Snyder, "Introduction: Reasserting America in the 1970s," in *Reasserting America in the 1970s: U.S. Public Diplomacy and the Rebuilding of America's Image Abroad*, ed. Notaker, Scott-Smith, and Snyder (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2016), 1.

[63]Joel Krieger, *Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Decline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 130.

[64]Walldorf, *To Shape Our World for Good*, 27.

[65]Walldorf, *To Shape Our World for Good*.

Declinism is likely to fail when there are no negative events or conditions to render declinist narratives tangible and meaningful to audiences, or when negative events or conditions are simply not forceful enough to garner much attention. At one extreme, when a nation is victorious or is doing phenomenally well, declinists will find it difficult to upend the prevailing sense of optimism. Opposition brokers in these situations must work much harder to have their declinism resonate with audiences. On the other hand, declinism is likely to resonate much more when events are shocking or traumatic. Importantly, events sufficiently negative and impactful enough to resonate widely are not always available. They are, thus, not like streetcars in their frequency or constant availability, such that actors can sit and wait for one to appear regularly to make hay of in a declinist narrative.[66] As such events or conditions impart virtually unambiguous negative meaning, unlike dimensions or metrics of power that may point in different directions, they render declinist narratives tangible and meaningful to audiences and cannot be as easily countered. These events or conditions provide opportunities for opposition brokers to seize upon them. In these circumstances, brokers are pushing through an open door with their declinism: their declinism finds resonance with the collective.[67]

The intersection of events and agents (opposition brokers) brings declinism to bear. Brokers are like "switches"—they are present, or they are not—and events are like "dials," which can have more or less causal impact depending upon the gravity of the event(s) or conditions.

Declinism's Foreign Policy Consequences

Are declinists compelled to follow through with the policies they put forward for renewal? Declinist narratives are not spun completely out of thin air, absent meaningful events that render declinism salient. My theory does not treat audiences as easily manipulable dupes who will believe that the nation is in decline in one moment and that the nation is restored to greatness in the next. Instead, declinists are engaged in a project of "worldmaking." Declinists lay the narrative terrain on which they later travel.[68]

Moreover, narratives of international decline can shape and constrain declinists, which leads to policy consequences.[69] First, declinists are often

[66]Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 14.
[67]Walldorf, *To Shape Our World for Good*, 26.
[68]Walldorf, *To Shape Our World for Good*, 15, similarly suggests that narratives create a set of policy preferences in the voting public which, if left undealt with, increases the audience costs associated with inaction.
[69]Walldorf, *To Shape Our World for Good*, 35–36.

"true believers" in declinism. Declinism thus may shape and determine interests. Declinists craft a political persona and forge a coalition in which decline—and the promise for renewal—is a major organizing principle and theme. It is difficult for declinists to ditch this persona, which often becomes part of their political identity and self-narrative.[70] Second, declinism may also constrain declinists. Most directly, declinist brokers forge a political coalition. To sustain these political coalitions, declinists are incentivized to follow through on their policy promises to combat decline.[71] They may place coalition members in positions of power within government, which leads to policy advocacy "from within." They may seek to make good on their promises in advance of upcoming elections or to maintain the core of their support. More broadly, some possible policy options may be difficult to sustain in light of a prevailing declinist narrative. How declinists respond to subsequent events may, at least in part, be driven by the declinism that they have ginned up more broadly in the nation's discourse.[72]

The content of declinist policies varies. For some declinists, declinist narratives sustain policies of global expansion to save face, regain lost glory, and reverse decline, from JFK's infamous "missile gap" and increases in defense spending to Thatcher's response to the Argentine invasion of the Falklands; from Hashimoto's pugilism in seeking to return Japan to greatness to Reagan's promise to make America great again through increased defense spending and the end of détente. Other declinists, however, seek to do the opposite, to "pull back" rather than "punch back" against the nation's decline. For example, during his campaign in 2016, Trump promised to make America great again by ending endless wars and redistributing the burdens of defense of wealthy European nations. Gorbachev sought a reorientation of Soviet foreign policy and defense priorities, including warming relations with the United States and Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. In both cases of expansion and retrenchment, narratives of decline can shape and constrain those who offer them. Though declinism can lead to either retrenchment or expansion, the most likely outcome involves the opposite of the establishment government's policies. Brokers define themselves in opposition to establishment policies. Tinkering at the margins of policy will not overcome decline for declinists. Because, however, this article is dedicated to explaining the origins of declinism rather than its effects, I do not test this hypothesis.

[70]Cannadine, *In Churchill's Shadow*, 26–27.
[71]For coalition dynamics, see Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, 17–19; Walldorf, *To Shape Our World for Good*, 35–36.
[72]Jack Snyder has referred to this as "blowback." See Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, 41–43.

Observable Implications

If my theory is correct, we should observe the following. First, declinism should most often come from the opposition, not the sitting government. Second, declinism should come from actors possessing weaker ties to the party establishment: outsiders or newcomers. Third, declinism should emerge from the presence of brokers and their new coalition. Conversely, when brokers are absent, we should not observe declinism, or should see declinism attempted and fail. Fourth, brokers should effectively connect and mobilize a coalition using multivocal appeals. We should observe brokers making such appeals in the name of combatting decline and trying to mobilize their coalition to advance policies of renewal. Fifth, the party establishment should eschew notions of their own culpability for the nation's decline. There are three observable implications with respect to events or conditions. First, declinists should point to specific events as meaningful when crafting their narrative of international decline: they will stress given events and conditions' importance, push to blame the incumbent and members of the establishment, and use events and conditions as lessons for what is to be done. Second, brokers and their coalitions, behind the scenes, should envision narratives of decline resonating because of negative events. Finally, incumbents may try to downplay events or contest whether the event is significant for understanding the nation's trajectory. If my theory is incorrect, then we should see (1) a shared understanding of decline among all political actors—in line with the objectivist thesis that decline is easily interpretable; (2) declinism being effectively put forward by brokers and nonbrokers alike; and (3) declinism put forward in the absence of events or conditions that lend resonance to narratives.

My theoretical framework requires identifying and measuring oppositions and brokers, including the social ties that constitute their network(s). Outsiders/newcomers are identified by their history with a party. In some cases, outsiders have no such history and are true newcomers to politics and a party. In other cases, outsiders may have a track record with a party, but their relationship to its establishment is weak. The outsider may have a contentious relationship with the party establishment, including recorded confrontations with and critiques of its leadership that indicate the outsider's status. Contemporaneous observers will characterize the individual as an outsider.

I identify brokers by their position between networks and the social ties that they facilitate. I rely on historiography, biographies, and primary documents (for example, meeting minutes and strategy memos) to establish that ties between networks flow through brokers and that those brokers are not part of a larger web of connections—a fully integrated network—in which brokers cannot be present. Ties, or relationships between actors and

organizations, are identified by the interactions between them, including presence at the same meetings, correspondence between individuals and groups, and individuals' affiliations with groups. I examine strong ties, which involve "more than a casual familiarity or fleeting acquaintance. Rather, a strong social tie involves exchanges that occur frequently over a sustained period that involve substantial and reciprocal exchanges between the parties."[73] I also examine evidence from contemporaneous observers that would suggest brokers mattered in the creation of new coalitions and that brokers forged such connections.[74]

Brokers must exist prior to their embrace of declinism. For brokerage to play a crucial role in generating successful declinism, we should observe, prior to declinism, individuals occupying brokerage positions in networks characterized by what network theorists call "structural holes"—a lack of interaction between different groups.[75]

Decline and Declinism in the United Kingdom

Britain is a widely examined case of a country in decline. Britain is an "easy" case for the objectivist argument: Britain certainly declined throughout the twentieth century, though not uniformly. In this aspect, the British case is a crucial and hard one for my theory.

I begin by examining UK parliamentary speech to track declinism in British political discourse between 1945 and the early 2000s and comparing this measure of declinism to metrics commonly used to measure decline. My measure allows me to hone in on a period of declinism—the late 1970s—and a period immediately preceding it in which declinism was relatively quiet. Then I draw upon archival research to trace the lack of declinism in the early 1970s and the rampant declinism late in the decade.

Measuring Decline and Declinism in the United Kingdom

I use dictionary-based methods to measure declinism over time in parliamentary speech in the United Kingdom.[76] I use two versions of the parliamentary Hansard: the BYU Hansard corpus[77] and the Digging into Linked Parliamentary Data corpus.[78] In the online appendix, I present newspaper

[73]Paul K. MacDonald, *Networks of Domination: The Social Foundations of Peripheral Conquest in International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 68.
[74]Goddard, "Brokering Peace," 507.
[75]In this way, brokerage is not purely exogenous; it can be endogenous to the interactions among nodes.
[76]Justin Grimmer and Brandon M. Stewart, "Text as Data: The Promise and Pitfalls of Automatic Content Analysis Methods for Political Texts," *Political Analysis* 21, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 267–97. For validation, I used a random number generator to select twenty keywords in context (see Online Appendix 1, Table 1).
[77]"Hansard Corpus (British Parliament)," https://www.english-corpora.org/hansard/.
[78]"Parliament Debate Search," PoliticalMashup, Digging into Linked Parliamentary Data project, https://web.archive.org/web/20170409073742/http:/search.politicalmashup.nl/.

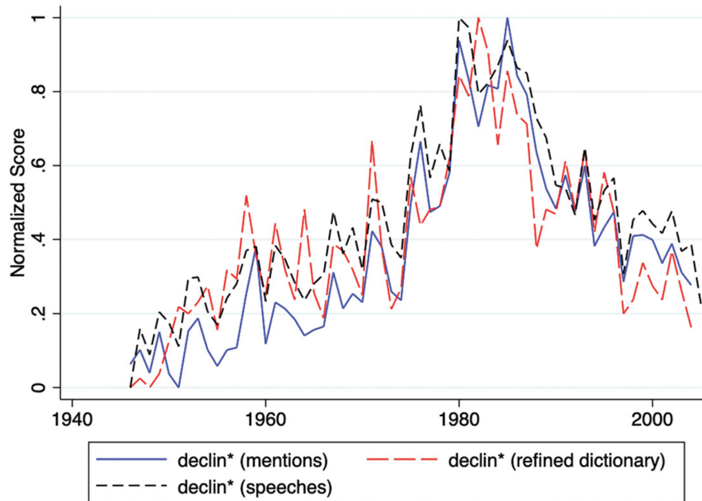

Figure 1. Mentions of "declin*," speeches mentioning "declin*," and refined dictionary measures, 1946–2004 (normalized). Min-max scaled y-axis. For graphs with each measure and non-min-max scaled y-axes, see Online Appendix 1, Figures 1, 3–4.

analyses as potential other sources to examine declinism, obtaining similar results.[79]

I measure declinism in the Hansard by examining: (1) the evocation of the term "declin*";[80] (2) the number of speeches evoking the term "declin*"; and (3) the co-occurrence of the term "declin*" alongside other terms of interest. First, and most crudely, I measure declinism as the number of times the stem "declin*" appears in the Hansard from 1946 to 2004. This measure is unrefined because there are many ways in which invoking decline may not be relevant. I therefore enhance the measure by creating a dictionary of words that should appear alongside "declin*" in my corpus (within nine words on either side of this term).[81]

Figure 1 shows the occurrence of the stem "declin*" in the number of mentions, number of speeches, and in the refined dictionary between 1946 and 2004 in the Hansard, and demonstrates that declinism peaks in the 1980s.[82] The y-axis is normalized to compare the trends of the three ways of measuring declinism.[83] Figure 1 also shows the number of speeches made in Parliament that include "declin*" (red line). Declinism ranges from a low of about 300 speeches per year at the start of my analysis to a peak of over 1,000 speeches in the 1980s. It becomes clear that declinism in

[79]See Online Appendix 1, Figures 5–7 and 9–11.
[80]This includes words such as "declined," "declining," "declines," and "decline."
[81]Online Appendix 1, Table 2 outlines these dictionary terms and their frequency alongside the term "declin*." See Online Appendix 1, Figures 8A,B.
[82]I also weight the results by the number of words per million, which obtains a similar trend (Online Appendix 1, Figure 2).
[83]For the raw numbers, see Online Appendix 1, Figures 1–4.

parliamentary speech was quite "flat" in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s: little change occurred across periods. There is a small increase in the number of mentions of "declin*" post-Suez, but in terms of sheer frequency of mentions of decline alongside relevant words, this initial period is marked by a relative lack of declinism compared to later half decades: the normalized score for mentions of "declin*" increases by roughly 0.4 in the thirty years between 1945 and 1975. Yet it took only five more years—between 1975 and 1980—for this score to more than double. Finally, the refined dictionary, which is based on mentions of "declin*" that co-occur with the terms outlined in Online Appendix Table 2, again shows a similar trend: a steep increase in the late 1970s and early 1980s (see Figure 1, dashed line).[84]

The impressionistic literature on declinism points to different moments in which declinism became dominant in British political discourse. Some point to the 1960s as the critical juncture.[85] My measure of declinism puts its high point in the 1980s, with its rise occurring in the late 1970s. This accords with historian Jim Tomlinson's claim that "declinism was not invented in the 1970s, but it was in that decade and the early years of the next that it was probably most prevalent and most politically significant."[86] These data confirm Tomlinson and others' account of the decade, which helps gauge the validity of the measure.[87]

Decline—as measured by international relations scholars—and declinism do not move in lockstep with each other in the British case, in contrast to an objectivist explanation. There are two common ways to measure decline: a great power's share of gross domestic product (GDP) and a great power's Composite National Index of Capabilities (CINC) score, both of which are relative to other major powers.[88] Each measure points to sharper declines during the 1950s and 1960s relative to the 1970s and 1980s.[89] Yet my measures of declinism point in the opposite direction (see Figure 2).

[84]Other terms, such as "falling" and "weak*" show a similar trend, in which the late 1970s shows a spike in these terms. See Online Appendix 1, Figure 13.

[85]John Campbell, *Edward Heath: A Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993), 163; Sked, *Britain's Decline*, 1; Gamble, *Britain in Decline*.

[86]Jim Tomlinson, "The Politics of Declinism," in *Reassessing 1970s Britain*, ed. Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton, and Pat Thane (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2013), 51.

[87]For example, Philip Begley, *The Making of Thatcherism: The Conservative Party in Opposition, 1974–1979* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2020); Cannadine, *In Churchill's Shadow*; Krieger, *Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Decline*; Tomlinson, "Inventing 'Decline.'"

[88]On measuring power and debates about decline, see Th. W. Bottelier, "Of Once and Future Kings: Rethinking the Anglo-American Analogy in the Rising Powers Debate," *International History Review* 39, no. 5 (2017): 751–69. Carston Rauch, "Challenging the Power Consensus: GDP, CINC, and Power Transition Theory," *Security Studies* 26, no. 4 (October–December 2017): 642–64; Adam Quinn and Nicholas Kitchen, "Understanding American Power: Conceptual Clarity, Strategic Priorities, and the Decline Debate," *Global Policy* 10, no. 1 (February 2019): 5–18; Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 15–16.

[89]For an analysis of Britain's relative economic decline, see Tomlinson, *Politics of Decline*, chap. 6; Matthias Matthijs, *Ideas and Economic Crises in Britain from Attlee to Blair (1945–2005)* (New York: Routledge, 2011), chap. 4.

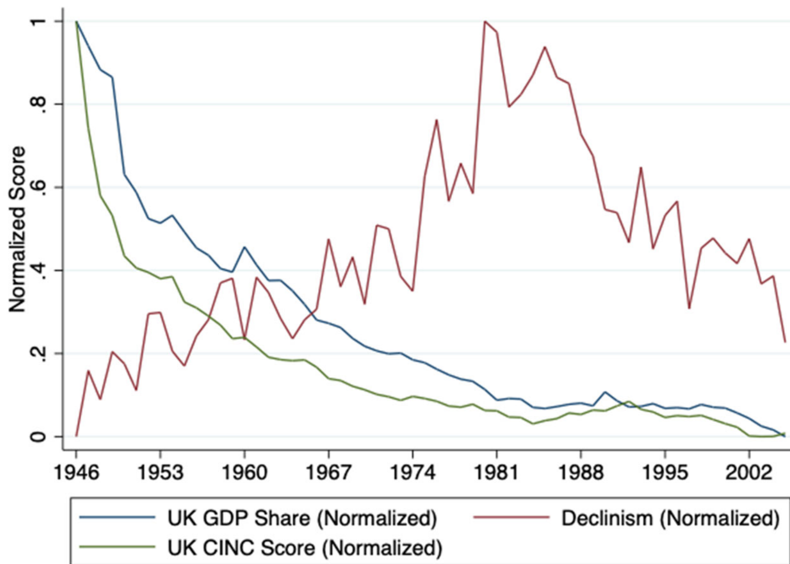

Figure 2. The mismatch between decline and declinism (normalized). Min-max scaled y-axis. Declinism measure from Figure 1 (number of speeches; see also Online Appendix 1, Figure 3). Decline measure is UK's share of great-power GDP.

Britain's decline, represented in blue by the UK's share of great-power GDP and in green by its CINC score, was sharpest and deepest early in the series, between 1946 and 1976. My measure of declinism, represented in red, then peaks when British decline slows down relative to other major powers. Figure 2 epitomizes my argument: there is no neat correlation between decline and declinism.

Britain's share of great-power GDP sharply declined throughout the 1950s and 1960s, as did its CINC score (see Figure 2). Britain's share of great-power GDP was 14 percent in 1946, dropping to 7 percent by 1970. Britain's share of great-power GDP was cut in half from 1946 to 1970. Britain's share remains between 15 and 17 percent of great-power GDP per capita from 1975 onward; ever-so slight differences occur in that period, but Britain's share of great-power GDP per capita remains about equal to France's, Germany's, and Japan's, and does not substantially change.[90]

The annual rate of change in Britain's share of great-power GDP per capita from 1946 to 1970 was roughly 0.5 percent. From 1970 to 1980, that rate reduces dramatically to 0.08 percent; the slope of the decline becomes much less steep. My measures of declinism show that it rises the most as Britain's decline, with respect to Britain's share of great-power GDP or CINC score, grinds to a slow halt.

[90]Online Appendix 1, Figure 12.

Why, then, did declinism become particularly prevalent in the late 1970s? And why was it not as strong earlier? Both the objectivist and perceptual lag explanations would expect that British leaders and policymakers, at some point during the 1950s and 1960s, would recognize their country's decline. Indeed, this is the case. Yet leaders chose not to weaponize declinism and make it core to their political identity and message to the British public.

It is clear, in looking at the British governments of the 1950s and 1960s, that British decline was perceived and measured, and its implications for Britain's role in the world hotly debated within government. Yet there was, publicly, relatively little by way of pronouncements of British decline, and politicians often insisted precisely the opposite: Harold Macmillan stated infamously in 1957 that "most of our people have never had it so good," and the Conservatives ran in 1959 on "prosperity" and "peace." Behind the scenes, however, cabinet officials and civil servants acknowledged the realities of Britain's dwindling international power. "The Future Policy Study Committee," which Macmillan commissioned in 1959, stated plainly that "the United Kingdom's relative power in the world will certainly decline" during the 1960s, which would lead Britain to "before 1970 face difficult choices."[91] The committee, made up of civil servants and chiefs of staff, was classified "top secret," lest it become political fodder.[92] Peter Hennessy describes the report as outstripping "in its detail and reach any comparable review of the UK's place and prospects in the world" and standing in "stark contrast to the government's smug theme of 'peace and prosperity.'"[93] Contrary to the perceptual lag account, British officials were clear that their nation was in relative decline and its future prospects dim. But, contrary to the objectivist account, these perceptions were not matched by prominent public declinism until the 1970s.

Tracing Declinism in 1970s Britain

In this section, I illustrate my theoretical expectations in 1970s Britain. By focusing on a decade, I can hold constant many of the domestic and international conditions Britain faced to trace declinism in the late 1970s.[94] In many ways, the domestic issues of the day in 1974 were like those five years later: industrial militancy, union problems, strikes, and inflation. Beyond the oil price rises and miners strikes in 1973 and 1974 and the

[91]"Future Policy Study Committee, Memoranda, 1959–1960," Government Papers, the National Archives, Kew, 1959–60, https://www.archivesdirect.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/Future-Policy-Study-Committee–Memoranda–1959-1960/CAB%20134_1929b.

[92]Peter Hennessy, *Having It So Good: Britain in the Fifties* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 575–76.

[93]Hennessy, *Having It So Good*, 576.

[94]Historians have noted that there is a political logic to examining the 1970s as a decade and historical moment. See Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton, "Introduction: The Benighted Decade? Reassessing the Seventies," in Black, Pemberton, and Thane, *Reassessing 1970s Britain*, 3.

"Winter of Discontent" of 1978/79, the decade writ large was one of strikes and strife.[95] Terms such as "muggers, scroungers, streakers, strikers, punks, and hooligans" became common parlance during the moral panics of the decade.[96] The conditions throughout the decade would help declinism resonate. Yet not everyone engaged in declinism.

Establishment Conservatives did not make decline a central theme in their February or October 1974 election campaigns, nor did Labor. This presents a puzzle. Why was decline not an issue in 1974, if measures point to the early 1970s as temporally closer to Britain's sharp loss of relative standing? (see Figure 2). Moreover, the domestic conditions were largely similar. Both parties had two opportunities to deploy declinist rhetoric in full campaign mode, yet by my measures of declinism the 1979 election featured twice the amount of declinist rhetoric as both 1974 elections combined.

I first examine the early 1970s. The Conservatives, as the party in power, were uninterested in declinism. Consistent with theoretical expectations, the lack of brokers in the Labor Party in the early 1970s meant declinism was unlikely to become a dominant narrative. This all changed in the mid-1970s when the Conservatives were in the opposition. I show that Thatcher and Joseph occupied brokerage positions in the mid-1970s. I outline the ties Thatcher had to the Conservative Party proper, and Joseph's ties outside the party. Once establishing that the dynamics of brokerage are present and consistent with my theoretical expectations, I then turn to how Thatcher and Joseph's position as brokers allowed them to build a coalition which, over time, established its own identity and became a political force. Finally, I examine how turning the tide against British decline became the key message Thatcher put forward.

Early 1970s: The "Dog That Did Not Bark"

Britain faced two general elections in February and October of 1974. After the February election proved inconclusive, Britain went back to the polls in October and Edward Heath's Conservative Party lost to the Labor Party under Harold Wilson.

In 1974, Heath, leader of his party and prime minister, was not inclined to bring about a message of decline and doom to the British public. My theory expects declinism to arise from oppositions. The Conservatives thought their brief tenure in government was successful and that such success would continue. This sentiment is summed up in the line they evoked repeatedly: "Don't let Labor ruin it."[97] Leading establishment Conservatives

[95]Black and Pemberton, "Introduction," in *Reassessing 1970s Britain*, 4.
[96]Black and Pemberton, "Introduction," in *Reassessing 1970s Britain*.
[97]For example, Official Group Minutes, 25 October 1973, Conservative Party Archive, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, UK, OG 73/134.

did not see wide-scale changes as necessary or prudent. In a key document pertaining to the development of manifesto themes, the Steering Committee noted that "continued expansion is, and is seen to be, the basic element in what the Government is trying to do."[98] Reflecting after the Conservatives' election loss in 1974, one disgruntled party member noted that "all we did was to pursue efficiency at the fringes: we never confronted the real difficulties head-on."[99] This would ultimately come back to bite Tory leadership, both with respect to the 1974 general election and the shift within the party thereafter.

According to my theory, the Labor Party, as opposition party, is the more likely contender to advance declinism. Yet there were no brokers present. Labor leaders were not brokers. The leadership, epitomized by the likes of Wilson (who, by the time of the election, had been Labor leader for eleven years) and Jim Callaghan, were established party members. As expected by my theory, leadership was uninterested in critiquing its past record, because they were pure insiders. For example, Wilson argued that "no attack should be made on the Labor Governments of 1964/1970"—of which Wilson was a part.[100]

Importantly, Wilson was, in the second period in which he led the Labor Party in opposition (1970–1974), not well-positioned to serve as a broker because of his alienation from the party's main wings. His efforts were focused on trying to maintain control of the party. During his time as prime minister from 1964 to 1970, Wilson did not sustain ties with regular Labor Party members and the trade unions.[101] As Ben Pimlott puts it, "The branches had come away from the trunk."[102] Wilson's ties within the party were weak. Wilson was unable to shore up support within the party and extend his reach outside it. Further, the Labor Party was polarized, driven by infighting that kept Wilson preoccupied, and, in his later years as party leader, increasingly paranoid.[103] Wilson thus found it difficult to hold the party together. Moreover, given that Wilson's reputation was now one of shiftiness and political opportunism, he could not speak multivocally: in trying to appeal to (or pacify) the left and right of the Labor Party, Wilson "antagonize[d] both equally" and could not make authentic appeals.[104] Wilson was not a broker, and Labor's trials and tribulations, particularly

[98]Manifesto Themes, 18 September 1973, Conservative Party Archive, SC 73/21.
[99]David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of February 1974* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 11.
[100]"Minutes of a Parliamentary Committee Meeting Held on Wednesday 16th January 1974," 5, Labour Party Online Archive.
[101]Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), 573.
[102]Pimlott, *Harold Wilson*, 574.
[103]Peter Dorey, "Harold Wilson, 1963–4 and 1970–4," in *Leaders of the Opposition: From Churchill to Cameron*, ed. Timothy Heppell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 65.
[104]Ibid., 61.

once it was in the opposition in 1970, put Wilson in a position of damage control rather than political entrepreneurship.

Declinism Run Rampant: Late-1970s Britain

In 1973, Lord Rothschild, then head of the Central Policy Review Staff, warned that by 1985 Britain's domestic product may be half that of West Germany's or France's and on par with Italy's.[105] Heath promptly and publicly rebuked Lord Rothschild's assessment.[106] Journalist Peter Jenkins noted in 1978 that since Heath's rebuttal, and since the 1974 elections in which the notion of Britain's relative decline was "something of a novelty," concern over Britain's decline had become "commonplace" in the late '70 s, as my measures of declinism also demonstrate (see Figure 2).[107] Why did declinism run rampant in the late 1970s?

The incumbent Labor Party was not interested in advancing a message of decline in the late 1970s. Labor shifted blame for the stuttering economy on the capitalist system and world economic conditions. The National Executive Committee (NEC) and the Cabinet Working Group for Labor's election manifesto decided that the document "should reflect the international constraints upon us in an uncertain world."[108] Their election manifesto claimed that in "an uncertain world suffering the worst economic trouble for 40 years we have pointed the way forward" and that over the course of the past five years, the incumbent Labor government "laid the foundations for a stronger economy."[109] A key meeting of members of Parliament from cabinet officials and Labor Party members of the NEC demonstrates this inherent tension in trying to balance accomplishments, hope for the future, and a recognition of the struggles the country faced. In the meeting, Denis Healey, then chancellor of the exchequer, noted the need to stress "our vulnerability to international things. It is not just the oil prices. We have an unsettled monetary situation all over the world—unemployment all over the world."[110] Labor offered an optimistic outlook to the 1980s and did not have incentives, as the incumbent, to engage in declinism.

Whereas Labor was uninterested in declinism, the Conservatives in opposition would advance a message of British decline during the 1979

[105]Peter Jenkins, "The Industries That Peaked a Century Too Soon," *Guardian*, 26 September 1978, 17.
[106]"Lord Rothschild (Speech)," 18 October 1973, Parliamentary Hansard, 1803–2005, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/written-answers/1973/oct/18/lord-rothschild-speech#S5CV0861P0_19731018_CWA_216.
[107]"Lord Rothschild (Speech)."
[108]"NEC/Cabinet Working Group—Manifesto (Minutes)," 20 December 1978, Labour Party Archive, People's History Museum, Manchester, UK, LP/RD/137.
[109]"The 1979 Labour Party Manifesto," Labour Party Manifestos, 2001, http://www.labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1979/1979-labour-manifesto.shtml.
[110]"Report of the Joint National Executive Committees/Cabinet Meeting held on 20 December 1978 in the Eighth Floor Boardroom at Transport House, Smith Square, London," Labour Party Archive, LP/RD/137/2.

election. This change from the establishment Conservatives of the early 1970s—and their lack of declinism—is explained by the rise of Thatcher and her ally, Joseph. Thatcher and Joseph were brokers. They occupied similar positions structurally, both within the party and in networks outside it. Though Thatcher, once becoming leader of the opposition, had stronger institutional strength and ties through the Conservative Party (including to the Conservative Research Department), Joseph was well positioned to tap outside academic, business, and social/political clubs through his engagement outside the party, particularly through engagement with the Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA) and other think tanks in the 1960s. Thatcher and Joseph bridged unconnected networks to foster a movement within and outside the Conservative Party with connections to British business, academia, the media, and, ultimately, the British public.

Brokers can work in pairs. I treat Thatcher and Joseph as occupying a similar structural position, in which they worked together to forge a coalition. Thatcher and Joseph were close political and personal friends.[111] They saw eye to eye on many of the issues that faced Britain and shared the same economic, social, and cultural principles that would become understood as "Thatcherism." Thatcher and Joseph's relationship was symbiotic. Thatcher, once winning the leadership battle, would have the institutional power of the Conservative Party, despite representing a radical break from the establishment. Joseph, on the other hand, could use his position and ties outside the party to their mutual benefit.

Thatcher was an outsider both with respect to her position in and relationship to the Conservative Party as well as with respect to her personal attributes: her sex and class.[112] Despite serving in the Heath cabinet, many Conservatives despised her, seeing her as "strong on first principles, weak on understanding of the complexities" and having a "lack of political and intellectual sophistication" coupled with her "abrasive, direct style."[113] Sexist and classist tropes influenced such assessments. She was from Britain's middle class—the so-called grocer's daughter—and used this background and persona to her advantage.[114] As such, it was not only her style, but who she was, that represented something new and made her an outsider.

Thatcher was also an outsider in terms of strategy. She was purposive in fostering a position within the party that led to her positionality as a broker. Thatcher "aspired not to be absorbed into that [party] hierarchy but to dismantle it. This was not the Conservative way. Conservatives were

[111]For "structural doubles," see Han, "Other Ride of Paul Revere," 143. Moreover, multiple actors can occupy a brokerage position. See Goddard, "Brokering Peace."
[112]Eric J. Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 42.
[113]Gamble, *Free Economy and the Strong State*, 85.
[114]E. H. H. Green, *Thatcher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 17–21.

expected to work with the grain."[115] Thatcher cultivated an image of a new kind of leader, someone who was ready for change, and Thatcher's politics and image typify the notion of political entrepreneurship associated with brokers. Finally, Thatcher was "deliberately confrontational" with her colleagues and sought to make clear to Conservatives writ large—but especially the establishment—that "consensus" politics based around the Keynesian postwar welfare state was inflicting incredible damage on Britain economically and the Conservative Party politically.[116] Thatcher was an outsider by strategy and by her attributes as a politician. Her position was thus borne of both her person and her politics.

Thatcher was connected to antiestablishment conservatives. She, with Joseph, would bridge this network within the Conservative Party with outside organizations. Thatcher garnered the support of disillusioned Conservative Party members who were fed up with the establishment. The 1974 election loss inspired a rethink, and Heath's loss to Thatcher as the head of the party the following year provided Thatcher with the clout and position to advance her agenda. Heath won the inner circle, senior party figures, and the establishment Conservative press; Thatcher won the backbenches.[117] Therefore, Thatcher was not a complete outsider. She was part of the Conservative Party—and indeed, part of Heath's cabinet—but by virtue of both her personal attributes and her position within the party as anti-Heath, Thatcher was an outsider with enough institutional clout to forge a coalition.

Joseph was of but not fully integrated into the party's mainstream. His "gaffes" ostracized him from the leadership. A growing faction within the Conservative Party was dissatisfied with Heath, and establishment Conservatives saw Joseph as a potential leader, though this ended after a speech in Birmingham in which Joseph stated that "the balance of our population, our human stock is threatened" by low-class women bringing children into the world.[118] Joseph was thus a party outsider.

Heath and the Conservative Party establishment had largely maintained the so-called Keynesian consensus that dominated British politics from 1945. Free-market groups such as the IEA were disillusioned by the Heath government and kept their distance from the Conservative Party from 1970 to 1974. Joseph, on the other hand, fostered connections with economic liberals (inspired by Friedrich Hayek and strong believers in the free market) throughout the mid to late 1960s, particularly with IEA.[119] Such

[115] Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism*, 42.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Green, *Thatcher*, 34. Thatcher filled her shadow cabinet with Heath followers to appeal across intraparty divisions. In this sense, she both "kept her enemies close" and forged more ties and power across the party.
[118] Andrew Denham and Mark Garnett, *Keith Joseph* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2002), 265.
[119] Denham and Garnett, *Keith Joseph*, 137.

connections went dormant while Joseph served in the Heath cabinet from 1970 to 1974.[120] However, upon being cast back into the opposition in 1974, Joseph immediately reconnected with the IEA and individuals such as Ralph Harris, Arthur Seldon, Alfred Sherman, and Alan Walters. He sought advice about policymaking and the formation of the CPS. Joseph was open to new economic ideas, and was, over the course of a decade, fostering ties with individuals beyond the Conservative Party, whose ideas resided outside of consensus politics. The IEA and other free-market, libertarian groups would be bridged by Joseph and brought into the fold in 1975.

Joseph and Thatcher used the ties the former built in the 1960s with economic liberals in the IEA to form the CPS in 1974, which sought to bring individuals from academia,[121] business (particularly those interested in the message of an "enterprise culture"[122]), the media,[123] and politics—particularly Conservative backbenchers, but also some non-Conservative members—together to challenge the postwar Keynesian consensus in Britain.[124] Thatcher and Joseph bridged two networks: the Conservative Party, which was traditionally the venue of consensus Keynesian economic thinking, and the amalgamation of free-market, libertarian, academic, business, and media organizations under the auspices of the CPS. The CPS attracted "those who would not normally have much to do with politics—let alone Conservative Party politics—but who had skills which would be useful to Mrs Thatcher and Keith Joseph in government."[125]

Other groups and individuals were connected to Joseph and Thatcher. The Salisbury Club at Cambridge University brought together Conservative and libertarian thinkers.[126] Business and industry groups already established by the 1970s, including the "Aims of Industry" and the "Economic League" were connected to other, newer groups such as the "Freedom Association" and the "Libertarian Alliance."[127] Joseph and Thatcher brought individuals from across the political spectrum into their coalition, including Labor MPs and activists.[128] Additionally, academics and journalists joined this unlikely coalition.[129] These individuals were drawn into and

[120]Denham and Garnett, *Keith Joseph*, 238.
[121]Richard Cockett, *Thinking the Unthinkable: Think-Tanks and the Economic Counter-Revolution 1931–1983* (London: HarperCollins, 2013), 264.
[122]Michael Harris, "The Centre for Policy Studies: The Paradoxes of Power," *Contemporary British History* 10, no. 2 (1996): 59.
[123]Harrison, "Mrs Thatcher and the Intellectuals," 216. Especially the *Telegraph*, the *Sun*, and the *Spectator*, and William Rees-Mogg at the *Times*.
[124]Simon James, "The Idea Brokers: The Impact of Think Tanks on British Government," *Public Administration* 71, no. 4 (December 1993): 491–506; Harris, "Centre for Policy Studies"; Harrison, "Mrs Thatcher and the Intellectuals."
[125]Cockett, *Thinking the Unthinkable*, 257.
[126]Gamble, *Free Economy and the Strong State*, 147–48; Harrison, "Mrs Thatcher and the Intellectuals."
[127]Harrison, "Mrs Thatcher and the Intellectuals," 210.
[128]Eric Caines, *Heath and Thatcher in Opposition* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 161–62.
[129]Caines, *Heath and Thatcher in Opposition*, 161–62.

mobilized by this coalition by appealing to their interest in economic liberalism and free markets.

This coalition would share ideas, consult across political, academic, and think tank spaces, and, in the process, form its own identity as the "New Right."[130] Thatcher and Joseph's brokerage "yoked" together different actors under this banner or "Thatcherism." By acting as brokers, Joseph and Thatcher transmitted ideas across networks, namely monetarist and neoliberal ideas, and provided access for thinkers who traditionally would not have been given a voice within the Conservative Party.

The coalition was not monolithic. Individuals and organizations who are broadly classified as economic liberals were brought together with individuals and organizations that were socially conservative. Thatcher and Joseph yoked together these different groups with disparate concerns, from the primacy of free markets to the dangers of the Soviet Union or immigration.

Thatcher and Joseph were not interested in tinkering at the margins of policy. They believed that Heath's approach to governing did not suit the moment. In understanding themselves as a new movement, decline became the key message—indeed, the core of their political identity—they would take to the British people. As Thatcher remarked: "Everything we wished to do had to fit into the overall strategy of reversing Britain's economic decline, for without an end to decline there was no hope of success for our other objectives … we had to continually stress that, however difficult the road might be and however long it took us to reach our destination, we intended to achieve a fundamental change of direction. We stood for a new beginning, not more of the same."[131]

Crucially, Thatcher and Joseph leaned on the networks they bridged. In doing so, not only was information shared—including the value of monetarist ideas, free markets, and the insufficiency of public welfare programs—the identity of this group came into being. According to Eric Caines, "By the time of the 1979 election this [approach to policy] had given the Party an identity."[132] Thatcher and Joseph's brokerage produced a redefinition of party identity through this new coalition.

Declinism in the 1979 General Election

The 1979 election was dominated by claims of British decline, from the preface of the Conservative Manifesto proclaiming that there was a "feeling

[130]As Andrew Gamble avers, "The New Right should not be regarded primarily as an ideological phenomenon [; it is] a political movement which unites diverse ideological strands with the organisation of interests and the formulation of programmes of policy." Gamble, *Free Economy and the Strong State*, 29.
[131]Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993),15.
[132]Caines, *Heath and Thatcher in Opposition*, 154.

of helplessness" in Britain, that Britain was "a once great nation that has somehow fallen behind and that it is too late now to turn things round"[133] to Thatcher stating on the BBC that "I can't bear Britain in decline. I just can't."[134] Thatcher and the New Right deliberately brought declinism to the British people, and it was part of their identity: a movement to restore Britain to greatness.

Thatcher and Joseph's brokerage meant they could advance a message of decline to the British people that would resonate, especially given the events of the late 1970s. They would blame both the incumbent Labor government and past Conservative governments for Britain's weakening. Thatcher explicitly drew upon events of the preceding winter in her declinism: "If you no longer have confidence in your country to solve its economic problems, very soon you begin to lose confidence in the spirit of your country … I believe that's what happened this last winter. None of us ever expected to see some of the strikes we saw. We said those things can't happen in Britain, but I believe it was because some of our economic failures had so demoralized us that we got a decline of a sort we never expected to see here."[135]

The New Right's declinism was wide-ranging, from appeals regarding Britain's economic decline to claims that British morality was decaying—made directly to those Conservatives who wished for a "strong state." Events and conditions were also crucial for the coalition to lean on. The "mood should be ripe for a fresh start politics," a key election planning document argued, and current anxieties among the public, whether it is an absence of law and order, industrial disputes, or inflation, were, according to Conservative planners, something that could be seized upon: "What the people want is what we want. Their hopes and anxieties find an echo in our policies."[136]

One of the core documents produced by the coalition was entitled *Stepping Stones*.[137] The report urged the next Tory government under Thatcher to undergo a "sea-change in Britain's political economy," to reject socialism, to stall and overcome continued economic decline, and develop a communications program for the public that persuades them that they

[133]"Conservative General Election Manifesto 1979," 11 April 1979, Margaret Thatcher Foundation, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/110858.
[134]"TV Interview for BBC *Campaign '79*," 27 April 1979, Margaret Thatcher Foundation, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103864.
[135]"Speech to Conservatives in Gravesend," 17 April 1979, Margaret Thatcher Foundation, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104016.
[136]"Planning Meeting," 15 December 1978, copy 8, Conservative Party Archive, CRD 4/30/50/37-41. Underline in the original.
[137]For the historical context of the *Stepping Stones* report, see Dorey, "Harold Wilson, 1963–4 and 1970–4," in Heppell, *Leaders of the Opposition*; Paul Smith and Gary Morton, "The Conservative Governments' Reform of Employment Law, 1979–97: 'Stepping Stones' and the 'New Right' Agenda," *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, no. 12 (1 September 2001): 131–47.

want more than just "material results," but also a "healthy society."[138] The authors, John Hoskyns (a policy adviser to Thatcher) and Norman S. Strauss (an executive at Unilever), with input from Geoffrey Howe and Jim Prior,[139] point to downward trends in Britain's share of world trade, industrial production, and per capita gross national product as indicators of Britain's problems. If change does not come soon, the authors warned, "inch by inch, by our behavior, we turn ourselves into the sort of people (for example, More like the Italians, less like the Germans) who no longer have what it takes to solve our own problems."[140]

Consistent with my theory, pushback against declinism came from Conservatives who were deeply entangled in the establishment. Different factions interpreted measures of British decline very differently. In a meeting to discuss *Stepping Stones*, John Davies, a holdover from the Heath era, remarked that he thought the report was overly pessimistic, stating that "the prospects for the British economy were better than for a number of our competitors, such as France and Germany."[141] He argued that the Conservatives should "not exaggerate the arguments as to the inevitability of our decline … Our investment, growth and balance of payments were all likely to improve considerably. He [Davies] preferred us to emphasize the great opportunity that improving circumstances had given us."[142] Moreover, and consistent with my theoretical expectations, establishment Conservatives rejected the move by coalition members to blame past Conservative governments for Britain's decline. For example, in response to one of Joseph's early writings in 1975,[143] which cast a wide net of blame for Britain's decline, meeting minutes from the time suggest that "several members, while regarding the policy suggestions as valuable, thought [Joseph's] paper was too critical of the recent past and, in particular of recent Conservative policy… . Conservative policy should be evolutionary, and built on the past, not revolutionary rejecting the past. Stability in approach was also important … it was generally felt that the Conservative Government of 1970–74 had, on the whole, tried to do the right things, but failed to explain its intentions adequately."[144]

[138]"Economy: "Stepping Stones" Report (Final Text)," 14 November 1977, Margaret Thatcher Foundation, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/111771.
[139]Thatcher remarks that both men had a role to play in the document. Whereas Howe was a core believer in the New Right, Prior was considered a "wet." "Leader's Steering Committee: 51st Meeting," 30 January 1978, LSC/78/51st Mtg; "Steering Committee: Minutes of 51st Meeting (Argument over 'Stepping Stones')," 30 January 1978, Margaret Thatcher Foundation, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/109832.
[140]"Stepping Stones Report (Final Text)."
[141]"Leader's Steering Committee: 51st Meeting."
[142]Ibid.
[143]See "Shadow Cabinet: Circulated Paper (Joseph 'Notes towards the Definition of Policy')," 4 April 1975, Margaret Thatcher Foundation, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/110098.
[144]"Leader's Consultative Committee Minutes," 11 April 1975, Conservative Party Archive, LCC/75 (57th Meeting).

Declinism did not resonate with the establishment, including Thatcher skeptics Francis Pym and Ian Gilmour.[145] They were insiders, heavily invested in their own past performance, and had not undergone a change in identity or beliefs. Furthermore, Labor did not accept Thatcher's declinism, as the party in power. Nor did Labor seek to use their own declinist narratives. Instead, Labor would claim that "four years of government prove that Labor has been good for Britain."[146] Neither the Conservative Party establishment nor Labor were declinists.

Domestic politics explains the sudden rise of declinism in late-1970s Britain. Thatcher and Joseph's position as brokers allowed them to propose a narrative of decline. They were outsiders in the Conservative Party. They brokered a coalition that included those outside the party to free-market liberals—established throughout the 1960s by Joseph—and their newfound power within the Conservative Party. Once Thatcher became leader, she and Joseph leaned on the networks that they bridged between the Conservative Party and the outside think tanks, academics, journalists, and industry. In doing so, ideas were shared, and the identity of this group came into being. This coalition brought a message of decline to the British people, blaming British decline on past Labor and Conservative policies.

Negative events and conditions were also crucial to declinism in the late 1970s. Thatcher and the members of her coalition did not spin declinism out of thin air. Negative events included industrial militancy, union problems, strikes, and inflation. Oil price rises, miners' strikes in 1973 and 1974, and the "Winter of Discontent" of 1978/79 provided fodder that Thatcher could draw upon as evidence for British decline, helping declinism resonate.

The Foreign Policy Consequences of Thatcher's Declinism

In April 1982, Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands after prolonged diplomatic attempts failed to resolve disputed claims to the territory. The islands, which sit 300 miles off the coast of Argentina, had been under British control since 1833. The invasion caught Britain by surprise.[147] Upon learning of it, Thatcher and her government assembled a naval task force that would make the 8,000-mile journey to the South Atlantic. It was an incredibly risky decision. Not only would it take three weeks for the task force to reach the Falklands, but the task force would be susceptible to

[145]See "Conservative Policy: Hailsham Diary (Shadow Cabinet Squabbles over Keith Joseph Paper)," 11 April 1975, Margaret Thatcher Foundation, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/111134.
[146]"Good for Britain" Pamphlet, Labour Party Archive, Judith Hart Papers (HART), 9/17.
[147]Lawrence Freedman and Virginia Gamba-Stonehouse, *Signals of War: The Falklands Conflict of 1982* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), chap. 7.

Argentinean air attacks, face an entrenched ground force, and would, it was believed, face an uphill battle to retake the islands.[148]

Thatcher's declinism shaped her response to the Falklands invasion. Despite Thatcher's government seeking to "lease-back" the islands to Argentina in the early days of her premiership,[149] she perceived a dangerous military response to Argentina's invasion as necessary and rejected the possibility of a diplomatic settlement.[150] Thatcher's declinism served both to shape and constrain her: she was defiant in her opposition to negotiating with the Argentineans, lest she—and Britain—look weak, and past negative events such as the 1956 Suez Crisis loomed large in the British government and people's minds. In other words, Thatcher's declinism made her especially sensitive to the ramifications of the invasion for Britain's standing in the world. Thatcher would go on to use British victory in the Falklands to transition from a declinist narrative to one of renewal.

The Falklands invasion deeply affected Thatcher, whose political persona had been crafted in opposition to what she saw as the sense of national decline at the hands of both former Labor and Conservative governments. She was accused by her political opposition of being ill-prepared for the invasion and bringing humiliation upon the nation.[151] Conservative MP Alan Clark noted in his diary "how low she [Thatcher] held her head, how knotted with pain and apprehension she seemed."[152]

The 1956 Suez Crisis hovered in the backdrop as a salient event for Thatcher's detractors and supporters alike.[153] It represented for many the end of Britain's international power, and many feared Thatcher's belligerent response to Argentina would destroy what was left of Britain's standing in the world, rather than restore it as Thatcher sought to do. "We are making a big mistake," Gilmour, a conservative opponent to Thatcher, confided; "it will make Suez look like common sense."

Sending the task force to the South Atlantic was thus a gamble. However, for Thatcher, the gamble was worth it. She understood the Falklands War as inherently consequential for Britain's standing in the world. As Thatcher remarked in her memoirs, "We were defending our honor as a nation … the significance of the Falklands War was enormous, both for Britain's self-confidence and our standing in the world. Since the

[148]David Monaghan, *The Falklands War: Myth and Countermyth* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 1.
[149]Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, 175–76.
[150]David M. McCourt, *Britain and World Power since 1945: Constructing a Nation's Role in International Politics* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2014), 157; D. George Boyce, *The Falklands War* (London: Palgrave, 2005), 51.
[151]Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon, *Continental Drift: Britain and Europe from the End of Empire to the Rise of Euroscepticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 423.
[152]Ibid.
[153]The Suez Crisis represented for many the end of Britain's international power, in which Britain (alongside France and Israel) were "put in their place" by the United States, Soviet Union, and United Nations.

Suez fiasco in 1956, British foreign policy had been one long retreat."[154] John Nott, Thatcher's secretary of state for defence, later reflected that Thatcher "had made up her mind from the outset that the only way we could regain our national honor and prestige was by inflicting a military defeat on Argentina."[155] Thatcher blamed past British governments for being defeatist and accepting decline, while suggesting that the Falklands put Britain back on the correct course: "The tacit assumption made by British and foreign governments alike was that our role in the world was doomed steadily to diminish … Everywhere I went after the war, Britain's name meant something more than it had."[156] Thatcher would respond to the Falklands—and, more broadly, in opposition to such assumptions—and seek renewal, from the economy to foreign policy, by doing the opposite of the establishment.

For Thatcher, the Falklands War showed that "Britain has not changed and that this nation still has those sterling qualities which shine through our history."[157] Contemporary observers, like Secretary of State Alexander Haig, noted that "Mrs. Thatcher's objective, after all, was to demonstrate that Britain was still Britain."[158] In a key speech to Conservatives in Cheltenham shortly after the end of hostilities in July of 1982, Thatcher claimed that Britain had "ceased to be a nation in retreat":

> We have instead a new-found confidence—born in the economic battles at home and tested and found true 8,000 miles away. That confidence comes from the re-discovery of ourselves, and grows with the recovery of our self-respect. And so today, we can rejoice at our success in the Falklands and take pride in the achievement of the men and women of our Task Force. But we do so, not as at some last flickering of a flame which must soon be dead. No—we rejoice that Britain has re-kindled that spirit which has fired her for generations past and which today has begun to burn as brightly as before. Britain found herself again in the South Atlantic and will not look back from the victory she has won.[159]

Thatcher linked victory in the South Atlantic and domestic struggles together to claim newfound confidence. Thatcher sounded triumphant, and rightly so given the precarious nature of the mission in the South Atlantic. Thatcher used the victory over Argentina to rally political support for her domestic political agenda and launch her message of British renewal. In her Cheltenham speech, the "Iron Lady" linked domestic political problems, such as the railway strikes or National Health Service pay disputes, to the victory in the Falklands. Behind the scenes, Thatcher's chief press secretary,

[154]Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, 173.
[155]Cited in Boyce, *Falklands War*, 51.
[156]Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, 173.
[157]"Speech to Conservative Rally at Cheltenham," 3 July 1982, Margaret Thatcher Foundation, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104989.
[158]McCourt, *Britain and World Power since 1945*, 158.
[159]"Speech to Conservative Rally at Cheltenham."

Sir Bernard Ingham, argued that Thatcher had proved her capacity for leadership in peace and war, and now was the time to "convince the people that your cure really does work, is turning the country round and that you are building a Britain to their liking."[160] If only those troublesome Brits who engaged in labor disputes and cries for better pay would realize the sacrifices needed to bring Britain back from the brink, if only they would take lessons from those who fought in the Falklands, then Britain, according to Thatcher, would find its way again.

For Thatcher, victory in the Falklands represented the best of Britain, a Britain that "had no illusions about the difficulties" of the tasks at hand, a Britain that had "re-kindled that spirit which fired her for generations past and which today has begun to burn as brightly as before."[161] According to Simon Jenkins, "Constantly citing 'the Falklands spirit', she [Thatcher] tackled the miners and industrial relations generally. She took on the IRA [Irish Republican Army] at great personal cost. She savaged the GLC [Greater London Council]. She embarked on privatization, of which she had previously been a skeptic."[162] In other words, for Thatcher, the Falklands conflict was not just a story of Britain claiming a victory in the South Atlantic, it was a story of the beginnings of Britain's renewal at home as well.

Declinism in Major Powers

Domestic political factors and events are at the heart of declinism. I have argued that opposition brokers bring otherwise disconnected groups and individuals together in a new coalition. This coalition is well positioned to lay blame for the nation's decline on the incumbent government and the opposition establishment, and to offer alternative policies and visions in line with the interests that bring them together through brokerage. I showed that declinism was unlikely to arise as a dominant theme in early-1970s Britain because the incumbent Conservative Party wanted to stress stability and growth, and Labor had no brokers able to bring together otherwise unconnected individuals and groups to challenge the status quo. Alternatively, after the Conservatives' dual electoral defeats in 1974, a new movement emerged, spearheaded by Thatcher and Joseph. They occupied a brokerage position between the Conservative Party and outside groups. Once their coalition took hold, they brought a message of decline to the British people, leaning on the "Winter of Discontent" and domestic

[160]"Ingham Minute to MT," 3 August 1982, Margaret Thatcher Foundation, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/122990.

[161]"Speech to Conservative Rally at Cheltenham."

[162]Simon Jenkins, "Falklands War 30 Years On and How It Turned Thatcher into a World Celebrity," *Guardian*, 1 April 2012.

turmoil. Thatcher's declinism was brought to bear during the 1982 Argentinean invasion of the Falklands, an event that crystalized for Thatcher Britain's need to reassert itself on the world stage and that would offer its leader a lodestar for British renewal.

This argument has implications for the United States against the backdrop of a rising China and the return of great-power competition. My argument suggests that if a declinist leader becomes powerful stateside, arguments about American decline will be driven by domestic politics rather than the needs and realities of the moment. Whether true believers who come to believe that the United States is in severe decline, or simply the figureheads to broader coalitions whose demands must be met, declinists are beholden to their declinism once in power. As the Falklands case demonstrates, declinists may well become constrained by their declinism and respond to what are perceived to be crises signifying the nation's decline in dangerous ways. Declinism, in other words, may push leaders to choose policies they otherwise would avoid.

Future research should broaden the scope of analysis to examine different political regimes, from nondemocratic major powers to variation within different types of democratic regimes. Presidential democracies such as the United States, for example, may depend more on the politics of personality and on the intimate connection between the president and the people. Such political dynamics may exacerbate the incentives to engage in declinism. Further, declinists focus on different metrics of their respective nations' international declines, from economic and military power to prestige and influence. Future research should unpack such connections between declinists and the content of their declinism. What metrics do leaders most often lean on to measure their nation's trajectory, and how do these relate to those metrics used by scholars? Do some metrics and declinist arguments resonate more than others, and if so, why?

Finally, future research should examine the foreign policy consequences of declinism in greater detail. As I have suggested in this article, declinist narratives may sustain policies of expansion or retrenchment, from Trump's insistence that endless wars in the Middle East drained American power to Kennedy's desire to restore US military supremacy over the Soviet Union. Declinists, I have argued throughout this article, are uninterested in the status quo and establishment policies, policies they believe are the cause of decline. Future research should unpack the relationship between past establishment policies and declinism, as well as the variation between different foreign policy choices declinists make, including retrenchment and expansion.

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