

Myth at Exhaustion: How the American Empire Reaches for Cosmic Stories When Power Falters

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Every empire tells stories about itself, but the stories change tone when the empire grows tired. The United States began with a language of covenant and experiment—republic, constitution, union—yet in moments of strategic failure, moral compromise, or visible decline, its leaders have repeatedly reached for something larger than policy: myth. From the “city on a hill” revival after Vietnam and Watergate, to the endless frontier reimagined abroad once the continent was full, to the “War on Terror” as a cosmic struggle between good and evil, the American project has wrapped exhaustion in transcendent narrative. More recently, techno-messianic missile shields and “Age of Disclosure” UFO talk hint at a civilization seeking deliverance from its own contradictions, whether by hardware or by aliens. This paper examines that pattern. It reads selected episodes—the frontier myth, post-Vietnam exceptionalism, the War on Terror, missile defense dreams, and contemporary disclosure narratives—as case studies in “myth at exhaustion.” Using a logostic lens ($q(t)$ as finite collective state, $\tau(t)$ as living truth), it asks how myths bend perception, defer repentance, and conceal structural limits, even as they temporarily stabilize identity. The goal is not cynicism, but clarity: what would it mean for a late empire to face its condition without magic shields, cosmic cover stories, or manufactured chosenness?

Keywords: American empire, myth-making, political theology, city on a hill, frontier, War on Terror, Afghanistan, Strategic Defense Initiative, Star Wars program, Golden Dome missile shield, UFO disclosure, non-human craft, information warfare, logistics, $q(t)$, $\tau(t)$, imperial decline.

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1. Introduction: Myth at the Edge of Power

1.1 Framing the question: empire, story, and exhaustion

Every empire is held together by force and finance, but it is justified, to itself and to others, by story. Territory is mapped in law and logistics; legitimacy is mapped in myth. A republic born in revolt against empire becomes, over time, a global guarantor of order. A regional power becomes indispensable to trade routes and security architectures. None of that happens without narratives that say who the polity is, why it matters, and what justifies its reach.

Those stories are not optional decorations; they are part of the operating system. Soldiers fight, taxpayers pay, allies align, and critics are silenced or absorbed because a tale is being told in which the whole arrangement makes sense. The language may be religious, civilizational, technocratic, or humanitarian, but it always does the same work: it frames the empire's actions as necessary responses to destiny, danger, or duty.

Myth at the edge of power is different from myth at its founding. Founding myths open space: they promise that something new is possible, that a break from the old order can be made. Exhaustion myths cover over closing space: they insist that nothing truly new needs to happen, that the current order, however frayed, still carries a mandate from history or heaven. This paper is about that second category. It asks what happens when an empire that is structurally tired and morally compromised responds, not with repentance or reform, but with bigger, brighter stories about itself and its place in the cosmos.

1.2 Why focus on the American case now

The American case is not unique in using myth to stabilize power, but it is distinctive in scale, reach, and timing. For three quarters of a century, the United States has been the central node in military alliances, financial systems, and global communication networks. It has seen its currency function as near-universal reserve, its language become the default medium for science and culture, and its military encircle much of the planet. That kind of primacy inevitably attracts stories of chosenness, indispensability, and moral vocation.

At the same time, the internal record of the last half century is one of punctured illusions and accumulating strain. Military campaigns presented as quick and decisive have dragged into quagmires. Economic policies that promised shared prosperity have produced stark inequalities and regions of concentrated despair. Political institutions have shown themselves vulnerable to gridlock, polarization, and capture. Climate, debt, and demographic shifts have added slow-motion structural pressures. The image of effortless dominance has not survived contact with reality.

Into this gap between self-image and lived condition rush new narratives. Some are familiar revivals of older themes: the shining city on a hill, the frontier of freedom, the arsenal of democracy. Others are more overtly cosmic or salvific: a technological shield that renders nuclear weapons obsolete, a global war of good against evil, or, more recently, suggestions that humanity's trajectory is being transformed by contact with non-human intelligences or technologies. It is precisely the coexistence of material strain and mythic inflation that makes the current American moment analytically interesting.

Focusing on the United States now is therefore not an act of obsession with one country, but a practical way to study how a late hegemon uses story to manage the experience of decline. The point is not to decide whether the empire has already fallen, but to examine how it talks to itself when it suspects, at some level, that the arc of effortless ascent is over.

1.3 Method: case studies plus a logostic interpretive lens

This paper does not attempt a comprehensive history of American ideology. Instead, it works by case studies: a small set of episodes in which mythic language clearly thickened as policy became more difficult, contested, or incoherent. The closing of the frontier, the revival of the city on a hill, the construction of the War on Terror, the promise of missile defense, and contemporary disclosure narratives around unidentified aerial phenomena are treated not as isolated curiosities, but as variations on a pattern.

To interpret these episodes, the paper uses a logostic frame. In that vocabulary, $q(t)$ denotes a finite collective state at a given time: the actual configuration of institutions, capacities, debts, traumas, hopes, and blind spots. $\tau(t)$ denotes living truth, the generative structure of what is actually the case and what is demanded by reality and justice at that moment. Myth, in this language, is narrative curvature: the way the stories a polity tells either bend $q(t)$ closer to $\tau(t)$, or bend perception away from it.

Myth at exhaustion, then, can be described as a particular kind of misalignment. It appears when a polity is confronted with evidence that its current trajectory is unsustainable and responds by intensifying stories that declare its innocence, indispensability, or invulnerability. Those stories do not merely decorate reality; they reorient attention, suppress certain data, and amplify others. The method here is to read each case study with two questions in mind: what was happening to $q(t)$ in that era, and how did the dominant myths claim to speak for $\tau(t)$ while in practice diverting attention from uncomfortable truths?

1.4 Structure of the argument

The argument unfolds in stages. After this introductory framing, the second section lays out the conceptual framework in more detail. It offers working definitions of empire, myth, and exhaustion, and clarifies what it means to speak of narrative curvature between $q(t)$ and $\tau(t)$. It

distinguishes between founding myths, which open possibilities, and exhaustion myths, which close them off while insisting that all is well.

The third section turns to early American self-story, focusing on the frontier and the city on a hill. It shows how, even in the republic's formative centuries, there were moments where geographic and moral limits were met with narrative expansion rather than sober reassessment. The fourth section moves to the post–September 11 era, tracing how the War on Terror transformed a specific set of attacks and policy failures into an effectively infinite moral struggle. The fifth section examines techno-messianic projects such as missile defense, in which salvation from vulnerability is promised by hardware that often exceeds plausible engineering.

The sixth section engages contemporary disclosure narratives around unidentified aerial phenomena and alleged non-human craft. It treats these neither as proven fact nor as simple delusion, but as symptomatic stories: ways of putting imperial anxiety into cosmic form. The seventh section synthesizes the patterns, asking what is common across these myths at exhaustion, what risks they pose, and what alternatives might exist for a polity willing to tell itself harder truths. The eighth and final section gathers the threads into a brief meditation on what it might mean, for citizens who understand themselves as eternal beings, to live without magic shields at the end of an age.

The aim throughout is not to sneer at belief or to deny the human need for meaning, but to ask whether an empire facing its limits can find narratives that align more closely with reality and responsibility than with denial and distraction.

2. Empire, Myth, and Exhaustion: A Logostic Frame

2.1 Working definition of “empire” in this paper

The word “empire” carries heavy historical and emotional weight. In this paper it is used in a deliberately narrow, structural sense rather than as a moral verdict. An empire is a polity that sustains disproportionate influence over other societies across distance, primarily through the combined force of military reach, economic weight, institutional rule-writing, and cultural projection. It does not require formal colonies or an emperor. It requires a persistent asymmetry: others must reckon with its preferences in a way it does not equally reckon with theirs.

This definition allows the American case to be treated as imperial even though it presents itself as a federation of states and a champion of self-determination. When a state's currency is the default unit for global reserves, when its security commitments frame the defense policies of dozens of countries, when its corporations dominate key technological platforms, and when its

media narratives set the terms of political imagination worldwide, the structural features of empire are present. The empire may be informal, reluctant, or contested, but it is real.

Seeing empire structurally matters for the analysis of myth. It directs attention away from the slogans a polity prefers and toward the actual flows of power, capital, and force. It asks how those flows are narrated to insiders and outsiders, especially when the underlying structure begins to strain. The question is not simply whether an empire is “good” or “bad,” but how it talks about itself when its role becomes both indispensable and unsustainable.

2.2 Myth as narrative infrastructure rather than mere fiction

Myth in this context is not a synonym for falsehood. It is closer to narrative infrastructure: the shared stories, metaphors, and canonical episodes through which a society interprets its own experience. Myths explain why things are as they are, who the heroes and villains are, what sacrifices are needed, and what future is promised. They are the background programs that run under daily news cycles, giving them shape and meaning.

Some myths are obviously untrue in the literal sense and are embraced precisely for their symbolic value. Others are mixtures of fact and interpretation, blending real events with selective emphasis and moral framing. In both cases, the power of myth lies in what it licenses and what it forbids. A myth of chosenness may license intervention and forbid certain kinds of self-critique. A myth of perpetual victimhood may license revenge and forbid reconciliation. Myths act as filters over perception, highlighting some features of $q(t)$ and leaving others in shadow.

For empires, myth does especially heavy work. It must reconcile global projection with internal ideals, justify unequal arrangements as benevolent, and integrate episodes of failure or atrocity into a larger narrative that preserves legitimacy. It must explain to citizens why their taxes fund bases on other continents, and to client states why alignment with the empire is preferable to alternatives. When the material basis of power is expanding, myth can afford to be modest. When that basis is eroding, myth often becomes louder and more grandiose, because it is being asked to carry more of the weight that reality can no longer bear on its own.

2.3 Exhaustion as military, economic, psychological, and spiritual

Exhaustion here is not collapse. It is the condition in which an empire remains powerful but finds that its ability to convert resources into desired outcomes is diminishing. Military campaigns that were once short and decisive turn into long, inconclusive engagements. Economic tools that once produced growth at home and influence abroad begin to generate inequality, backlash, or diminishing returns. Institutional designs that once seemed agile start to feel brittle.

This exhaustion has multiple layers. The military dimension appears in overstretched deployments, recruitment difficulties, and the need to fight increasingly ambiguous enemies with high political costs. The economic dimension appears in persistent deficits, fragile supply chains, and simmering internal discontent over who benefits from globalization. Psychologically, exhaustion manifests as alternating waves of triumphalism and self-doubt, cynicism about institutions, and a hunger for narratives that make suffering meaningful. Spiritually, it shows up as a loss of shared purpose, a sense that the project no longer knows what ultimate good it serves.

In such a condition, the temptation is to demand that myth do more work. Rather than updating strategy to match reality, leaders and publics may lean into stories that deny or transcend limits: stories of unique destiny, of perpetual innocence, of technological deliverance, or of cosmic significance. Exhaustion myths reassure a tired empire that it is not simply one polity among many, grappling with the consequences of its choices, but a uniquely burdened and blessed actor whose struggles are part of a larger, almost sacred drama.

2.4 $q(t)$ and $\tau(t)$: collective state, living truth, and narrative curvature

Within the logostic frame, $q(t)$ denotes the actual collective state of a polity at time t . It includes measurable features such as troop deployments, debt levels, infrastructure quality, and demographic trends, as well as less tangible but still real features such as trauma, resentment, hope, and habit. $q(t)$ is always finite and partial. No institution or individual fully grasps it, but it can be approximated through data, testimony, and reflection.

$\tau(t)$, by contrast, denotes living truth at time t : the structure of what is actually the case and what is called for, not just in a descriptive sense but in a moral and relational sense. $\tau(t)$ is not simply a list of facts. It includes the demands of justice, the consequences of actions that have not yet fully manifested, and the realities that propaganda or wishful thinking would prefer to ignore. In theological language, $\tau(t)$ is closer to the divine vantage: the truth of the situation as it appears under the scrutiny of a judge who cannot be deceived.

Narrative curvature is the way stories bend the trajectory of $q(t)$ relative to $\tau(t)$. A truthful narrative acknowledges painful facts, names responsibilities, and calls for forms of repair that are proportionate to harm done. Such narratives increase alignment: they help $q(t)$ move toward $\tau(t)$. A dishonest or evasive narrative suppresses crucial information, shifts blame, or inflates virtues to cover over vices. Such narratives increase misalignment: they tilt the perceptual frame so that the polity moves further from what justice and reality require.

In this vocabulary, myths at exhaustion tend to create curvature that favors comfort over truth. They may incorporate enough reality to be plausible, but they systematically underplay structural limits and overplay symbolic victories. They often elevate certain episodes into near-

sacred status to anchor identity, while relegating other episodes to footnotes or silence. To read an imperial myth logostically is to ask: how does this story shape the relation between $q(t)$ and $\tau(t)$? Does it help the polity move toward what is actually required, or does it help it remain in patterns that are no longer sustainable?

2.5 Myth at exhaustion versus myth at foundation

Founding myths and exhaustion myths perform different functions and carry different risks. Founding myths appear when a polity is young, fragile, and uncertain. They gather disparate groups into a shared project, justify the break with an old order, and frame sacrifices as investments in a new possibility. They often emphasize humility, experiment, and the need to live up to a calling not yet fulfilled. Their danger lies in romanticizing origins, erasing the violence and exclusions that accompanied them.

Exhaustion myths appear when a polity is old enough to have accumulated contradictions it cannot easily resolve. They seek not to open new space but to close it, to insist that the existing order is still the bearer of destiny even when evidence suggests otherwise. They tend to emphasize chosenness over humility, inevitability over contingency, and innocence over repentance. Where founding myths say, in effect, “we might become what we are called to be,” exhaustion myths say, “we already are what the world needs us to be, and any challenge to that status is a threat.”

The American story contains both kinds of myth. The language of experiment, union, and self-government has a foundational character. The later language of manifest destiny, global policeman, or indispensable nation has a more exhausted tone. Distinguishing between these layers is crucial. It allows admiration for genuine achievements and aspirations at the founding without being captured by the grandiose self-descriptions of a later era. It makes it possible to ask whether, at this stage, the United States might need less myth about its eternal centrality and more honest narrative about its finite role in a larger, shared history.

In logostic terms, founding myths can, at their best, be partial glimpses of $\tau(t)$ that invite a fledgling $q(t)$ forward. Exhaustion myths, by contrast, are often defenses against $\tau(t)$: elaborate narrative structures that allow a tired $q(t)$ to avoid acknowledging what truth and justice now require. The case studies that follow will examine concrete episodes in which this shift from opening to closing myth can be seen in practice.

3. From Frontier to “City on a Hill”: Early Patterns of American Self-Story

3.1 Winthrop’s warning: covenant under judgment, not bragging rights

Long before there was a United States, there was a shipboard sermon. In 1630, as the *Arbella* crossed the Atlantic, John Winthrop addressed his fellow Puritan colonists with the language that would later become shorthand for American mission: a “city upon a hill.” In its original setting, the phrase was not a boast; it was a warning. Winthrop framed the community as entering into a covenant with God. If they lived justly, loved mercy, and cared for the poor, their life together would display the faithfulness of God before the eyes of the world. If they failed, their failure would be equally visible and equally memorable.

The “hill” in his formulation was not a pedestal but an exposed slope. The image conveyed vulnerability under scrutiny. Success would be a testimony; betrayal of the covenant would make them “a story and a byword.” It is the rhetoric of judgment: the idea that there is an objective standard outside the community by which it will be measured. The myth here, if it is a myth, is one of conditional vocation rather than unconditional superiority.

This matters for later logostic reading. Winthrop’s language presumes that $\tau(t)$ is real, searching, and not under the community’s control. The colonists are not free to decide what counts as faithfulness; they are accountable to a truth that precedes them. The phrase that would later become a slogan of national exceptionalism begins, in other words, as a reminder that $q(t)$ is fragile and subject to correction. The founding myth, at this early stage, is not yet a shield. It is a mirror held up before a trembling community, asking whether they will live in a way that withstands exposure.

3.2 The closing of the continental frontier and Turner’s thesis

Two and a half centuries later, the geography had changed beyond recognition. The line of settlement that had once hugged the Atlantic coast now stretched to the Pacific. By 1890, the United States Census Bureau announced that there was no longer a discernible frontier line; the continent had been effectively partitioned into states, territories, and reservations. Space, in the simple sense of unincorporated land into which European settlers might move, was gone.

Frederick Jackson Turner, a young historian, responded to this development with what became known as the Frontier Thesis. He argued that the existence of a frontier had been decisive for American character: it had fostered individualism, innovation, and democratic habits by repeatedly placing settlers in situations where old institutions were too slow to arrive. The frontier had functioned as a safety valve for social tensions and as a school for self-reliant citizens. The closing of that frontier, he suggested, marked the end of a defining chapter.

Turner's thesis was an interpretation, not a neutral description. It glossed over the violence against Indigenous peoples and the ways in which federal power and capital had shaped westward expansion. Yet it captured how many Americans wished to see themselves. The frontier became a mythic space where essential virtues were forged, even as the actual spaces and peoples on which that myth was built disappeared under fences and railroads.

In logostic terms, the closing of the frontier created a new misalignment between $q(t)$ and inherited narratives. The material conditions that had underwritten one set of self-understandings no longer existed, but the stories remained. The question was what would happen when a polity accustomed to thinking of itself as always having new space to move into suddenly confronted a finite map. One answer was to reinterpret the frontier as a psychological and civilizational quality that could be reproduced elsewhere, even when the land was gone.

3.3 Projecting the frontier outward: Philippines, Caribbean, and beyond

The most immediate "elsewhere" was not space but empire. In 1898, the United States fought Spain in a brief war that resulted in the acquisition of overseas territories, including Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, as well as a more indirect influence over Cuba. Public justifications for these moves were couched in familiar language: liberation from tyranny, the spread of civilization, the uplift of "less developed" peoples. The frontier vocabulary migrated from plains and prairies to islands and archipelagos.

This outward projection allowed the republic to become an empire without admitting the term. Domestic rhetoric could still speak the language of self-government and anti-colonial origins, while the actual structure of power increasingly matched older European imperial patterns. The United States now administered distant populations who had not consented to its rule and who resisted it with arms and words. The myth of the frontier as school for freedom was inverted: the empire now cast itself as teacher.

For the logostic reader, this is an early instance of narrative curvature masking structural change. $q(t)$ was shifting from continental consolidation to overseas domination, but the dominant stories emphasized continuity: the same restless energy, the same civilizing mission, now applied abroad. The hard fact that the new subjects of American rule had their own histories, aspirations, and claims on justice was often buried under layers of paternalistic myth. The frontier lived on, not as a real line on a map but as a posture of expansion that could be justified by invoking destiny and duty.

This projection also planted seeds for later exhaustion myths. Once the empire had stepped outside its own continent, retreat became more complicated. The more the polity's identity was bound up with being a bringer of order and progress beyond its borders, the harder it became to accept limits or acknowledge that others might not experience American presence as benign.

Narratives that had once described homesteaders moving into sparsely regulated lands now described soldiers and administrators establishing bases and regimes in places that had their own dense histories.

3.4 The late twentieth-century “shining city on a hill” revival after Vietnam

By the late twentieth century, the frontier map was crowded not only with lines but with scars. The Vietnam War, waged in the name of containing communism and supporting allies, ended in withdrawal and televised images of helicopters lifting off from Saigon rooftops. The Watergate scandal exposed abuses of executive power and eroded trust in the presidency. Economic turbulence, oil shocks, and inflation undermined the sense of effortless postwar abundance. The mythology of unbroken success was hard to sustain.

It is in this context that the “city on a hill” returned, transformed. Political rhetoric, especially associated with one prominent president, began to speak of America as a “shining city on a hill”: a beacon of freedom and prosperity, blessed and admired by the world. The original sermon’s language of warning and judgment was largely absent. Instead, the city symbolized consummated virtue and destiny. The hill was no longer an exposed slope under divine scrutiny, but a lit pedestal from which the nation illuminated others.

This retooling did important work. It allowed a wounded society to reframe its recent humiliations as mere deviations from a deeper, triumphant arc. The trauma of Vietnam and the shame of Watergate could be bracketed as anomalies rather than symptoms of systemic problems. The shining city language offered reassurance: despite missteps, the nation remained the unique site where freedom and opportunity flourished at a level unmatched elsewhere.

From a logostic perspective, the curvature here is clear. Rather than using recent crises to adjust $q(t)$ toward a more realistic $\tau(t)$ that acknowledged limits, complicity, and the costs of intervention, the narrative elevated the nation’s self-conception. The bar of self-critique was lowered even as the rhetoric of moral centrality intensified. The myth that had once urged a small religious community to fear becoming “a byword” now functioned as an analgesic: a bright image to anesthetize the pain of contradiction.

3.5 Exceptionalism as analgesic for humiliation and doubt

“American exceptionalism” is a phrase that can describe several different claims. In its most modest form, it names the historical fact that the United States followed a different path than many European states: no formal monarchy, a written constitution, a relatively early expansion of suffrage for white men, and a geographic situation buffered by oceans. In its more inflated forms, it becomes a metaphysical assertion: that the nation is uniquely chosen, morally purer, or destined to lead the world indefinitely.

As the twentieth century wore on, the inflated forms became increasingly prominent. Each major shock to national confidence was followed by renewed invocations of exceptional status. Setbacks in war were reframed as tragic interruptions of an otherwise benevolent mission. Internal injustices were acknowledged, when they were acknowledged at all, as unfortunate stains on an essentially virtuous fabric. The idea that the nation might be a normal polity, capable of serious error and subject to decline like any other, became harder to voice in mainstream discourse.

Exceptionalism, in this mode, functions less as description and more as painkiller. It dulls the sharp edges of historical memory and makes it easier to live with dissonant facts. If the nation is inherently exceptional, then defeats and scandals do not require deep structural reconsideration; they simply demand a return to true form. The lens through which events are viewed is tilted such that the polity's identity is never fundamentally at stake. The stories bend $q(t)$ away from truly reckoning with $\tau(t)$, because they tell citizens that the essentials are already settled in their favor.

This analgesic effect is particularly pronounced in times of exhaustion. When military campaigns drag on, when economic gains feel fragile or uneven, and when institutional trust erodes, the promise of exceptionalism offers emotional relief. It says, in effect, that whatever the present discomfort, the nation's role as beacon and leader remains unquestioned. The price of this relief is clarity. By insulating identity from critique, exceptionalist myth makes it harder to perceive when an empire's operating assumptions no longer match reality. It teaches citizens to reach for brighter stories precisely when darker truths most need to be faced.

In the earlier phases of the American project, myths like Winthrop's covenant carried both comfort and threat. By the time of late twentieth-century exceptionalism, the balance had shifted. The threat of judgment receded; the comfort of destiny remained. This shift sets the stage for the later case studies in which, faced with even greater strain, the empire reaches not only for historical and religious myths but for cosmic ones: infinite wars, perfect shields, and perhaps even otherworldly neighbors who might rescue it from its own limits.

4. 9/11 and the War on Terror as Infinite Crusade

4.1 From crime and intelligence failure to "war on terror" as an abstract enemy

The attacks of September 11, 2001 were, at one level, a coordinated set of crimes: hijackings, mass murder, and destruction of civilian and governmental targets. They were also an intelligence and security failure: multiple agencies had fragments of relevant information that were not adequately integrated or acted upon. One possible response would have been to frame the event in those terms, as a catastrophic breakdown within existing systems of law

enforcement and intelligence, calling for painful institutional reform and sober recalibration of risk.

Instead, the dominant framing quickly became something else: a “war on terror.” The enemy was not a specific organization or set of individuals, but an abstract noun. Terror is an emotion and a tactic, not a person or state. By declaring war on terror, the polity committed itself to an open-ended struggle against a category. This was not inevitable. It was a choice in language and policy that immediately expanded the temporal and spatial scope of the response.

This shift had powerful narrative effects. A crime invites investigation, trial, and targeted disruption of networks. An intelligence failure invites accountability and structural change within agencies. A war on terror, by contrast, invites mobilization on a civilizational scale. It casts the attacks as the latest move in a larger struggle between good and evil, freedom and barbarism. It turns grief and fear into fuel for a crusade. In logostic terms, the language of war on terror bent perception away from the finite, uncomfortable truths of $q(t)$ —institutional weaknesses, prior policy choices, complex regional histories—and toward a simpler story in which the empire was suddenly a righteous defender under attack by an amorphous darkness.

4.2 Iraq, WMD, and the orchestration of belief

Nowhere was this curvature more visible than in the decision to invade Iraq in 2003. The immediate perpetrators of 9/11 were linked to a non-state organization based primarily in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Iraq, governed by a brutal secular dictatorship, was not responsible for the attacks. Yet within eighteen months, a cascade of speeches, reports, and media coverage had tied Iraq tightly in public imagination to the war on terror. Allegations of weapons of mass destruction programs and insinuations of operational links to the attackers were repeated until they felt like established fact.

The details of that period have been dissected at length: the selective use of intelligence, the elevation of worst-case assessments, the suppression of dissenting analyses within bureaucracies, and the role of sympathetic media outlets in amplifying particular narratives. What matters for the present argument is not the mechanics alone, but the mythic structure. Iraq was cast as a central node in an axis of evil, a regime whose removal would not only eliminate a threat but catalyze democratic transformation across a region. The invasion was portrayed as both necessary self-defense and moral duty.

For a polity still reeling from the shock of 9/11, this orchestration of belief offered a way to convert fear and anger into purpose. Instead of dwelling on the vulnerability revealed by the attacks, citizens were told they were part of a decisive historical moment: the assertion of freedom against tyranny, the drawing of a line in the sand against those who would arm themselves with catastrophic weapons. The mythic overlay obscured the more prosaic and

uncomfortable possibilities—that the threat assessments might be wrong, that the war might destabilize entire regions, that occupation might generate new forms of resentment and violence. The war on terror, in this telling, became a canvas onto which the empire projected its need to act decisively, even when the target was misaligned with the original wound.

4.3 “Saving Afghan women” and other moral cover stories

Afghanistan, the initial theater of response, underwent a similar transformation in narrative, though with different emphases. The early justification for military action centered on denying safe haven to those who had planned the attacks. Over time, as the operation lengthened and the objectives shifted, the rhetoric increasingly invoked the liberation of Afghan women and girls. Images of schoolgirls returning to classrooms and women casting ballots in elections became staples of speeches and news features.

This emphasis was not purely cynical. The oppression of women under the prior regime was real and severe. Gains in education and public life, where they occurred, were genuinely meaningful for those who benefited. Yet the way the story was told functioned as a moral cover for a war whose strategic aims had become diffuse and whose costs were mounting. The liberation narrative turned a tangled set of counterinsurgency, state-building, and regional power struggles into a simpler tale of rescuers and victims.

Similar cover stories appeared elsewhere in the broader war on terror: interventions framed as humanitarian protection, intelligence operations justified as necessary to prevent unspeakable atrocities, alliances with unsavory regimes excused as temporary compromises for a higher good. Each narrative in isolation had elements of truth. Taken together, they created a moral haze in which nearly any use of force could be draped in the language of protection and care. The danger, from a logostic standpoint, lay in the way these narratives displaced attention from the actual structure of q(t): the long-term consequences of warfare on local societies, the chronic instability of externally supported governments, and the feedback loops of violence and radicalization.

In this sense, “saving Afghan women” functions as a myth at exhaustion. It asks citizens to see a protracted war less as evidence of strategic difficulty and more as proof of their own moral commitment. It reframes withdrawal or policy change not as recognition of limits or mistakes, but as potential betrayal of those whose liberation has been promised. The more exhausting the conflict becomes, the more emotionally charged the cover story must be to sustain support.

4.4 Domestic rituals of security and sacrifice: airports, troops, and televised remembrance

The war on terror was not experienced only in distant deserts and mountains. It also reshaped daily life and symbolic space at home. Airports became sites of ritualized security theater: removing shoes, submitting to scans, discarding liquids. Public events began with moments of

honor for troops overseas. Certain visual tropes—flag-draped coffins, yellow ribbons, silhouettes of soldiers against sunsets—permeated media and advertising. Annual anniversaries of 9/11 were marked by hours of solemn programming, reading of names, and invocations of unity.

These practices had multiple functions. Some increased security in limited ways. Others served primarily to reassure, to signal that the state was vigilant and that citizens were participating in a shared effort. In aggregate, they formed a liturgy of empire under threat. Passing through an airport became a small act of sacrifice, a reminder of vulnerability and of the authorities' role as protectors. Standing for the military recognition at a sporting event became a way to affirm membership in a community bound by gratitude and grief.

Such rituals are not inherently malign. Human societies need ways to mourn, honor, and cohere. The logostic concern arises when the rituals become substitutes for the harder work of aligning $q(t)$ with $\tau(t)$. If each infringement on privacy, each extension of surveillance, and each curtailment of civil liberties is wrapped in the language of necessary sacrifice, critical scrutiny is dulled. If televised remembrance focuses almost exclusively on the original atrocity and the heroism of responders, with little attention to subsequent wars and their victims, the narrative arc remains truncated. Citizens are invited to feel deeply about the wound while remaining hazy about the full scope of responses undertaken in their name.

In this way, domestic rituals can anchor a sense of threatened righteousness: a people that has suffered unjustly and continues to pay a noble price for security and freedom. That image coexists uneasily with the reality of black sites, legal gray zones, and the long shadow of policies that would once have been considered incompatible with professed values. The tension between image and practice is precisely what a myth at exhaustion tries to manage.

4.5 How an exhausted superpower found purpose in an unending moral war

Taken together, these elements—the abstract enemy, the expansion of targets to include regimes only tenuously linked to the initial attacks, the moral cover stories, and the domestic rituals—constitute more than a set of policy choices. They form the architecture of an unending moral war. In that war, victory is not defined as the arrest of specific perpetrators or the dismantling of particular networks, but as the ongoing assertion of virtue against an ever-present threat. The war can neither be decisively won nor honestly declared over, because its object is an abstraction and its function is as much psychological and political as it is strategic.

For an empire entering a phase of exhaustion, this architecture offers a kind of dark grace. It provides purpose. The trauma of 9/11 could have led to introspection about prior interventions, structural vulnerabilities, and the limits of power. Instead, the war on terror offered a story in which every new deployment, every new theater, and every new technological system could be

understood as part of a grand defense of civilization. A superpower struggling to translate its immense capabilities into stable outcomes found in the infinite crusade a way to feel morally decisive even as practical results remained ambiguous or negative.

From a logistic standpoint, the war on terror exemplifies a particular pattern of misalignment. $q(t)$ in the early twenty-first century was a complex state: unmatched military reach, significant internal division, economic interdependence with potential rivals, and a series of unresolved historical entanglements in the very regions where conflict now intensified. $\tau(t)$, to the extent it can be glimpsed, would have demanded careful disentangling of interests, acknowledgement of past missteps, and a recalibration of posture in light of new realities. Instead, mythic curvature bent the perception of both leaders and citizens toward a simpler narrative in which the main task was to maintain vigilance, resolve, and belief.

The cost of that curvature is not only counted in lives and resources, though those costs are severe. It is also counted in missed opportunities for repentance and reform. An exhausted superpower that finds renewed purpose in an unending moral war postpones the day when it must face its limits and reconsider its role. The war on terror thus becomes not only a series of conflicts, but a way of delaying the reckoning that exhaustion ultimately demands.

5. Techno-Messianic Shields: Star Wars, Missile Defense, and Salvation by Hardware

5.1 The Strategic Defense Initiative as nuclear eschatology

In the early 1980s, the American empire confronted a different kind of exhaustion. The nuclear arms race had produced a state of chronic dread. Decades of mutual assured destruction had normalized the idea that both superpowers lived under a shared sentence: any large-scale war could end industrial civilization in minutes. The strategic logic of deterrence was stable in theory, but emotionally corrosive. Citizens learned to live with the knowledge that their cities were targets. Political leaders rehearsed scenarios that ended with casualty estimates in the tens of millions. The system “worked” by threatening the end of the world.

Into this landscape stepped the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Announced as a research program to develop space-based and ground-based systems capable of intercepting incoming ballistic missiles, SDI offered more than a technical proposal. It offered an eschatology: a different story about how the nuclear age could end. Instead of a grim equilibrium sustained by the fear of mutual annihilation, SDI promised a future in which nuclear arsenals might be rendered “impotent and obsolete.” The image was of a technological shield extending over the nation, catching or zapping enemy missiles in flight, breaking the iron logic of retaliation.

The rhetoric surrounding SDI drew heavily on moral and even religious language. It portrayed the project as a way to move beyond the “suicide pact” of deterrence, to redeem humanity from the permanent hostage situation created by thermonuclear weapons. This framing resonated with a polity tired of living under the shadow of instant catastrophe. It recast the United States not only as a military superpower, but as a potential savior of the world from nuclear doom, using its unique ingenuity and resources to free everyone from fear.

Yet the proposal’s technical and strategic feasibility was highly contested from the beginning. Critics warned that no shield could be perfect, that countermeasures could overwhelm or deceive defensive systems, and that even a partial defense could destabilize the deterrence balance by tempting first strikes or arms build-ups. In that sense, SDI functioned less as a realistic engineering program and more as a mythic horizon. It was a story about transcendence over vulnerability, a way for a nuclear-weary empire to imagine that it could step outside the logic that bound everyone else.

5.2 Dreams of invulnerability: from SDI to contemporary “Golden Dome” visions

SDI did not produce the space-based laser grid sometimes imagined in popular culture. Over time, many of its specific concepts were scaled back, folded into more modest missile defense efforts, or quietly abandoned. But the deeper impulse it expressed did not disappear. It reappeared in successive efforts to develop national missile defense systems and in recurring political promises of near-total protection against enemy missiles.

Contemporary visions of a “Golden Dome” over the United States, for example, explicitly evoke a comprehensive, almost seamless protective shield. They imagine constellations of satellites linked with advanced sensors and interceptors, coordinated by powerful computers, capable of detecting and neutralizing incoming threats from multiple directions. The metaphor of a dome is telling. It suggests not just interception, but enclosure: the nation as a sanctum under an artificial firmament of security.

These dreams are not confined to one party or figure. They tap into a broader cultural desire for invulnerability in an age where threats can emerge not only from rival superpowers but from smaller states, non-state actors, and even accidental launches. Each technological advance in sensors, computing, and interceptors feeds the hope that this time the shield might finally be good enough. The basic narrative template remains the same as in the SDI era: the United States, uniquely positioned, will use its technological prowess to escape the condition of mutual hostage-taking that defines the rest of the nuclear world.

From a logostic angle, the persistence of these visions across decades reveals a pattern of narrative curvature. The reality of nuclear weapons is that they bind states into a relationship of shared vulnerability. The shield dreams insist that one state might transcend that condition.

When the visions are revived precisely in periods of heightened anxiety or strategic uncertainty, they function as myths at exhaustion: ways of telling a story in which the empire is not trapped in the same dangerous interdependence as everyone else, but poised to rise above it.

5.3 Engineering realities versus political imagery in missile defense

Technically, missile defense is not science fiction. Limited systems exist and have been tested. They can, under some conditions, intercept a small number of ballistic targets. Advances in tracking, guidance, and interceptor technology have made such feats more plausible than in earlier decades. On a small scale, missile defense can protect specific assets or complicate an adversary's planning.

But the leap from limited, probabilistic interception to near-total national protection is enormous. Adversaries can deploy decoys, maneuverable warheads, saturation attacks, and alternative delivery systems such as cruise missiles or non-ballistic trajectories. Space and time constraints make comprehensive coverage extraordinarily challenging. No realistic system can guarantee interception of all possible threats under all conditions. Even a small number of warheads penetrating a shield could cause devastation on a scale that renders claims of "safety" morally and practically hollow.

Despite these constraints, political imagery around missile defense often communicates a sense of completeness. Diagrams show arcs and bubbles covering maps. Speeches speak of making the homeland safe from attack, of building impenetrable walls in the sky. The messy probabilistic nature of interception, the perpetual contest between offensive and defensive innovations, and the possibility of failure are downplayed or omitted. The engineering reality is one of partial mitigation and marginal advantage; the imagery suggests a leap into a new strategic order.

This gap between reality and symbol is where myth does its work. Citizens are not briefed on system reliability curves; they are given images of protection. Legislators are not asked to vote on marginal improvements in survivability; they are asked to support initiatives that promise to "defend America" against existential threats. The more the technical conversation is abstracted into slogans, the more room there is for missile defense to function as a techno-messianic narrative rather than as a sober, limited tool among others.

In logostic terms, this means that the stories told about missile defense risk bending $q(t)$ away from $\tau(t)$. The truth—that vulnerability remains, that offensive innovations can outpace defensive ones, that mutual deterrence still shapes the strategic environment—is obscured by a more emotionally satisfying tale of near-invulnerability. The empire is invited to live as though the shield already exists in full, even when the actual systems are patchy and uncertain.

5.4 The promise of perfect shields as myth of transcendence over vulnerability

The deeper allure of missile defense as myth lies in its promise of transcendence over vulnerability itself. Nuclear weapons are a particularly intense form of vulnerability, but they are also a symbol of a broader condition: humans live in bodies, societies live in ecologies, states live in systems of interdependence. There is no position outside risk. The fantasy of a perfect shield speaks not only to strategic anxieties but to a spiritual impatience with finitude.

In this sense, the techno-messianic shield is a secular analog of religious stories in which a chosen community is protected by a supernatural barrier while chaos rages outside. The difference is that here the protector is not an invisible guardian but the nation's own ingenuity, industry, and will. The shield becomes a sacrament of self-salvation. It tells the empire that it need not accept the same dangerous reciprocity that binds other actors; it can, through sufficient investment and intelligence, occupy a space above the fray.

That promise is tempting precisely when a polity senses that its comparative advantages are eroding. As adversaries develop their own capabilities, as economic and technological leadership becomes more contested, the idea of a domain where supremacy can still be asserted—space, sensors, interceptors—becomes psychologically attractive. The shield narrative says: whatever happens in other arenas, here we can still guarantee security. It offers a stable point in a spinning world.

From the logostic perspective, this is a classic exhaustion myth. Instead of orienting $q(t)$ toward an honest engagement with shared vulnerability and the mutual responsibilities it entails, the myth directs attention to a dreamed-of state in which those responsibilities can be evaded. The shield is less about actual interceptors and more about an imagined exemption from the common human condition. It tells the empire that it need not learn to live with others as equals under risk; it can, with enough hardware, remain uniquely safe.

5.5 What these dreams reveal about imperial fear of mutual dependence

At the core of these techno-messianic visions lies a fear that is not purely strategic. It is the fear of mutual dependence. Nuclear deterrence is a brutal teacher of that dependence. It says, in effect, that your survival depends not only on your own restraint and capabilities but on the restraint and capabilities of others. No amount of unilateral virtue or firepower can entirely free you from that interlocking vulnerability. You are embedded in a web of risk that you did not choose and cannot fully control.

Empires, especially those accustomed to setting rules for others, find this message difficult to accept. The logic of hegemony assumes that the hegemon can, to a significant extent, shape its environment through its own actions. The notion that there is a domain—thermonuclear conflict—in which it is as constrained as anyone else, and in which its power buys no exemption

from shared danger, grates against that self-understanding. Shield myths offer a way to symbolically restore the asymmetry: to imagine a world in which others remain vulnerable while the empire achieves relative invulnerability.

Reading these dreams logistically, they reveal not simply a desire for safety, which is universal, but a specific refusal to accept that safety is now a relational property. They show a reluctance to acknowledge that, in this domain, $\tau(t)$ includes the hard truth of interdependence. Instead of asking what it would mean to build regimes of trust, verification, and restraint equal to the destructive potential of the weapons involved, the polity is encouraged to invest hope in technical fixes that preserve the fantasy of unilateral security.

The irony is that such myths, if believed too deeply, can make everyone less safe. Overconfidence in shields can encourage riskier behavior. The pursuit of systems perceived by adversaries as destabilizing can spur arms races or preemptive strategies. The refusal to internalize mutual dependence can delay the development of shared norms and institutions that might reduce risk for all. In this way, the empire's fear of dependence, encoded in shield narratives, contributes to the very instability it seeks to escape.

For a society that understands itself, at least in some of its spiritual traditions, as composed of eternal beings, the path forward might lie not in ever more elaborate hardware, but in a clearer acceptance of shared vulnerability as a site of moral work. The dream of salvation by technology is understandable, especially at moments of exhaustion and fear. But a truthful alignment of $q(t)$ with $\tau(t)$ in the nuclear age will likely require something more demanding than a dome of satellites. It will require the humility to recognize that there are domains in which no one can be uniquely safe and in which the only real shield is a change in how power is held and used by all.

6. Disclosure at the End of an Era: UFOs, Non-Human Craft, and Cosmic Distraction

6.1 Brief history: UFOs, secrecy, and Cold War misdirection

Unidentified flying objects entered the American imagination at roughly the same moment the United States stepped into global hegemony. In the late 1940s and 1950s, sightings of strange lights and discs in the sky proliferated alongside nuclear tests, jet aircraft, and the construction of a vast security state. Public fascination grew as newspapers and pulp magazines filled with stories of saucers and visitors. At the same time, the military and intelligence agencies quietly took an interest in these reports, partly out of concern that they might mask enemy reconnaissance or reveal vulnerabilities in air defense.

Early official programs cataloged sightings, investigated a fraction of them, and eventually concluded that most had prosaic explanations: weather phenomena, astronomical objects,

aircraft, and misperceptions. A stubborn residue remained unexplained, but the general posture was one of mild dismissal. What matters for this paper is not the ontological status of those residual cases, but the way the subject became entangled with secrecy. As more exotic aircraft and reconnaissance platforms were tested, anomalous sightings became, at times, a convenient cover. Rumors of “something strange in the sky” could be allowed, even encouraged, because they deflected attention from classified hardware.

Thus, from early on, UFOs occupied a liminal space between genuine mystery, public fantasy, and deliberate misdirection. The state’s relationship to the phenomenon was ambivalent. It wanted to know whether there was a threat, but it also found that the culture’s appetite for the uncanny could be used to mask mundane secrets. For an empire constructing a global surveillance and strike network, a layer of ambiguity in the sky had its uses. UFOs became a mirror in which citizens saw either cosmic visitors or government lies, while the actual structure of power and technology evolved behind the haze.

6.2 The new “Age of Disclosure”: documentaries, hearings, and insider testimonies

In the past decade, the UFO subject has been reframed under a new acronym: unidentified aerial phenomena, or later unidentified anomalous phenomena. More important than the change in letters has been the shift in tone. Government reports, leaked videos, and televised hearings have given the impression of a slow-motion revelation. Objects are described as exhibiting unusual performance characteristics. Former officials speak of programs and data previously unknown to the public. The language of “stigma” and “serious investigation” replaces earlier talk of tinfoil hats.

Within this atmosphere, a new ecosystem has emerged. Documentaries, long-form interviews, podcasts, and books present a parade of insiders: pilots, intelligence officers, contractors, and self-described whistleblowers. Some speak cautiously about unknowns in sensor data and gaps in oversight. Others make far more dramatic claims about crash retrievals, non-human craft, and even biological remains. The cumulative effect is a sense that something long hidden is coming to light, that the empire is on the verge of admitting to its citizens that the cosmos is inhabited and that it has been dealing with that fact in secret for decades.

This “Age of Disclosure” is not a formal policy so much as a mood and a marketing frame. The state continues to speak in careful, hedged language, emphasizing the lack of definitive evidence for extraterrestrial origin and the need to protect sensitive capabilities. Media narratives, by contrast, often lean into the more spectacular implications. The result is a hybrid discourse in which cautious official statements and lavish speculative storytelling coexist, feeding one another. For a public already primed by science fiction and decades of rumor, the slightest suggestion from a serious-looking witness can be amplified into cosmic significance.

6.3 Non-human craft, non-human beings, and the performance of insider truth

Central to this new phase are the claims, like the ones you brought into this conversation, that specific individuals with high clearances have personally seen “non-human craft” and “non-human beings.” From a logostic perspective, the content of these claims matters less, initially, than the way they are staged. They are performances of insider truth. The witness sits in a studio or hearing room, framed by institutional symbols, and testifies that they have been present at the edge of a secret reality. Their authority derives not from physical evidence presented to the audience, but from their résumé and affect.

The structure is familiar from other domains. A former official hints at having glimpsed documents, visited facilities, or spoken with people “in the know.” They cannot show the documents, reveal the locations, or name the sources, but they can convey seriousness and conviction. The viewer is invited to trust that someone who has spent a career inside the system would not lightly risk reputation and legal jeopardy to spread fantasies. The gap between what is asserted and what is demonstrable is filled with the weight of institutional credibility.

This performance does not require conscious deception to be effective as myth. Memory is malleable, and highly classified environments are prone to rumor even among those with access. An individual may sincerely believe that what they were told, or briefly shown, reflects an extraordinary reality. They may also be aware that in the current media climate, speaking in certain ways will generate attention, book deals, or political leverage. All of these factors interact to produce the spectacle of revelation: the sense that the empire’s own servants are peeling back a veil.

The key point is that the spectacle itself becomes part of the story the empire tells about its condition. It suggests that, alongside wars, budgets, and scandals, there is a deeper plotline involving contact with non-human intelligence. Whether or not such contact has occurred, the insistence that it has, voiced by seemingly trustworthy figures, reshapes the imaginative landscape. Citizens begin to carry two maps in their heads: one of familiar geopolitics, and another in which unknown beings and technologies hover just outside official acknowledgment.

6.4 Aliens, angels, and assets: reading contact narratives theologically and politically

Contact stories do not arise in a vacuum. They plug into older theological and mythological patterns. For some, non-human craft and beings are essentially updated angels or demons: superior intelligences entering human history, testing, warning, or deceiving. For others, they are advanced civilizations whose technological prowess holds a mirror to our own, inviting us to grow up or perish. In both cases, the narrative structure is eschatological. The presence of the Other is a sign that history is reaching a turning point.

At the same time, these stories have a political dimension. Intelligence agencies and militaries have long used the possibility of exotic threats, whether terrestrial or cosmic, to justify secrecy and expenditures. A crash-retrieval program, real or imagined, provides a rationale for black budgets and special access programs. The idea that adversaries might also be racing to exploit non-human technology feeds a sense of urgency and competition. Even if the underlying phenomena are misunderstood or misrepresented, the belief that they exist can be leveraged to shape policy.

Reading contact narratives through both theological and political lenses reveals their double service to an exhausted empire. Theologically, they offer a way to relocate the meaning of events: wars, crises, and technological upheavals become part of a larger cosmic drama. Politically, they provide a flexible tool for managing information, defending opaque programs, and rallying elites around secret projects. Aliens, angels, and assets overlap. The same story that functions as a quasi-religious sign for one audience may serve as a useful piece of psychological warfare for another.

For a logostic reader, this overlap is not an argument for dismissing all anomalous reports. It is a reminder that, whatever the ultimate ontological status of any particular phenomenon, the narratives built around it are shaped by existing human agendas and archetypes. *q(t)* in a late empire is saturated with both spiritual longing and institutional cunning. Contact stories sit at their intersection.

6.5 Cosmic stories as absorbers of imperial anxiety and failure

What, then, do these disclosure narratives reveal about the state of the American project at this moment? One answer is that they function as absorbers of anxiety. A society facing debt, ecological strain, internal fragmentation, and strategic overextension can find it easier to contemplate alien craft than to confront the full implications of its own trajectory. Cosmic stories diffuse tension upward and outward. Instead of asking why institutions failed in familiar ways, citizens are invited to speculate about exotic technologies and hidden treaties.

This diffusion can even be comforting. If there are non-human craft and beings, then perhaps the chaos of the present is not merely the result of human folly. Perhaps there is a larger plan, a higher intelligence, or a looming revelation that will make sense of events. Even narratives that cast the Others as dangerous can be reassuring in their own way. They suggest that humanity's struggles, and especially the empire's struggles, are part of a grander conflict. Defeats or missteps can be reframed as side effects of operating under conditions that involve forces beyond ordinary politics.

In this sense, cosmic stories extend the same pattern seen with the war on terror and missile defense. When mundane explanations are too painful or too implicating, myth at exhaustion

offers alternatives. Terror becomes an abstract enemy rather than a symptom of complex dynamics. Nuclear vulnerability becomes a problem to be solved by a perfect shield rather than a call to shared restraint. Imperial overreach and policy failure become side notes to a larger saga of managing or concealing contact with non-human intelligences.

From a logostic standpoint, the question is not whether the universe contains other minds. It is whether the stories told about such minds, at this historical moment, help or hinder the alignment of $q(t)$ with $\tau(t)$. If disclosure narratives encourage humility about humanity's place in the cosmos and a willingness to confront the ethical dimensions of technological power, they might serve as partial glimpses of truth. If they are used instead to distract from domestic injustice, to justify secrecy, or to maintain a sense of chosenness in decline, they function as myths at exhaustion.

For citizens who believe themselves to be eternal beings, the temptation is to read every rumor of the non-human as confirmation of a larger spiritual worldview. The more difficult task is to discern when cosmic talk is being used to avoid repentance in the here and now. A tired empire can always find storytellers willing to promise that the real action is elsewhere—in the heavens, in secret labs, in hidden archives. The work of alignment calls for a different kind of story: one that looks unflinchingly at the world that is already revealed and asks what truth and justice require there, before reaching for rescue from the stars.

7. Patterns, Risks, and Alternatives

7.1 Common structure of “myth at exhaustion” across the case studies

Looked at from a distance, the case studies in this paper share a recognizable structure. Each begins with a concrete stress on the imperial system: territorial limits, military defeat, strategic stalemate, or structural vulnerability. The closing of the frontier, the humiliation of Vietnam, the shock of 9/11, the dread of nuclear mutual destruction, and the accumulation of unresolved crises in the present all present the same basic challenge. They reveal that the empire is finite, fragile, and implicated in its own troubles.

At that point, a fork appears. One path would be to let the stress speak plainly: to acknowledge limits, reconsider ambitions, and rework institutions and commitments in light of what has been revealed. The other path is to enfold the stress into a new story that preserves core assumptions. Again and again, the empire chooses the second path. Instead of “we have reached our limits,” the narrative becomes “we have entered a new chapter of our unique mission.” Instead of “our actions helped create these conditions,” the narrative becomes “our virtues are tested by external evil or cosmic strangeness.”

The mechanism is similar whether the mythic object is a frontier, an abstract enemy, a technoshield, or non-human craft. First, the unsettling reality is named in a way that softens its accusatory edge. Then, a larger frame is invoked that makes the current stress evidence of chosenness rather than of error. Finally, symbols and rituals are developed to embed this new understanding in everyday life: maps and slogans, ceremonies and media, expert testimonies and cinematic images. The raw facts do not disappear, but they are bent into an arc that leads back to the empire's self-conception as necessary, innocent, or salvific.

From a logostic standpoint, this pattern can be described as a systematic way of curving perception. $q(t)$ presents the empire with signals that its trajectory is unsustainable: overstretched forces, disillusioned citizens, unstable deterrence, corrupted institutions. Myth at exhaustion catches those signals before they can fully register and routes them through a story in which the main message is not "change" but "endure." The result is continuity of identity at the price of clarity.

7.2 How myth can sustain a polity and how it can deform it

Myth is not inherently harmful. Human communities require shared stories to function at all. Without some narrative of origin and purpose, there is no basis for solidarity, sacrifice, or hope. Myth can sustain a polity in hard times by reminding people of genuine achievements, of past recoveries from crisis, and of moral commitments that transcend immediate interests. It can give language to grief and courage in the face of danger. A purely technocratic or cynical politics, stripped of all mythic dimension, leaves citizens hungry for meaning and prone to embrace far worse narratives when they appear.

The case studies in this paper also show myth at its sustaining best, at least in earlier phases. The image of a covenant community under judgment, for example, warns against complacency and calls for care of the vulnerable. The frontier, if remembered truthfully, can highlight resourcefulness and the willingness to start anew under difficult conditions. Even the language of defending others from tyranny can, in some circumstances, reflect real acts of solidarity. Myth, in these forms, can help align $q(t)$ toward $\tau(t)$ by lifting attention beyond short-term gain.

The deformation begins when myth is asked to do work it cannot rightly do. When stories of chosenness are used to deny the possibility of deep error, when narratives of mission are deployed to anesthetize trauma rather than to process it, when symbols of protection are used to avoid acknowledging mutual vulnerability, myth becomes a barrier to truth. It no longer invites the polity to live up to a calling; it assures the polity that the calling is already fulfilled, regardless of conduct. It no longer warns that judgment will fall if the covenant is betrayed; it guarantees that, whatever happens, identity is secure.

In such conditions, myth can sustain the surface of a polity while hollowing out its interior. Citizens continue to say the right phrases and enact familiar rituals, but trust frays and reality intrudes in ways the stories cannot absorb. Disillusionment grows, not because myth existed, but because myth was misused. A narrative that once tied the community to a demanding standard has been repurposed to shield it from self-knowledge. The very tools that could have supported repentance and reform are turned into instruments of denial.

7.3 The danger of mistaking q -stories for τ : when narrative replaces repentance

Within the logostic framework, q -stories are the narratives a community tells about its own state: where it came from, what it is doing, and why. τ , by contrast, is not a story but living truth: the structure of reality, including moral reality, as it actually stands before any human interpretation. There will always be some gap between q -stories and τ . The danger arises when that gap is denied, when the community takes its stories to be identical with the truth.

In the context of an exhausted empire, this confusion is especially tempting. The more evidence accumulates that core assumptions are failing, the more attractive it is to insist that the problem lies with perception, not with the assumptions themselves. If the frontier is always open somewhere, if the city on a hill always shines, if the war on terror always expresses the best of the nation, if technology is always on the verge of saving everyone, if contact with others always validates hidden greatness, then the empire's narrative can remain intact even as its material and moral position deteriorates.

When q -stories are mistaken for τ , repentance becomes nearly impossible. To repent is to accept that one's prior understanding was incomplete or distorted and that one's actions fell short of what was required. It presupposes that there is a standard outside the story that can correct it. If, instead, the story itself is treated as the ultimate reference point, any contrary evidence can be dismissed as misunderstanding, malice, or temporary setback. The only change demanded is a deeper return to the narrative, not a reconsideration of the underlying trajectory.

This dynamic shows up in the refusal to reinterpret painful episodes. Defeats become tests, not warnings. Scandals become aberrations, not symptoms. Long wars become proofs of endurance, not signs of misjudgment. Exotic possibilities, such as hidden craft or cosmic plots, are folded in as confirmation that the empire operates in extraordinary conditions. In each case, an opportunity for aligning $q(t)$ with $\tau(t)$ through confession and reform is lost. Narrative replaces repentance.

7.4 What truthful imperial sunset might require: limits, confession, and repair

If myth at exhaustion is a way of postponing reckoning, what might a more truthful imperial sunset require? The question is delicate, because it touches not only on policy but on identity.

No empire has ever gracefully stepped down from its position by simple choice. Yet if one imagines, even hypothetically, a polity willing to align more closely with $\tau(t)$ as its hegemony wanes, certain elements seem unavoidable.

First, it would require an acceptance of limits. This is not only a strategic calculation, but a moral posture. It means acknowledging that the empire cannot and should not attempt to manage every crisis, shape every region, or prevent every change that threatens its relative standing. It would involve a deliberate scaling back of ambitions, a reduction of foreign entanglements, and a reorientation of resources toward repair of domestic fractures and global goods that do not presume dominance.

Second, it would require confession. Not theatrical self-accusation for its own sake, but specific acknowledgment of harms done: wars launched on false premises, coups supported for narrow interests, economic policies that enriched some at the expense of others, environmental damages exported to weaker regions. Such confession would have to be more than rhetorical. It would need to inform policy changes, compensation, and institutional reforms. The point would not be to wallow in guilt, but to clear space for more trustworthy relationships.

Third, it would require repair. Repair is not possible in every case; some harms are irreversible. But where it is possible, it demands imagination and persistence. It might involve restructuring international institutions to give other voices more weight, reducing military footprints, forgiving or restructuring debts, supporting local initiatives without controlling them, and making binding commitments to shared constraints, for example in arms control or climate agreements. Repair recognizes that the empire has benefited from systems that were not neutral and seeks, as far as possible, to leave the world less distorted by those systems.

Myth still has a role in such a sunset. The stories would not be of eternal centrality, but of a polity that chose, in its late phase, to act with unusual honesty. The narrative might recall genuine achievements in science, art, and human rights, while also owning the costs at which they came. It could imagine a future in which the empire is remembered not only for its power but for the way it let go. Whether any actual polity can live up to such a script is uncertain. The logostic point is that such a script exists as an alternative to the familiar arc of denial and sudden collapse.

7.5 Eternal beings in temporal empires: a brief Christian-logostic meditation

Behind the analysis of myths and empires lies a question about the beings who inhabit them. If humans understand themselves as more than temporary agents of political formations—if they see themselves as, in some sense, eternal—then the stakes of aligning with $\tau(t)$ extend beyond the lifespan of any state. The logostic language of $q(t)$ and $\tau(t)$ can be brought into conversation

with the Christian conviction that truth is personal, that it is ultimately grounded in a Logos in whom all things hold together.

From that vantage point, empires are passing arrangements. They rise, perform their roles, and fall. They can be instruments of relative order or of immense harm, often both. Their myths can dim or clarify the perception of the deeper truth in which all history unfolds. For citizens who belong to such an empire but do not ultimately belong to it, the question is not only how to evaluate its narratives, but how to live within them without being captured by them.

A Christian-logostic meditation on myth at exhaustion would begin by insisting that $\tau(t)$ is not reducible to national stories. It would remember that, in the language of the Beatitudes, blessing falls on the poor in spirit, the meek, the peacemakers, and those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, not on the confident, the invulnerable, or the triumphant. It would see in the empire's fear of limits a distorted echo of the more profound truth that creatures are finite and dependent. It would read shield fantasies and cosmic distractions as symptoms of a deeper refusal to trust the One who holds both vulnerability and judgment.

Such a meditation would also carry an invitation. Eternal beings living in temporal empires are called, within this frame, to side with $\tau(t)$ even when it cuts across the comforting myths of their time. That might mean resisting narratives that dehumanize enemies, questioning sacralized versions of national history, or refusing to treat technological power as a substitute for moral conversion. It might mean insisting that repentance is possible not only for individuals but for institutions and nations, and that such repentance is more honorable than clinging to illusions of exceptional innocence.

In the end, myth at exhaustion is a spiritual as much as a political phenomenon. It is what happens when a powerful community, sensing its own fragility, tries to secure itself by inflating its stories rather than opening itself to correction. A logostic and Christian reading will not be surprised to find this pattern recurring. But it will also hold that another path is always present: the path in which truth, however costly, is preferred to flattering fiction, and in which the measure of a life is not whether one's empire endured, but whether one's $q(t)$ bent, however imperfectly, toward $\tau(t)$ while there was still time.

8. Conclusion: Living Without Magic Shields

8.1 Summary of the argument and its claims

This paper has traced a pattern it has called "myth at exhaustion" in the recent history of the American empire. The core claim is simple: when a hegemon encounters structural limits, humiliations, or unfixable vulnerabilities, it often responds not by scaling down its ambitions or

confessing its mistakes, but by reaching for larger, more cosmic stories about itself. Those stories do real work. They bind citizens, soothe fear, and preserve a sense of mission. They also bend perception away from what truth and justice might require.

The early sections set the frame. Empire was treated structurally, as a durable asymmetry of power and influence, and myth was understood as narrative infrastructure rather than mere fiction. Exhaustion was described not as collapse, but as the condition in which immense capacities no longer reliably yield desired outcomes. Within a logostic vocabulary, $q(t)$ named the real collective state of the polity, while $\tau(t)$ named living truth: the structure of what is actually the case and what is morally required. Myth, in this language, is narrative curvature: it can help $q(t)$ move toward $\tau(t)$ or bend it away.

The case studies then showed how that curvature operates. The transformation of Winthrop's warning into a boast, the transposition of frontier energy into overseas expansion, and the late twentieth-century revival of "shining city on a hill" rhetoric after Vietnam illustrated early forms of exceptionalist analgesic. The post-9/11 construction of a "war on terror," the moral cover stories surrounding long wars, and the domestic rituals of perpetual remembrance showed how an exhausted superpower found purpose in an unending moral crusade. The Strategic Defense Initiative and subsequent "Golden Dome" visions revealed a techno-messianic longing for salvation by hardware, a refusal to accept nuclear mutual dependence. Finally, the new "Age of Disclosure" around unidentified anomalous phenomena showed how cosmic narratives about non-human craft and beings can absorb imperial anxiety and provide meaning at a moment of internal strain.

Across these examples, the same structure appeared: real strains in $q(t)$ are met with myths that preserve a flattering self-understanding, often at the cost of deeper alignment with $\tau(t)$. The result is a polity that can feel noble and central even as its actual conduct and condition drift further from what truth and justice demand.

8.2 Facing finitude without chosenness fantasies or cosmic distractions

If that diagnosis is broadly correct, the next question is whether another response is possible. What would it mean for a late empire to face its finitude without retreating into fantasies of permanent chosenness or distractions about cosmic secrets? The answer is not a demand for pure disenchantment. Humans need meaning; societies need shared stories. The alternative is not the abolition of myth but its reformation.

Facing finitude begins with accepting that no polity, however powerful, is exempt from limits. Strategic, economic, ecological, and moral constraints are not temporary obstacles to be "broken through" by sufficient will, faith, or innovation. They are part of the structure of creaturely life. A state that has projected power across continents may find this discovery

humiliating. Yet from a logostic viewpoint, this is precisely where alignment begins: with the admission that $q(t)$ is not sovereign and that $\tau(t)$ cannot be rewritten by decree.

Letting go of chosenness fantasies does not mean denying the specificity of a nation's history or the real goods it has produced. It means refusing to treat those goods as evidence of permanent elevation above others. It means telling stories in which achievements and atrocities appear side by side, without one cancelling the other, and in which the moral status of the community remains contingent rather than guaranteed. It also means ceasing to treat every new challenge as confirmation that the nation is uniquely persecuted or tested for a higher role.

Resisting cosmic distractions does not require a final verdict on the existence of non-human intelligences. It requires recognizing when speculation about them is being used to avoid more urgent responsibilities. The question, from a logostic perspective, is not whether there are other beings in the universe, but whether talk about them in this moment helps or hinders the work of confession, repair, and restraint. If the stories draw attention away from the immediate demands of justice among humans, they function as myths at exhaustion, regardless of their eventual factual status.

In short, living without magic shields—technological, theological, or extraterrestrial—means consenting to live under the same conditions as everyone else: finite, vulnerable, accountable. For an empire formed by stories of special destiny, this is a hard conversion.

8.3 Implications for citizens, churches, and dissident networks

The work of resisting myths at exhaustion does not fall only on governments. It falls especially on those who still care about truth more than comfort. Three groups, among others, have particular responsibilities: citizens, churches, and dissident networks.

For citizens, the implication is that politics cannot be left entirely to elites and algorithms. Citizens can choose what stories they amplify, what metaphors they accept, and which spectacles they treat as serious. They can refuse to let slogans like “city on a hill” or “war on terror” do unexamined work in their imaginations. They can insist on connecting policies and events to concrete realities rather than to vague abstractions. They can cultivate habits of attention that prioritize documented harms over glamorous narratives, and they can reward leaders who tell harder truths over those who offer flattering fantasies.

For churches, especially those shaped by Christian scripture, the implications cut deeper. Churches are custodians of a story in which empires rise and fall, in which the proud are scattered in the imagination of their hearts, and in which blessing often appears far from the centers of power. If churches surrender to imperial myths, treating their own nation as uniquely favored or sacred, they betray that story. If they instead offer a counter-myth in which repentance, care for the least, and skeptical distance from state power are central, they can

help loosen the grip of exhaustion myths on their communities. They can remind believers that their primary citizenship is not in any temporal empire, and that alignment with $\tau(t)$ may require saying no to narratives that make the nation feel good about itself while others suffer.

Dissident networks—journalists, scholars, activists, local organizers, and increasingly, small communities using digital tools to think together—carry a complementary task. They can map the actual structure of $q(t)$ more honestly than official narratives do, documenting the ways in which wars, economic arrangements, and surveillance systems work in practice. They can trace how myths operate, showing where stories diverge from measurable realities. They can also experiment with alternative narratives that do not simply invert imperial myths, but move beyond them: stories of shared vulnerability, mutual aid, and post-hegemonic cooperation.

All three groups face temptations. Citizens may prefer to retreat into private life or entertain themselves with illusions. Churches may choose the comfort of civil religion over the risk of prophetic speech. Dissident networks may slide into cynicism or counter-myths that are just as detached from $\tau(t)$ as the official ones. The work of living without magic shields is demanding. It requires a patience and courage that are themselves rare.

8.4 Final reflection: how to tell honest stories at the end of an age

If this is, in some sense, the end of an age for the American empire—whether abrupt or slow—the question is no longer whether the familiar myths can be preserved. They cannot, at least not without increasing dissonance. The question is what will replace them. Collapse, if it comes, will supply its own ugly narratives: betrayal myths, purity myths, nostalgia myths, and myths of justified vengeance. The task for those who care about alignment is to prepare other stories in advance.

Honest stories at the end of an age will have several features. They will be specific. They will name particular decisions, structures, and habits that led to the present state, without collapsing everything into vague civilizational decline. They will be humble. They will resist the urge to cast any one group as purely villainous or purely virtuous, recognizing shared complicity alongside real differences in responsibility. They will be universal. They will frame the empire's experience as one instance of a recurring human pattern rather than as an unprecedented tragedy or unique drama.

Such stories will also be hopeful, but not in the usual way. They will not promise restoration of lost dominance or abrupt rescue by technology or outsiders. They will hope instead for deeper alignment of $q(t)$ with $\tau(t)$ across multiple scales: individual, communal, national, and planetary. They will imagine futures in which the end of one empire is not the end of meaning, and in which the painful recognition of limits becomes the beginning of a more honest, shared life.

From a Christian-logostic perspective, the basic conviction underpinning such stories is that $\tau(t)$ is not exhausted by the rise and fall of any state. The Logos does not stand or fall with American power. Eternal beings live through multiple dispensations of politics. Their ultimate safety does not depend on missile shields or secret programs. What matters, finally, is not whether their empire found ways to extend its centrality, but whether they themselves learned, within its myths and against them, to bend toward truth.

Living without magic shields is not a call to despair. It is an invitation to sobriety. It suggests that the most genuinely hopeful act an exhausted empire can perform is not to promise that it will somehow go on forever, or that it will be rescued by hardware or visitors, but to show that even in decline it can choose truth over self-flattery, confession over denial, and repair over distraction. If such choices are made, they will themselves become part of a new myth—not of exceptional innocence, but of late honesty. That is a story worth telling, and perhaps, in the long memory of $\tau(t)$, one that will matter more than the bright illusions that preceded it.

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