

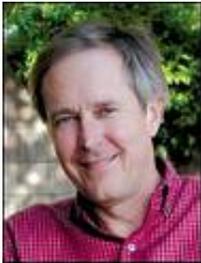


How Can America Rise Again?

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James Fallows

James Fallows has an interesting article called "[How Can America Rise Again?](#)" in the latest issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. It is a long article, but it is worth the time. He recounts that throughout our history Americans repeatedly have worried that the country is in serious decline. This "declinism" is a longstanding part of our culture that has spurred us to innovative action—in other words, it is one of the reasons we haven't declined. Beginning with Sputnik this cultural tendency has taken the form of concerns that we are falling behind some other country. The focus of our worries today often is China.

Fallows writes that we shouldn't worry about China's advantages that are related to size and scale. There is nothing we can do about them anyway—one day it will have the largest economy in the world. The more important question is whether America is "falling short" of our own expectations—or even falling apart. Fallows argues that American culture has strengths that will drive future industries and technologies, including "flexibility, openness, reinvention, [and] 'crowdsourcing.'" He concludes that "[t]he simplest measure of whether a culture is dominant is whether outsiders want to be part of it." For Fallows, our advantage depends on two specific policies that "are the absolute pillars of American strength: continued openness to immigration, and a continue concentration of universities that people around the world want to attend."

Fallows recognizes that we face serious challenges—jobs, debt, military strength, and independence. He believes that America has the ability to address nearly any of our structural weaknesses and that our "society is in fine shape." The problem is that "a vital and self-renewing culture that attracts the world's talent, and a governing system that increasingly looks like a joke." Fallows outlines how government has not adapted to changing conditions and contends that "rigid



institutions inevitably fail.” After discussing a range of options for improving our government, he concludes that we must find ways to work “within its flaws and limits” as “the bravest and best choice for us now.”

This article offers a broad context for thinking about many of the national policy issues that we are facing. Fallows worked in the Carter Administration and his focus is on federal government and state government—though to a lesser extent. I worry about the same kind of institutional failures trickling down to city and county government, and there is evidence that it is happening. Our challenge as a School is to think hard about whether there is anything we can do to make a difference in North Carolina government. Can we be a partner in helping state and local government in this state adapt to meet changing conditions? This will require a great deal of creativity. Along with a number of our colleagues, I’m attending the Emerging Issues Forum in Raleigh this week. Luckily the theme of the conference is Creativity, Inc.