

# Chicago Tribune

## 'America in decline' denial

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Is America in decline? No way, says President Barack Obama, proudly speaking of our standing overseas. But some grim new reports on our educational gaps remind us that decline is like charity — it begins at home.

Two new reports on educational achievement gaps reveal a surprising good news/bad news story: The gap between black and white students mercifully has shrunk, but the gap between rich and poor has dangerously grown.

The test score gap between the richest 10 percent and poorest 10 percent of students has grown by about 40 percent since the 1960s, according to a study by Stanford University sociologist Sean F. Reardon. That's twice the testing gap between blacks and whites, which shrunk significantly in all income levels, he said.

A separate study by University of Michigan researchers found the gap between students from rich and poor families in college completion also grew by about 50 percent since the late 1980s.

No wonder there's so much apocalyptic talk these days about the nation's future. We are emerging, thanks to the hard-won victories of the civil rights movement, out of an old order in which race was almost all you needed to know to forecast how well a young American was going to do in life. But we're beginning to slip below some European countries into a new caste system defined by family income.

For example, out of 55 countries in an Urban Institute study of countries that succeed in improving academic achievement of low-income children, the U.S. ranked 36th, according to the Education Trust, a nonprofit that focuses on closing the gap.

"The black-white achievement gap is a terrible travesty in this country," Amy Wilkins, an Education Trust vice president told NPR's "Talk of the Nation" after the latest university studies were released. But now, she said, "We have to pay as much attention to the income gap as we have to the race gap."

Obama predictably accentuates the positive about our stature in the world. "America is back," he said in his State of the Union address. "Anyone who tells you that America is in decline or that our influence has waned, doesn't know what they're talking about." But at a time when polls are finding a majority of Americans think our nation is in decline and that the next generation will be worse off than this one, it is not just our diplomatic influence that might be slipping.

The president, according to news reports, has read neoconservative historian Robert Kagan's recent essay in *The New Republic*, which addresses "the myth of American decline." I was reading a less sunny assessment, "How the West Was Lost: Fifty Years of Economic Folly and the Stark Choices Ahead," by Dambisa Moyo.

The Oxford- and Harvard-educated Moyo, born and raised in Zambia, is a former World Bank consultant and investment banker whose best-seller, "Dead Aid," caused a big stir by questioning the way postwar development policy, some of it inspired by star entertainers like Bono, had actually made poverty worse by pushing more charity than economic development.

Her new book, first published last year in Great Britain, turns her sights on how the U.S. and the rest of the West "have seen their wealth and dominant political position decline to the point where, today, they are about to forfeit all they have strived for — economic, military and political global supremacy."

We have managed to alienate the emerging countries with whom we now compete — from China to Abu Dhabi, she says. Among other problems, we have invested much more of our resources in the older generations of workers and retirees than in educating our children — while other developing nations are striving to catch up.

Where, we are left to ask, will "cold fusion" or the "next killer app" or other scientific and technological breakthroughs come from? Perhaps we need a new version of President Dwight Eisenhower's push for the 1958 National Defense Education Act after the Russians launched Sputnik. It emphasized foreign languages, science and gifted children. We need a new focus to make the American dream of educational achievement and upward mobility work for everybody, regardless of family income.

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