The basis for this essay began some years ago after a brief visit to the modern Republic of Turkey and my fascination with the Ottoman Empire. It got me thinking about how empires come and go, including our own. Quite recently, my understanding has evolved with the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the potential implications for the rest of the world.

My journey to better understand the world’s dynasties begins in suburban New York, where I grew up enjoying an occasional trip to New York City to see a Broadway show. New York was crime-ridden, dirty and literally on fire as slumlords burned their apartment buildings in the Bronx for insurance proceeds. I was fortunate to accompany my father on visits to his overseas clients. His practice involved maritime law disputes, typically occurring in international waters. My fascination with other cultures surely came in part from our family dinner conversations about my father’s visits to Moscow, London, Amsterdam, and Tokyo, where disputes were mediated. This was during the Cold War, so I remember the FBI visiting our neighbors to make sure my dad was representing American interests and not the Soviets.

My favorite trip as a teenager was to Hong Kong, where I visited the New Territories as my father worked. I’m sure the vendors at the outdoor market had good dinner table conversation with their families about the tall red-headed blue-eyed teenager wandering aimlessly through their stalls. At that time, Hong Kong was a capitalist enclave of the British Empire and the neighboring Chinese territory was clearly under communist rule. I did not learn any Mandarin that year but gained an appreciation for authentic Chinese food.

I attended Colgate University in snowy Central New York, in the hopes of furthering my running career. While there was limited athletic success, I gained a degree in International Relations, intending to become an Ambassador to a major European power after a few short years in the foreign service. This was still during the Cold War with plenty of political intrigue but limited military incursions. My very practical academic advisor explained that, despite his best efforts, my future as an ambassador would take much more than hard work and a Colgate degree. Nonetheless, I gained valuable experience as student in Germany. This included weeks in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, which were then behind the “iron curtain”. As official guests of those countries, we were chaperoned to important historical sites and fed propaganda from the Soviet-backed governments. Perhaps more importantly, we met with other local college students for evenings of beer-drinking and debate over Russia’s involvement in Afghanistan and the U.S. engagement in Nicaragua. None of us at that time could have guessed that the U.S. would replace the Russians in Afghanistan with similar failure. Our tourist expeditions that Spring were slightly curtailed due to the accident at the Soviet nuclear reactor in Chernobyl, Ukraine. I recall a shift in our Spring break plans from Greece to Italy, so we could avoid radiation fallout on the beaches.

After college, I started with an international insurance firm in New York City, but found international insurance to be archaic and bureaucratic. I moved on to more exhilarating aspects of domestic insurance and later started a family in the Midwest. We had zero exotic travel and paid little attention to the rest of the world. I traveled for work to financial centers but did not bring the family. Our dinner conversations were rarely of other cultures. Nonetheless, my eldest daughter had wanderlust beyond the borders of Bexley. Meghan excelled in school and thought she could do even better at a boarding school in Switzerland, perhaps something that resembled Harry Potter’s. This was not an option for my children, but Meghan persisted in her travel plans.

Meghan ultimately found relief in the Rotary Club’s international exchange program and so we began her plans for a gap year after high school. She was mostly interested in a European experience and asked to rank a few countries where she might wish to spend a year. Much to my surprise, she was selected for Turkey and quickly sought a local instructor for a crash course in the language that has no connection to any other. Turkish is on the oddball branch of the language tree, the “all other” group, along with Finnish and Hungarian. Meghan found Mufit in the Short North at a boutique called Karavan. Mufit taught her the language and how to drink real tea in the shop on Sunday mornings.

Meghan left Columbus alone in 2014 and eventually arrived in Bolu, Turkey, a city I would describe as the Columbus of Turkey. It was prosperous university town between major cities of Istanbul and Ankara, with far fewer tourists than the seaside resorts. She attended college classes and made the most of travel around the country with other Rotary club kids and her host families. She wisely neglected to tell us of her travels near the Syrian border, which at the time was flooded with refugees and the Turkish military. American military personnel stationed near the Syrian border were not allowed to travel off base. My child’s adventures across Turkey amazed me, even more so when she became our tour guide the following summer.

We arranged for a two-week tour of the country, led by Meghan, who arranged all hotels, restaurants, and historical tours. I drove a nine-passenger van (with a stick shift) to accommodate the family and two grandparents. Quickly, I realized that the recent American dominance as a world super-power was not something that the Turkish people thought about regularly.

We started in Istanbul, a wealthy, secular, and modern city with many visitors from around the world. There were even 7 outlets of Columbus’ own Victoria’s Secret. We hired a local history teacher as a tour guide for the Istanbul leg of our journey and stayed within a 5-minute walk of the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sofia. The only reference to American culture (other than retail shops) was by a rug merchant named Metin, who promised he was friends with Rick Steves, the American travel writer. I still get calls from Metin as recently as last week. He is convinced I need another Turkish rug.

In addition to the Ottoman history, our tour guide Semih was particularly proud of olive oil and the trees that have been supplying much of the world for centuries (except for the United States) He claimed that Greek olive oil that we used was inferior, watered down, and from immature trees. Moreover, organized crime in Italy controlled the American olive oil trade. My dream of becoming a Turkish oil importer and international jetsetter quickly faded after learning the connections needed to distribute in the U.S.

Our tour included the Grand Bazaar, which houses 4000 shops. Founded in 1456, it has as many as 90 million visitors in a year, exceeding even Easton Town Center in Columbus at least for now. And there is no parking!

At the time of my travel to Turkey, I was not aware of the reputation for scholarly work occurring at The Ohio State University beginning in the 1930’s. Last year, Distinguished Scholar Jane Hathaway introduced Professor Amy Singer of Brandeis who provided a lecture at Ohio State on Turkish History. In 1935, Sidney Fisher began teaching Turkish History at The Ohio State University, less than 20 years after the birth of modern Turkey. Dr Singer’s lecture informed my essay and made me realize that many great dynasties have survived in another form.

Edirne was the actual founding city of the Ottoman Empire in the early 1400’s, prior to the conquest of Constantinople in 1453. The Ottomans rebuild that city as their capital for a global dynasty which expanded quickly during the next century. Greece, Croatia, and Bulgaria were included in the empire and its bureaucracy and taxation system.

Constantinople was previously a Byzantine capital, but a confluence of events caused the territory to shrink. This included a pandemic in 1347 which we call the Black Plague. We now can only imagine the effects of a pandemic without the benefit of modern medicine! With the sacking of Constantinople, the 1000-year-old Byzantine Empire ended.

The Ottoman Empire was one of the mightiest and longest-lasting empires in world history. It lasted as a true dynasty until 1920. Historians now regard the empire as a great source of stability and security, as well as achievements in art, science, religion, and culture. By 1517, the Empire included Syria, Arabia, Palestine, and Egypt. At its height, the Ottomans Empire ruled Hungary, Greece, and parts of North Africa. There was a total of 36 rulers, many of whom lived in the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. The Ottomans have been credited with inventing surgical instruments including the scalpel, forceps, and catheters. Mechanical alarms clock and a smallpox vaccine were also Ottoman.

The Empire began to lose dominance to Europe, along with new trading powerhouses in America and India. By 1913, nearly all European territory had been lost. The Ottoman rulers began to lose control, resulting in massacre of its own people. In 1915, many scholars believe that 1.5 million Armenians were massacred. To this day, it is illegal to speak of the Armenian genocide in Turkey.

Other cultures preceded the Byzantines before the Ottomans ruled Turkey. The Greeks colonized Ephesus in the 10th century BC and ultimately built a theater capable of holding 24,000 spectators. While not as large as Ohio Stadium, that theater survives. The city is now designated one of the 7 wonders of the Ancient World. Another ancient city, Hierapolis, was destroyed by an earthquake. Later, Philip the Apostle lived and died in the city. The Virgin Mary supposedly lived near Ephesus and her home has been visited by several popes.

Our journey led us to Izmir, Fethiye, and Antalya (where President Obama and other world leaders subsequently met in 2016). At each of the resort towns we were fortunate to eat local food and sleep at small inns. Nearly every day, when Meghan explained we were American, and innkeepers would ask why there are no American tourists in Turkey. Given the beauty, history, cuisine, and climate, I had no idea. The Brits, Germans, Russians, and Ukrainians seemed to be the most common tourists in 2015.

From the coast, we headed North toward Bolu and were stopped for a routine check of car registration and insurance. The police officer, speaking through my interpreter daughter, could not understand which country produced my driver’s license. He had never seen the Ohio state flag or even heard of Ohio. Imagine another country issuing a driver’s license without the country’s name or flag! Such is our own American dynasty in the year 2022.

My fascination with current Turkish culture and history really took hold while visiting Meghan’s friends and their families in Bolu. In each home, there was a shrine to the founder of modern Turkey. It reminded me of similar reverence of John F. Kennedy in Irish Catholic houses on Long Island as a kid. Ataturk (legally now known as “Father of the Turks”) created the Republic in 1923. He abolished the veil, turban, and fez, and attempted to bring the country up to speed by wearing bowler hats. The written language was Latinized, and the government secularized. Women could vote. He died in 1938, and regular families still devote a part of their home to him more than 80 years later. To this day, there remains a law in Turkey which outlaws insults to his memory and destruction of objects representing him. His death is commemorated each year with a moment of silence.

During our 2015 visit, President Erdogan had been in that position for 2 years. Previously he was Prime Minister for 9 years and mayor of Istanbul for 4. During our visit, he was already known for crackdowns on the press and social media. Since that time, his rule has been known for authoritarianism and censorship. In 2017, eighteen amendments were made to the Constitution and the Supreme Court was reorganized. The currency and debt crisis of 2018 led to popular unrest ever since then.

One of the current ways Erdogan controls the country is through judicial appointments. Just last year, Professor Asli Bali presented to OSU’s Center for Historical Research. She requested no recording of her presentation, so my summary of her findings is from other sources. Recall that in 2016, there was an attempted coup in Turkey. There were 3 successful coups in Turkey between 1960 and 1980. Erdogan blamed a U.S.-based cleric, Fethullah Gulen, and subsequently purged his supporters. More than 91,000 people have been jailed in the last 4 years, and 150,000 sacked from their government jobs over alleged ties to Gulen. Importantly, 3,900 judges and prosecutors had been fired and 500 jailed. At least 9,000 new judges have been hired since the coup attempt. Currently 45% of the 21,000 judges and prosecutors have less than 3 years of experience. The average age of judges in some provinces is 25!

Inflation in Turkey was at a 20-year high in February of this year, at 54%. The Turkish Lira has lost 47% of its value in 2021 alone. If you are planning a Mediterranean vacation this year, I’d suggest there is good value. I thought so in 2015, when one Lira was worth 35 US cents. Today that same Lira is 7 cents. Last year, the minimum wage was increased by 50%, which is barely keeping up with inflation. Keep in mind, much of this data preceded the war in Ukraine and the inflation currently facing the U.S. and elsewhere. Erdogan fired the head of statistics last month, so don’t expect more bad news from that department. Tourism makes up 13% of Turkey’s economy, so it may indeed help the country out of its current economic death spiral.

I believe that this economic crisis had caused a significant decline in Erdogan’s popularity. His party lost local elections in the 2 biggest cities. The current account deficit is one of the largest in the world. As with many authoritarian leaders, Erdogan has reportedly stashed a fortune in other countries and with close relatives. I imagine he knows the end of his rule is near. He recently completed a government palace in Ankara with 1000 rooms. The White Palace is among the largest in the world. Imagine how the citizens of Ankara feel about such an investment.

Erdogan developed a new Presidential system in 2018, giving him overarching powers which he believes will keep him in power through the centennial celebration of modern Turkey in 2023. He will have been the longest-ruling leader of the New Republic.

On March 6th of this year, President Erdogan met by phone with Vladimir Putin. Erdogan considers Putin a friend, and Turkey hosts millions of Russian tourists every year. Nonetheless, Turkish drones remain an effective and profitable weapon in Ukrainian efforts to fight the Russian military forces. Turkey has declared the conflict a “war”, which allows it to close the key waterways to warships under provisions of the 1936 Montreux Convention. Russia already moved six warships and a submarine into the Black Sea prior to the invasion. They might have enough supplies for 2-3 months. In addition to Russia and the Ukraine, and Turkey, the Black Sea’s coastline includes Romania, Bulgaria, and Georgia. Every vessel must pass through the narrow Bosporus Straights.

What I discovered in my research of the Ottomans and Turkey is that a vast and modern European country remains. It became a modern European culture after decades of stagnation by conservative emperors. One charismatic leader, Ataturk, captivated a country with democratic and means. A grateful nation still remembers his “fatherhood” but there is now a new charismatic leader. Erdogan made early economic advances but has recently created a judicial-legal bureaucracy to maintain his power as the well-being of Turks’ decline. His system has recently shown resistance, not just among the ethnic minorities, but among the largest cities of Istanbul (where he was Mayor) and Ankara.

I ask what happens to an affluent empire once it is clearly no longer such. A decade ago, Emma Marriott published “The History of the World in Bite-Sized Chunks.” She describes the last 5000 years of dynasties in 180 pages, ending with World War II. The Ottoman Empire consumes all of 2 pages. How many pages will be devoted to the American Dynasty in the next edition?

At the beginning of my research, I did not contemplate the current situation in Russia. But now as we look at Turkey’s situation, I cannot help but consider the fate of nearby Ukraine, one of the largest European nations, and the million Ukrainian refugees in Poland and elsewhere. Perhaps the bigger question is what will happen to the Russian people under autocrat Vladimir Putin. Will economic sanctions cause the Russian people to overthrow their ruler?

Closer to home, I still think of the United States as the last remaining Superpower when not too long ago there were two Superpowers. Growing up in the Seventies, I still remember preparing for a nuclear attack by crouching in the hallway of the elementary school with our hands covering our heads.

I am not ready to declare the end of the American Century, as we are fortunate to still have great wealth, democratic elections, and (at least for now), the world’s best talent flocking to our shores. I can’t help but think of the Ottoman Empire and its demise. Now 100 years into the Modern Turkish era, an autocrat has rigged the judicial system and created a kleptocracy. His reign will come to an end soon enough as the economic collapse requires a new regime. Erdogan and his sons will find a new country to reside in and spend their millions. Or perhaps the world will learn from Vladimir Putin’s recent pillaging of Russia and create a global financial system that discourages massive wealth transfer to political leaders.

I hope that our children and grandchildren will benefit from the American democracy as we have in the 21st century. More immediately, I pray that the people of Ukraine survive the war with Russia and autocrats such as Putin and Erdogan are quickly removed through peaceful elections.