

## The Empire That Won't Go Away

PRESIDENT AND EMPEROR, America and Rome—the comparison is by now so familiar, so natural, that you just can't help yourself: it comes to mind unbidden, in the reflexive way that the behavior of chimps reminds you of the behavior of people. Is it really ourselves we see? Everyone gets it whenever a comparison of Rome and America is drawn—for instance, in offhand references to welfare and televised sports as “bread and circuses,” or to illegal immigrants as “barbarian hordes.” We all understand what's meant by the thumbs-down sign—*pollice verso*, as the Romans would have said—and know the gladiatorial context from which it came. It's almost compulsory to speak of political pollsters as latter-day versions of Rome's oracles, the *augurs* and *haruspices*, who sought clues to national destiny by studying the flight of birds and the entrails of slaughtered sheep. When a reference is made to an “imperial presidency,” or to the president's aides as a “Praetorian Guard,” or to the deployment abroad of “American legions,” no one quizzically raises an eyebrow and

wonders what you could possibly be talking about. To American eyes, Rome is the eagle in the mirror.

Popular culture, the national id, is saturated with references to the Roman Empire. Not long ago HBO and ABC each launched a fictionalized “swords-and-sandals” miniseries set in ancient Rome and centered on the first glimmerings of imperial destiny, as the venerable but creaky Roman Republic began to fall apart. Novels about Rome are reliable bestsellers. The *Star Wars* saga is in essence a Rome-and-America amalgam, about the last remnant of a dying republic holding out against the empire that would supplant it. Earlier films about Rome, such as *The Robe* and *Quo Vadis?*, *Spartacus* and *Ben-Hur*, were crowd-pleasing vehicles that carried implicit political messages against totalitarianism and McCarthyism. (In *The Robe* the emperor Tiberius shows his true colors as an anti-American when he describes the desire for human freedom as “the greatest madness of all.”) Liam Neeson, the villain of *Batman Begins*, cites Roman precedent to justify his destruction of Gotham: “The League of Shadows has been a check against human corruption for thousands of years,” he tells Bruce Wayne. “We sacked Rome. Loaded trade ships with plague rats.”

Rome as a point of reference is not exactly new. Americans have been casting eyes back to ancient Rome since before the Revolution. Today, though, the focus is not mainly on the Roman Republic (as it was two centuries ago, when America was itself emerging as a republic) but as much or more on the empire that took the republic’s place. The focus is also as much on the decline and fall of Rome as on its rise and zenith. Depending on who is doing the talking, Rome serves as either a grim cautionary tale or an inspirational call to action. Albert Schweitzer once observed that people setting out to write a life of Jesus all end up looking at their own reflections, as if gazing into the water of a well. In a similar way, those who explore the example of Rome tend to discover that it somehow resonates with their own concerns. I won’t pretend to be an exception.

Obviously, the emergence of America as the world’s sole superpower, and the troubles it has encountered in that role, explain much of the revival of the Roman Empire in the American imagination. An assortment of “triumphalists” (not their term, of course) see America as at long last assuming its imperial responsibilities, bringing about a global Pax Americana like the Pax Romana of Rome at its most commanding, in the first two centuries A.D. Some form of this idea has been around for decades, and it is here to stay. America’s difficulties in Iraq (and in Afghanistan, Iran, Lebanon, North Korea, and elsewhere) are seen as a bump or a challenge—the inevitable price of global leadership—not as a dead end. Charles Krauthammer, the *pontifex maximus* of this outlook, has written: “America is no mere international citizen. It is the dominant power in the world, more dominant than any since Rome. America is in a position to reshape norms, alter expectations, and create new realities. How? By unapologetic and implacable demonstrations of will.” William Kristol, the editor of the conservative *Weekly Standard*, ascends to the purple with fewer words: “If people want to say we’re an imperial power, fine.” The neoconservative writer Max Boot, arguing that America must become the successor empire to Britain (which once saw itself as the successor empire to Rome), has called for “the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets.” The triumphalist-in-chief, trading jodhpurs for flight suit, is of course George W. Bush. He has stated that arms races by other nations are “pointless,” because American power is now and will forever be kept “beyond challenge” and capable of striking “at a moment’s notice in any dark corner of the world.”

“Declinists” (also not their term) see this same incipient American empire as dangerously overcommitted abroad and rusted out at home, like Rome in its last two centuries. The historian and columnist Chalmers Johnson, who disparages President Bush as a “boy-emperor,” writes in a recent book: “Roman

imperial sorrows mounted up over hundreds of years. Ours are likely to arrive with the speed of FedEx." In this view, part of the problem is "imperial overstretch," to use the historian Paul Kennedy's well-known term—our military and globalist ambitions exceed our capacity to pay for them. Another part of the problem is moral and political: empires destroy liberty—always have, always will. Today, the declinists say, the executive branch's imperial need for secrecy, surveillance, and social control, all in the name of national security, is corroding our republican institutions.

Somewhere between the declinists and the triumphalists are those, like the historian Niall Ferguson, in *Colossus*, who argue that at any given moment *some* great power needs to step up and perform the world's various imperial chores—and that the United States is the only one currently available. "Unlike most European critics of the United States," Ferguson writes, "I believe the world needs an effective liberal empire and that the United States is the best candidate for the job." But America, he goes on, is an "empire in denial." It lacks the will and the staying power, the skill and the desire, to shoulder an imperial role. The dispossessed second sons of England's landed gentry and a raft of ambitious and opportunity-starved Scots and Irish lit out for the colonies and there spent their lives governing the British Empire, a sprawling red mass on the maps. America's best and brightest, in contrast, "aspire not to govern Mesopotamia but to manage MTV; not to rule the Hejaz but to run a hedge fund." The problem here, in other words, is "imperial understretch."

The Rome debate has its outright Jeremiahs, its prophets of doom. The social analyst and urban planner Jane Jacobs, in a spirited and hortatory book called *Dark Age Ahead*, published shortly before her death at the age of ninety, all but consigns Western civilization to a new "post-Roman" era of medieval chaos and woe, brought on by the collapse of strong families, the perversion of science, and the oppressive distortion of the government's taxing

power. She sees a lethal dynamic at work: "The collapse of one sustaining cultural institution enfeebls others. . . . With each collapse, still further ruin becomes more likely."

The rot-from-within camp has a conservative flank, too. The classicist and military historian Victor Davis Hanson, sounding like an old Roman, bemoans the American elite's self-absorption, moral relativism, and lack of will. "The anti-Americans often invoke Rome as a warning and as a model, both of our imperialism and of our foreordained collapse," Hanson writes. But, he argues, Rome's situation was more parlous in 220 B.C. (when it faced the challenge of Carthage) than in 400 A.D. (when it faced the barbarians): "The difference over six centuries, the dissimilarity that led to the end, was a result not of imperial overstretch on the outside but something happening within that was not unlike what we ourselves are now witnessing. Earlier Romans knew what it was to be Roman, why it was at least better than the alternative, and why their culture had to be defended. Later in ignorance they forgot what they knew, in pride mocked who they were, and in consequence disappeared."

There are other camps. A group that might be called the "Augustinians," led by the Christian scholar Richard Horsley, wonders if the pursuit of a Pax Americana diverges from the message of Jesus, much as Augustine, in *The City of God*, written shortly after the sack of Rome by Alaric and the Visigoths in 410 A.D., pointed to the incompatibility of earthly and heavenly ambitions. Horsley's views clash with those of "Ambrosians" like the Reverend Jerry Falwell, who see the Pax Americana and the advance of evangelical Christianity as fundamentally inseparable—a throwback to the views on church and state of Ambrose, a Roman prefect and bishop of Milan in the fourth century A.D. "God has raised up America for the cause of world evangelization," Falwell maintains. The idea that an American imperium is part of God's plan was the message of the Christmas card sent out in 2003 by Vice President Dick Cheney and his wife, Lynne.

It read: "And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?"

And then there are the expansionists, an ironical group who foresee more of the same for America, only bigger and better. In a document that hovers between modest proposal and eccentric manifesto the aging French radical Régis Debray urges the annexation of Europe by America, creating a United States of the West as the only hope against the coming Islamist and Confucianist onslaught. "Who but America can take responsibility, at a reasonable cost, for the peace and unity of the civilized world?" Debray asks. "Do you suppose we would breathe easier under the iron rule of Islam? Or under the domination of China, if by some misfortune she became the only hyperpower?" Referring to an imperial Roman decree of 212 A.D. that extended citizenship to all free men in Rome's provinces, Debray goes on, "I believe the time has come for a new Edict of Caracalla" — meaning American citizenship for Canadians and Mexicans, for Europeans, for Japanese, and for New Zealanders and Australians. (And if it's not too much to ask, can we make sure to include the Caribbean?)

The comparisons, often contradictory, go far beyond military power and global reach. The Roman analogy is cited with respect to the nation's borders and the extent to which America has lost control of them, as Rome lost control of hers. It is cited both by people who see America in the grip of spiritual torpor and sybaritic excess (as Rome at times was) and by those who see it as ruled by moralizing religiosity and outright superstition (as Rome at times also was). It is cited by those who worry about an overweening nationalism and also by those who see an erosion of public spirit.

Cock an ear: you'll hear Rome-and-America analogies everywhere. "It's the fall of Rome, my dear," the food historian Barbara Haber told a reporter when asked about the spread of televised contests featuring gluttony and regurgitation, with their

echoes of Roman overindulgence. (Never mind that the fabled *vomitorium* is a myth; the Latin word refers to passageways in amphitheaters that quickly "disgorged" crowds into the streets.) Senator Trent Lott, pushing for the passage of a pork-laden highway bill in 2005, summoned the shades of Rome to his aid. "Part of the reason that Rome eventually collapsed was that it stopped building and maintaining its roads," he argued. "The day we stop investing in better and safer roads is the day we have just one more thing in common with Rome. And Rome fell." In a speech from decades ago that continues to be widely reprinted, Clare Boothe Luce railed against America's anything-goes "new morality" toward sex, conjuring the forlorn attempts of Augustus, Rome's first emperor, to bolster the Roman family in the face of similar licentiousness. ("It was already too late," Luce concluded darkly.) Most people are aware that the Roman Empire was eventually split into western and eastern halves, the one Latin-speaking and centered on Rome, the other Greek-speaking and centered on Constantinople. It's probably only a matter of time before someone sees in this a foreshadowing of the emergence of Red and Blue America.

The larger question still hangs in the air: Are we Rome? That question leads to others: Does the fate of Rome tell us anything useful about America's present or America's future? Must decline and fall lurk somewhere ahead? Can we learn from Rome's mistakes? Take heart from Rome's achievements? And by the way, what exactly *was* the fate of the Roman Empire? Why do historians lock horns over the question, Did Rome really fall?

If you're looking for reasons to brush comparisons aside, it's easy enough to find them. The two entities, Rome and America, are dissimilar in countless ways. It's hard even to know what specific moments to compare: the American experiment is in its third century, and the Roman state in the West spanned more than a millennium, from the eighth century B.C. to the fifth century A.D. Over time, Rome and America molted more than once

from their previous selves. But I'll argue that some comparisons do hold up, though maybe not the ones that have been most in the public eye. Think less about decadence, less about military might, and more about how our two societies view the outside world, more about the slow decay of homegrown institutions. Think less about threats from unwelcome barbarians, and more about the healthy functioning of a multi-ethnic society. Think less about the ability of a superpower to influence everything on earth, and more about how everything on earth affects a superpower.

I'll argue further that the debate over Rome's ultimate fate holds a key to thinking about our own. The status quo can't be flash-frozen. A millennium hence America will be hard to recognize. It may not exist as a nation-state in the form it does now — or even exist at all. Will the transitions ahead be gradual and peaceful or abrupt and catastrophic? Will our descendants be living productive lives in a society better than the one we inhabit now? Whatever happens, will valuable aspects of America's legacy weave through the fabric of civilizations to come? Will historians someday have reason to ask, Did America really fall?