

Lessons of Rome

The rise and fall of the Roman Republic provides lessons that hint at flaws in modern political policies.

by *Steve Bonta*

This is the 10th (final) installment in a series of articles on the rise and fall of the Roman Republic.

From a modern vantage point, Roman history instructs poignantly on both the genius of prudent government and the folly of empire. Imperial Rome was finally extinguished in the fifth century A.D., and though strands of her culture persisted — in the Venetian Republic, in the Byzantine Empire, and in Western Christendom, which preferred the Latin language over the vernacular for the next thousand years — the books were closed on the civilization of Cicero, Brutus, and even the Caesars. Because well-constituted states usually decline gradually rather than suddenly, the lessons of Rome were centuries in the teaching — centuries that,

to most Romans, made the loss of Roman liberty only vaguely noticeable.

The primary reason for Rome's fall was moral decline. Every Roman writer who chronicled the fall of the republic — Apian, Tacitus, Cassius Dio, Sallust, Cicero, and others — marveled at the evaporation of ancient virtue that preceded the loss of liberty. While republican Rome lacked many of the softer virtues of later Christian civilization, there can be no question that, in comparison with most contemporary pagan societies, Rome was a paragon of rectitude, resisting for centuries many of the debilitating vices and superstitions of the rest of the pagan world. Where the Greeks institutionalized homosexual behavior, sexual perversion was taboo in the Roman Republic. Where the Carthaginians practiced human sacrifice, including child sacrifice on a large scale, Rome generally refrained from such excesses.

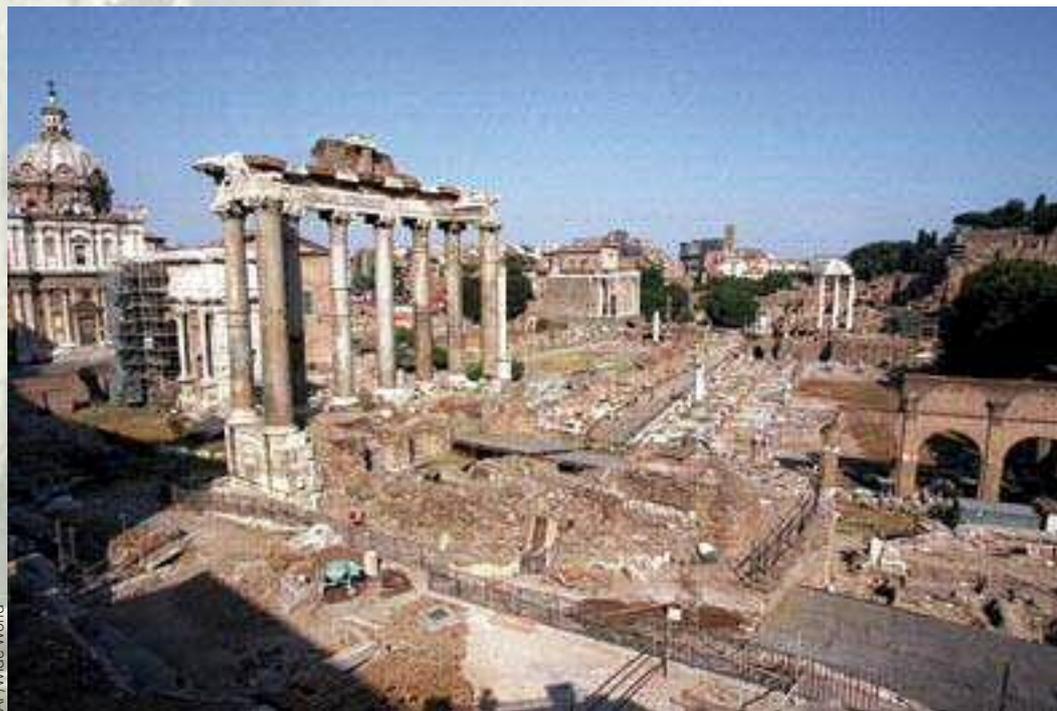
Where Persia, and Babylonia before her, submitted to an all-powerful priesthood who were superior in power to political rulers, Roman priests remained subordinate to magistrates of the republic.

Cultural Revolution

The end of the republic saw a revolution not only in political but in moral and even religious manners. By the first century B.C., sexual mores had been abandoned, and the former sanctity of marriage forgotten. Crime, once almost unknown in Rome, became rampant. In such an environment, Rome became an easy target for political conspiracies like that of Catiline, which exploited the criminal elements in Rome to carry out bribery, blackmail, and assassination.

More ominously still, the bucolic simplicity of authentic Roman religion was gradually contaminated by a monstrous cult from the east, the Persian mystery religion of Mithra that, by the late second century A.D., had permeated every level of Roman society. This cult was in fact a vast secret society consecrated to emperor-worship and to the amoral doctrine of radical dualism — the idea that good and evil are eternal, absolutely equivalent principles that must both be appeased. It was apparently introduced into Rome in the first century B.C. by the Cilician pirates and spread through the ranks of political officialdom and the military, claiming as adherents emperors like Commodus, Aurelian, Diocletian, and Julian.

Fortunately for Western civilization, Christianity eventually eclipsed Mithraism, breathing new life into decrepit imperial Rome.



Remains to be seen: Millions of people have marveled at the ruins of the Roman Forum, which was once the setting for some of the greatest political dramas, and some of the most extraordinary leaders, in all of human history.

Rome's successor civilization in the East, Byzantium, was sustained for more than a thousand years by the Christian piety of her citizens and more capable rulers, despite ceaseless assaults by barbarian nations and an irremediably weak system of law and government.

Wages of War

Much of Rome's strength in her early years flowed from her martial virtues. Her citizen soldiers were fearless and superbly organized. The Roman genius for order soon led to innovations in military science that made the Roman legions a virtually invincible fighting force for centuries. But Rome's military successes engendered a love of conflict and conquest that hastened her undoing. For republican Rome was unwilling to interrupt her ceaseless warfare at the water's edge, and plunged into overseas empire building at the first challenge from abroad.

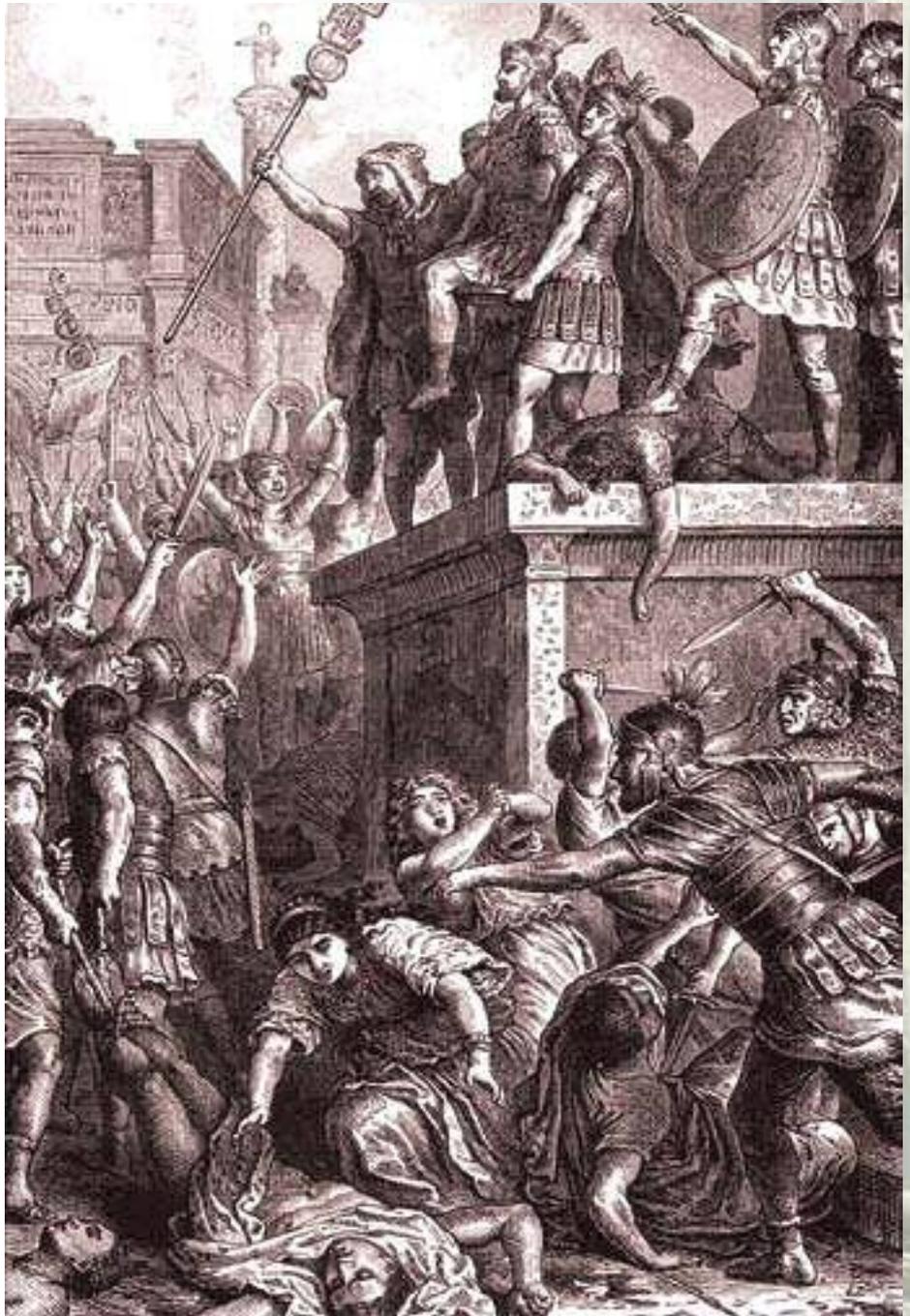
The Punic wars were followed by several generations of mostly craven conquest against much weaker foes in Iberia, Africa, and Asia Minor. Caesar's victories over the Gauls were mostly achieved by playing disunited tribes against one another, and further encouraged Rome to trust in her own invincibility. Yet when Rome was confronted with truly formidable foes, the results were sometimes calamitous. Such was the case with the Parthians at Carrhae and the Germans at Teutoberg, both of which resulted in the slaughter of entire legions.

In the imperial period, the sturdy Gothic nation, unimpressed by Rome's inflated opinion of herself, became Rome's most successful adversary. To the north, the Germans never succumbed to Roman arms, and to the east, the Persian empire of the Sassanids presented an impossible challenge. But Rome, once addicted to international warfare, never found the strength of will to lay down the sword. Her endless wars of conquest depleted her coffers (despite the plunders of war), decimated her population, made enemies far and wide — and created irresistible pressure for surrendering domestic liberties.

For Rome, her greatest civic strength had always been her unity. Until the late second century B.C., Rome had never seen bloodshed from civil unrest. The various disputes between the plebeians and patri-

cians had always been resolved by negotiation and political reform. But beginning with the administrations of the Gracchi in the late second century B.C., Rome exploded into episodes of partisan violence. The following century saw a series of devastating civil wars that tore the re-

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Factional strife: When Rome's military forces were turned against her own people, from the first century B.C. onwards, the resulting purges often decimated the city's populace.

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public apart and eased the way for the rise of military dictators like Caesar, Antony, and Octavian, who put an end to Roman liberties. From that time forward, Rome was never free from factional violence. Political assassinations and riots, unknown in the early centuries of the republic, became commonplace. Emperors were enthroned and deposed almost exclusively by military coups, often accompanied by dreadful purges and epic battles.

Constitutional Flaws

The Roman constitution, superior though it was to other contemporary political systems, contained a number of serious flaws that came to the fore as the republic disintegrated. For one thing, it provided for the appointment of dictators for six-month periods during times of acute crisis, an institution that furnished a pretext for military coups by the likes of Marius, Sulla,

and Caesar. For another, the Roman constitution failed to give equal protection to all Roman citizens, institutionalizing the patrician aristocracy and ensuring that Rome would always have a ruling class.

While the Roman system of government recognized the need for checks and balances and for separating the powers of the state among various offices and magistracies, the Roman state did not enjoy the neat modern divisions of executive, legislative, and judicial power. Instead, fragments of these powers were parceled out into various offices. The judicial power, for example, was shared among certain of the assemblies and the praetors. The executive power was divided among the consuls, praetors, senate, quaestors, and others. The legislative power, meanwhile, appertained to the various assemblies and to the Senate.

Like the ancient Greek city states, Rome provided for deliberation and even the enactment of laws by the masses in popular assemblies. This serious flaw — the absence of representative government — guaranteed all of the instability and tumult associated with direct democracy, finally leading to the rise of unscrupulous demagogues.

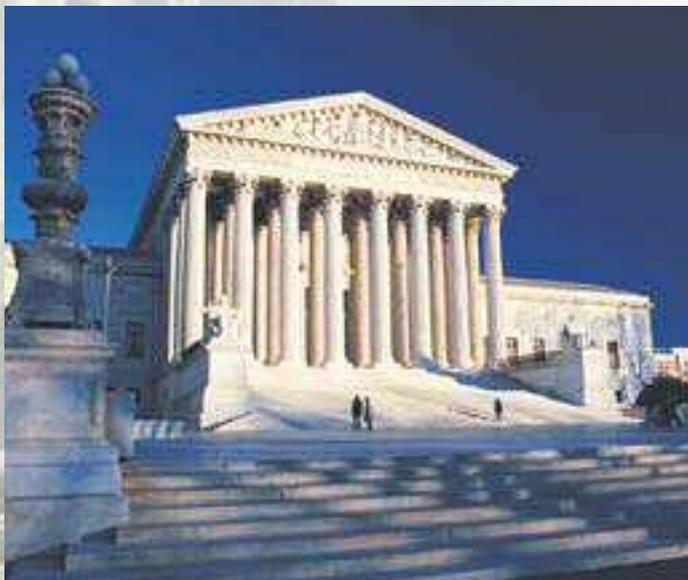
Overall, the Roman Republic, even in

its best years, was a far cry from the standards of liberty and peace to which modern Americans are accustomed. Rome was at war nearly all the time, and all able-bodied men served throughout their prime adult years during each campaigning season. Roman citizens were bound by rigid class distinctions, and slavery was pervasive. Citizenship was generally not granted to subject peoples, even in Italy, until the first century B.C.

Above all else, it must be borne in mind that Rome was a pre-Christian civilization. Absent from Roman culture was the value on human life and individual dignity that has characterized enlightened states in Western Christian civilization. The Twelve Tables of Roman law required the killing of deformed infants, for example. Moreover, while the Roman military, at least during the republican period, acted with more restraint than was characteristic of the ancient world, their wars, battles, and sieges were nonetheless usually fought without negotiation and without quarter for the vanquished.

Legacy of Rome

The fall of Rome, although a tragedy to the generations that experienced it, has proven to be a blessing for mankind in the longer term. For while Rome's collapse led to a dark age of several centuries, it also made possible, in the longer run, the rise of a modern civilization that has far eclipsed



Modern parallels: As the design of the U.S. Supreme Court alongside the Roman Pantheon attests, Roman architecture has had a profound influence on modern architectural styles. Rome lives on in her literature, language, law, art, and republican ideals.

Rome's greatest achievements. Had Rome maintained indefinitely her grip on England, Anglo-Saxon civilization with its distinctive common law system could never have arisen. Germany would never have become civilized without the demise of the Roman legions that fought unceasingly to subdue her. The Italian city-state republics would never have inaugurated the Renaissance under the heel of the Roman military. Modern Western civilization, especially American civilization, with all of its blessings of freedom and progress, could never have been born under the banners of the Roman legions.

But Rome lives on in the fragments of Roman civilization that have inspired and guided her modern inheritors. It was a reawakening of interest in classical language and culture, particularly art and architecture, that motivated the pioneers of the Renaissance. Roman laws were the source of the civil law code of continental Europe, and had significant influence on English law as well. The Latin language has enriched modern English immeasurably, providing us with a vast scientific,

academic, and legal lexicon.

Perhaps most importantly, America's Founding Fathers looked to Rome as their primary inspiration in learning the lessons of civilizations past, lessons extracted from striking historical parallels that modern Americans would do well to heed. Like America, Rome began as a tiny colony of immigrants surrounded by hostile neighbors. Like America, Rome was governed first by kings, and founded a republic when its monarchy turned into despotism. Like America, early Rome placed great importance on separating and limiting the powers of government. Like modern America, republican Rome embarked on a destructive program of foreign military adventurism that added to her international prestige but sapped her strength and resources. Like America, Rome succumbed to the temptations of the welfare state, teaching her citizens to divide into factions to fight over the spoils of the public treasury and to depend on government for their material well-being. Like America, Rome saw the rise of subversive movements that attacked her free constitution.

And like the America in which we now live, Rome underwent a dizzying cultural and moral decline, which, in the case of Rome, eventually destroyed Rome's capacity for self-government.

In spite of the many parallels, there are also differences that suggest that America need not suffer the same fate as Rome. For one thing, in spite of the venality of modern American society, we are nowhere near the pitch of moral decline depicted in the pages of Suetonius, Tacitus, and Juvenal. For another, our Constitution is vastly superior to Rome's, and ought to prove far more durable. Most crucially, modern America possesses many layers of strength — cultural, moral, religious, institutional, and even technological — that ancient Rome did not have, that may allow America to endure where Rome faltered.

With all her tarnished greatness, Rome is a witness, not only of the pitfalls of power, prestige, and prosperity, but of the transcending truth that, even under the most adverse circumstances, freedom and enduring civilization are possible. ■