

THE LESSONS OF ANCIENT ROME

In *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Republic*, author Steve Bonta examines the lessons of the growth and decline of the Roman state in the centuries before the empire.

by Dennis Behreandt

The Rise and Fall of the Roman Republic: Lessons for Modern America, by Steve Bonta, Ph.D., Appleton, Wisconsin: The John Birch Society, 2006, 137 pages, paperback. For ordering information, see the ad on the inside front cover.

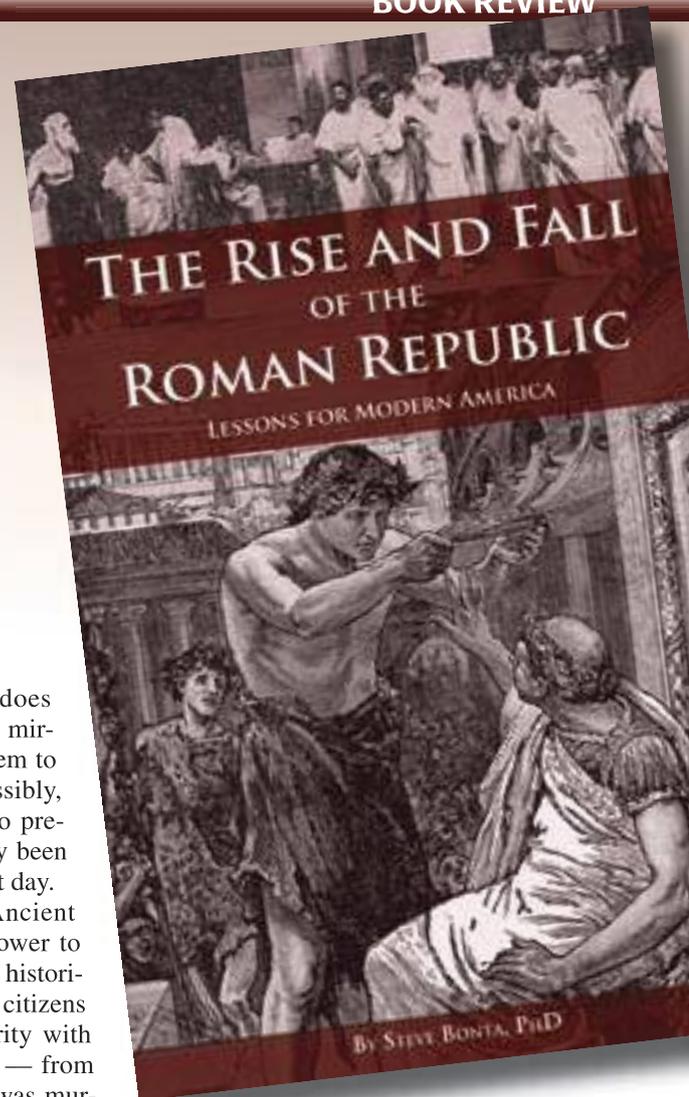
In many ways the modern world is but an echo of ancient Rome. For that we have to thank Francesco Petrarch. A 14th century Italian scholar, poet, and freelance diplomat, Petrarch saw in Rome the ruins of a civilization that seemed to tower above his own. Impressed by the majesty of the glory that was ancient Rome, Petrarch spent his life recovering and then reading and studying ancient Latin literature. After him came other scholars who, heavily influenced by his example, carried on his work. Through them and their works, the political history of Rome began to inform the political philosophy of Europe and, later, America, where the American Founding Fathers were influenced by several factors, very much including their familiarity with the history of Rome.

The influence of Ancient Rome on the modern world, though seemingly diminished with time, has not ceased. Moreover, Roman history seems to run parallel to our own. Famed historian Barbara Tuchman once described the 13th century as a “distant mirror,” into which we could look and see staring back at us some truths about

ourselves. Even more so does Rome seem to be this distant mirror. Looking at Rome, we seem to see our own history and, possibly, our own future. Indeed, in no previous time has Roman history been more relevant than the present day.

Unfortunately, though Ancient Rome has lost none of its power to fascinate, the general level of historical literacy is such that most citizens have only a passing familiarity with the subject. They may know — from Shakespeare — that Caesar was murdered. But there is very little understanding of the relevance of that murder, of what part it played in the death of the Roman Republic and the birth of the empire, or of how the lessons of that era apply to today. And while there are plenty of fine, scholarly books on the subject, most of these are written for an audience already familiar with the story, and most focus on the Roman Empire as opposed to the republic. Yet Rome’s great experiment in ordered liberty occurred during the time of the republic, which came to an end before Christ walked the Earth. And it is the history of the republic, not the empire, that is more fascinating and uplifting — and far more relevant to us today.

What is needed is a book that reintroduces the subject of Rome to the American people and that puts the focus where it belongs — on the republic! Fortunately, in Dr. Steve Bonta’s *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Republic*, this book now exists.



Regular readers of THE NEW AMERICAN will recognize that the book is an adaptation of a series of articles originally appearing in this magazine. In fact, some readers suggested that these articles be compiled in a book. Now that they have been compiled, with some new material added, the result is, in this reviewer’s opinion, much greater than the sum of the parts.

THE OVERTHROW OF TYRANNY

In even its earliest days, the history of Rome runs parallel to our own history. Like America, the Roman Republic was forged in revolution, created by the overthrow of an oppressive regime. In its almost legendary prehistory, Bonta recounts, Rome was led by a series of kings. Not all of these were bad and some were famous for their contributions to the growth and stability of the Roman state. One of these, Bonta notes, was the king Numa Pompilius. This king,

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Bonta writes, “refused an offer of kingship until a large body of his fellow citizens persuaded him to accept.” Immediately he “set about civilizing the Romans and abolishing the crude despotism of his predecessor.”

Unfortunately, in any monarchy, power remains concentrated in the hands of single leader and his court of advisers. No matter how saintly one king may be, the next may again turn despotic. While some of the foundational structures of the republic were created during the age of the Roman kings, their behavior nevertheless eventually caused the word “king” to become a watchword for tyranny in the minds of many later Romans.

The final such tyrant was the king Tarquin the Proud. Tarquin, Bonta notes, took the throne by murder and in turn had his political opponents rounded up so that none could oppose him. The Roman Senate, already in existence, was powerless and unable to counteract the tyranny of the king, his family, and his supporters. Being all-powerful, the Tarquins began to

engage in all manner of villainy and crime, and when one of them raped a young woman who later committed suicide, the die was cast. A group of men, led by Lucius Junius Brutus, swore to rid Rome of tyranny and did so. “After a 25-year reign of terror,” Bonta writes, “Tarquin the Proud was expelled from Rome, and Brutus and Collatinus [the violated woman’s husband] were elected Rome’s first consuls.”

FROM REPUBLIC TO EMPIRE

Much like the later U.S. Founding Fathers, in the aftermath of the expulsion of Tarquin the Proud, the Romans sought to create a government ruled by law instead of one ruled by men. This “was something new,” Bonta notes, “a form of government that protected the rights of its citizens while being itself limited by laws and by the diffusion of its powers into many different magistrates and governing bodies.” The new government was called a *res publica*, or “people’s thing,” and it was constructed in such a way as to prevent the accumulation of absolute power.

Nevertheless, the republic faced a number of challenges in its history, all of which have their parallels in U.S. history and all of which Bonta covers. Most significantly, the Roman Republic fought a series of hot and cold wars against another regional superpower, Carthage, that nearly

saw the defeat of the Roman state. Just as the United States emerged stronger after conflicts like the Second World War, the Roman Republic emerged from its wars with Carthage as the strongest military power in the West, able to confront and defeat nearly any foe. And, like the United States in the 20th century, the Romans struggled with class division and the accumulation of wealth. Much like today’s Democrats and Republicans, in Rome two opposing political parties, the *Populares* and the *Optimates*, faced off on either side of the political divide. And, like the parties of today, both were creatures of the aristocratic classes and had very little interest in anything that did not serve to increase their own power. Naturally, the stresses of such a political climate led to disturbances and finally to revolution. With the murders of Caesar and Cicero, the last vestiges of the old republic were swept away, replaced by the empire.

The incredible story of the Roman Republic is one of drama and beauty, peopled with heroes and scoundrels. With grace and clarity, Bonta, an accomplished scholar, covers the entire panorama of this history. The book is finely illustrated with plates highlighting key subjects and the typeface is elegant and easy on the eyes. While it would make a fine addition to any library, every citizen concerned about the future of the United States should read this book in order to look into that distant mirror and learn, perhaps, how we in the 21st century can avoid the fate of that earlier republic. ■

The Rise and Fall of the Roman Republic is filled with wonderful illustrations like this one — Maccari’s famous rendition of Cicero denouncing Catiline in the Roman Senate.

