

Rome and America – Comparing to the Ancient Roman Empire

Kerby Anderson looks at the comparisons between modern America and ancient Rome, i.e. the Roman Empire. Do Americans have a worldview more like ancient Romans than the biblical worldview spelled out in the Bible? In some ways, yes, and in other ways, not so much.

Similarities

The philosopher George Santayana once said: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” To which I might add that those who remember Santayana’s maxim also seem condemned to repeat the phrase.

✖ Ask anyone if they see similarities between Rome and America, and they are likely to respond with a resounding, “Yes!” But I have also found that people who see similarities between Rome and America see different similarities. Some see similarities in our moral decay. Others see similarities in pride, arrogance, and hubris. But all seem to agree that we are repeating the mistakes of the past and need to change our ways.

In his book *Are We Rome?*, Cullen Murphy argues that there are many similarities between the Roman Empire and America.^{1} But he also believes that the American national character couldn’t be more different from Rome. He believes those differences can help us avoid Rome’s fate.

Let’s begin by looking at some of the political, geographical, and demographic similarities.^{2}

1. Dominant powers: “Rome and America are the most powerful actors in their world, by many orders of magnitude. Their power includes both military might and the ‘soft power’ of

language, culture, commerce, technology, and ideas.”

2. Approximately equal in size: “Rome and America are comparable in physical size—the Roman Empire and its Mediterranean lake would fit inside the three million square miles of the Lower Forty-eight states, though without a lot to spare.”

3. Global influence: “Both Rome and America created global structures—administrative, economic, military, cultural—that the rest of the world and their own citizens came to take for granted, as gravity and photosynthesis are taken for granted.”

4. Open society: “Both are societies made up of many peoples—open to newcomers, willing to absorb the genes and lifestyles and gods of everyone else, and to grant citizenship to incoming tribes from all corners of the earth.”

5. Culturally similar: “Romans and Americans can’t get enough of laws and lawyers and lawsuits. . . . They relish the ritual humiliation of public figures: Americans through comedy and satire, talk radio and Court TV; the Romans through vicious satire, to be sure, but also, during the republic, by means of the *censorial nota*, the public airing, name by name, of everything great men of the time should be ashamed of.”

6. Chosen people: “Both see themselves as chosen people, and both see their national character as exceptional.”

While there are many similarities, there are also profound differences between Rome and America. Before we look at the six major parallels that Murphy talks about, we need to remind ourselves that there are many distinct differences between Rome and America.

Differences

It is no real surprise that people from different political

and religious perspectives see similarities between Rome and America. While some see similarities in moral decay, others see it in military might or political corruption. Although there are many similarities between Rome and America, there are some notable differences.

Cullen Murphy points out these significant differences.[\[3\]](#)

1. Technological advancement: "Rome in all its long history never left the Iron Age, whereas America in its short history has already leapt through the Industrial Age to the Information Age and the Biotech Age."

2. Abundance: "Wealthy as it was, Rome lived close to the edge; many regions were one dry spell away from famine. America enjoys an economy of abundance, ever surfeit; it must beware the diseases of overindulgence."

3. Slavery: "Rome was always a slaveholding polity with the profound moral and social retardation that this implies; America started out as a slaveholding polity and decisively cast slavery aside."

4. Government: "Rome emerged out of a city-state and took centuries to let go of a city-state's method of governance; America from early on began to administer itself as a continental power."

5. Social classes: "Rome had no middle class as we understand the term, whereas for America the middle class is the core social fact."

6. Democracy: "Rome had a powerful but tiny aristocracy and entrenched ideas about the social pecking order; even at its most democratic, Rome was not remotely as democratic as America at its least democratic, under a British monarch."

7. Entrepreneurship: "Romans looked down upon entrepreneurship, which Americans hold in the highest esteem."

8. Economic dynamism: “Rome was economically static; America is economically transformative.”

9. Technological development: “For all its engineering skills, Rome generated few original ideas in science and technology; America is a hothouse of innovation and creativity.”

10. Social equality: “On basic matters such as gender roles and the equality of all people, Romans and Americans would behold one another with disbelief and distaste.”

While it is true that Rome and America have a vast number of similarities, we can also see there are significant differences between the two. We therefore need a nuanced view of the parallels between the two civilizations and recognize that these differences may be an important key in understanding the future of the United States.

Six Parallels

Murphy sees many parallels between the Roman Empire and America in addition to the above.[\[4\]](#) The following are larger, more extensive, parallels.

The first parallel is perspective. It actually involves “the way Americans see America; and more to the point, the way the tiny, elite subset of Americans who live in the nation’s capital see America—and see Washington itself.”

Like the Romans, Americans tend to see themselves as more important than they are. They tend to have an exaggerated sense of their own presence in the world and its ability to act alone.

A second parallel involves military power. Although there are differences, some similarities stand out. Both Rome and America start to run short of people to sustain their militaries and began to find recruits through outside sources.

This is not a good long-run solution.

A third parallel can be lumped under the term privatization. "Rome had trouble maintaining a distinction between public and private responsibilities." America is currently in the midst of privatizing functions that used to be public tasks.

A fourth parallel concerns the way Rome and America view the outside world. In a sense, this is merely the flip side of the first parallel. If you believe your country is exceptional, you tend to devalue others. And more importantly, you tend to underestimate another nation's capabilities. Rome learned this in A.D. 9 when three legions were ambushed by a smaller German force and annihilated.[\[5\]](#) The repercussions were significant.

The question of borders is a fifth parallel. The boundary of Rome "was less a fence and more a threshold—not so much a firm line fortified with 'Keep Out' signs as a permeable zone of continual interaction." Compare that description to our border with Mexico, and so can see many similarities.

A final parallel has to do with size and complexity. The Roman Empire got too big physically and too complex to manage effectively. The larger a country or civilization, the more "it touches, and the more susceptible it is to forces beyond its control." To use a phrase by Murphy: "Bureaucracy is the new geography."[\[6\]](#)

Cullen Murphy concludes his book by calling for greater citizen engagement and for us to promote a sense of community and mutual obligation. The Roman historian Livy wrote, "An empire remains powerful so long as its subjects rejoice in it." America is not beyond repair, but it needs to learn the lessons from the Roman Empire.

Decline of the Family

What about the moral decline of Rome? Do we see parallels in

America? I have addressed this in previous articles such as "[The Decline of a Nation](#)" and "[When Nations Die.](#)"^{7} Let's focus on the area of sexuality, marriage, and family.

In his 1934 book, *Sex and Culture*, British anthropologist Joseph Daniel Unwin chronicled the historical decline of numerous cultures, including the Roman Empire. He found that cultures that held to a strong sexual ethic thrived and were more productive than cultures that were "sexually free."^{8}

In his book *Our Dance Has Turned to Death*, Carl Wilson identifies the common pattern of family decline in civilizations like the Roman Empire.^{9} It is significant how these seven stages parallel what is happening in America.

In the first stage, men ceased to lead their families in worship. Spiritual and moral development became secondary. Their view of God became naturalistic, mathematical, and mechanical.

In the second stage, men selfishly neglected care of their wives and children to pursue material wealth, political and military power, and cultural development. Material values began to dominate thought.

The third stage involved a change in men's sexual values. Men who were preoccupied with business or war either neglected their wives sexually or became involved with lower-class women or with homosexuality. Ultimately, a double standard of morality developed.

The fourth stage affected women. The role of women at home and with children lost value and status. Women were neglected and their roles devalued. Soon they revolted to gain access to material wealth and also freedom for sex outside marriage. Women also began to minimize having sex relations to conceive children, and the emphasis became sex for pleasure.

In the fifth stage, husbands and wives competed against each

other for money, home leadership, and the affection of their children. This resulted in hostility and frustration and possible homosexuality in the children. Many marriages ended in separation and divorce.

In the sixth stage, selfish individualism grew and carried over into society, fragmenting it into smaller and smaller group loyalties. The nation was thus weakened by internal conflict. The decrease in the birthrate produced an older population that had less ability to defend itself and less will to do so, making the nation more vulnerable to its enemies.

Finally, unbelief in God became more complete, parental authority diminished, and ethical and moral principles disappeared, affecting the economy and government. Because of internal weakness and fragmentation, the society came apart.

We can see these stages play out in the decline of the Roman Empire. But we can also see them happening before our eyes in America.

Spiritual Decline

What about the spiritual decline in Rome and America? We can actually read about the spiritual decline in Rome in Paul's letter to the church in Rome. In the opening chapter he traces a progression of spiritual decline that was evident in the Hellenistic world of his time.

The first stage is when people turn from God to idolatry. Although God has revealed Himself in nature to all men so that they are without excuse, they nevertheless worship the creation instead of the Creator. This is idolatry. In the past, this took the form of actual idol worship. In our day, it takes the form of the worship of money or the worship of self. In either case, it is idolatry. A further example of this is a general lack of thankfulness. Although they were

prospered by God, they were ungrateful. And when they are no longer looking to God for wisdom and guidance, they become vain and futile and empty in their imaginations. They no longer honor God, so their foolish hearts become darkened. In professing to be wise, they have become fools.

The second stage is when men and women exchange their natural use of sex for unnatural uses. Here Paul says those four sobering words, "God gave them over." In a society where lust-driven sensuality and sexual perversion dominate, God gives them over to their degrading passions and unnatural desires.

The third stage is anarchy. Once a society has rejected God's revelation, it is on its own. Moral and social anarchy is the natural result. At this point God has given the sinners over to a depraved mind and so they do things which are not proper. This results in a society which is without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, and unmerciful.

The final stage is judgment. God's judgment rightly falls upon those who practice idolatry and immorality. Certainly an eternal judgment awaits those who are guilty, but a social judgment occurs when God gives a nation over to its sinful practices.

Notice that this progression is not unique to the Hellenistic world the apostle Paul was living in. The progression from idolatry to sexual perversion to anarchy to judgment is found throughout history.

In the times of Noah and Lot, there was the idolatry of greed, there was sexual perversion and promiscuity, there was anarchy and violence, and finally there was judgment. Throughout the history of the nation of Israel there was idolatry, sexual perversion, anarchy (in which each person did what was right in his own eyes), and finally judgment.

Are there parallels between Rome and America? I have quoted from secular authors, Christian authors, and a writer of much

of the New Testament. All seem to point to parallels between Rome and America.

Notes

1. Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).
2. Ibid., 14-15.
3. Ibid., 16-17.
4. Ibid., 18-20.
5. Ibid., 122.
6. Ibid., 135.
7. Kerby Anderson, [“The Decline of a Nation,”](#) Probe Ministries, 1991, and [“When Nations Die,”](#) 2002; both available on Probe’s Web site, www.probe.org.
8. J.D. Unwin, *Sex and Culture* (London: Oxford University, 1934).
9. Carl Wilson, *Our Dance Has Turned to Death* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1981), 84-85.

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The Decline of a Nation – History and Christian Values

Kerby Anderson considers factors which may lead to the decline of this nation’s position as the only world super-power. He points out the relationship between moral and spiritual decline and the decline of society in general. We need to return to godly principles if we are to avoid a descent into irrelevance and depravity.

This article is also available in [Spanish](#).



Doomsayers for many years have been predicting the decline and fall of this country. And while many of these short-term predictions have proved inaccurate, there is some truth to the prevailing belief that this nation will fall like every great nation before it. Apart from revival and reformation, this nation is destined to decline.

The problem with many of these doomsayers is that while their prognosis is right, their diagnosis is wrong. Yes, the future is bleak. But our problem is not ultimately political, economic, or social, as these doomsayers would have us believe. The decline of this nation (just as the decline of every other nation) is due to spiritual factors. The political, economic, and social problems we encounter are the symptoms of the spiritual deterioration of a nation.

Just as there are spiritual principles that influence the life of an individual, so there are political-spiritual principles that govern the life of a nation. And though we may feel that these are obscure and difficult to discern, in reality they are visible to anyone willing to look at the record of history.

Our problem is that we don't really learn from history. George Santayana said that "those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it." The philosopher Hegel said, "What experience and history teach us is this: that people and government never have learned anything from history or acted on principles deduced from it." Or as Winston Churchill said, "The one thing we have learned from history is that we don't learn from history."

The refrains that are often heard are: "It can't happen here," or "Our country is different." But the reality is that nations are born and die just like individuals. Their longevity may exceed the average person's lifespan. But the reality is that nations also die.

History has shown that the average age of the great civilizations is around two hundred years. Countries like Great Britain exceed the average while other countries like the United States are just now reaching the average age.

Each of the great civilizations in the world passed through a series of stages from their birth to their decline to their death. Historians have listed these in ten stages.

The first stage moves from bondage to spiritual faith. The second from spiritual faith to great courage. The third stage moves from great courage to liberty. The fourth stage moves from liberty to abundance. The fifth stage moves from abundance to selfishness. The sixth stage moves from selfishness to complacency. The seventh stage moves from complacency to apathy. The eighth stage moves from apathy to moral decay. The ninth stage moves from moral decay to dependence. And the tenth and last stage moves from dependence to bondage.

These are the ten stages through which the great civilizations have gone. Notice the progression from bondage to liberty back to bondage. The first generation throws off the shackles of bondage only to have a later generation through apathy and indifference allow itself to once again be enslaved.

This is the direction this and every other country is headed. The book of Judges shows that the nation of Israel passed through these same stages. And this country will do the same unless revival and reformation break out and reverse the inexorable decline of this nation.

The Cycle of Nations

In his book *The End of Christendom*, Malcolm Muggeridge makes this powerful observation. He says:

I conclude that civilizations, like every other human creation, wax and wane. By the nature of the case there can

never be a lasting civilization anymore than there can be a lasting spring or lasting happiness in an individual life or a lasting stability in a society. It's in the nature of man and of all that he constructs to perish, and it must ever be so. The world is full of the debris of past civilizations and others are known to have existed which have not left any debris behind them but have just disappeared.

He goes on to say that

...whatever their ideology may be, from the Garden of Eden onwards such dreams of lasting felicity have cropped up and no doubt always will. But the realization is impossible for the simple reason that a fallen creature like man though capable of conceiving perfection and aspiring after it, is in himself and in his works forever imperfect. Thus he is fated to exist in the no man's land between the perfection he can conceive and the imperfection that characterizes his own nature and everything he does.

Nations rise and nations fall. Every nation has followed this progression from bondage to bondage. The nations of this century will be no different. But let us not accept the Marxist notion that these are fixed and intractable laws of history. Christians can point to unusual times when revival has redirected the inexorable decline of a civilization. In the Old Testament, Jonah saw revival postpone God's judgment of Nineveh. In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther and John Calvin saw a Protestant Reformation transform Europe. And even in the history of the United States the First and Second Great Awakenings changed individuals and our society.

But apart from God's intervention, nations will decline and eventually pass off the scene. Much of the Old Testament records the history of the nation of Israel. It passed through these same stages and so will every country in the world.

As Christians we must recognize that nations will rise and

fall just as individuals will be born and die. Our civilization will not last indefinitely, but will eventually pass off the scene. Only God's Word endures forever. We should not put our trust in the things of this world for they are destined for destruction. Instead, we should put our faith in God and His word.

The Decline of the Family

Nations most often fall from within, and this fall is usually due to a decline in the moral and spiritual values in the family. As families go, so goes a nation.

This has been the main premise of thinkers from British historian J. D. Unwin to Russian sociologist Pitirim Sorokin who have studied civilizations that have collapsed. In his book *Our Dance Has Turned to Death*, Carl Wilson identifies the common pattern of family decline in ancient Greece and the Roman Empire. Notice how these seven stages parallel what is happening in our nation today. In the first stage, men ceased to lead their families in worship. Spiritual and moral development became secondary. Their view of God became naturalistic, mathematical, and mechanical.

In the second stage, men selfishly neglected care of their wives and children to pursue material wealth, political and military power, and cultural development. Material values began to dominate thought, and the man began to exalt his own role as an individual. The third stage involved a change in men's sexual values. Men who were preoccupied with business or war either neglected their wives sexually or became involved with lower-class women or with homosexuality. Ultimately, a double standard of morality developed. The fourth stage affected women. The role of women at home and with children lost value and status. Women were neglected and their roles devalued. Soon they revolted to gain access to material wealth and also freedom for sex outside marriage. Women also began to minimize having sex relations to conceive children, and the

emphasis became sex for pleasure. Marriage laws were changed to make divorce easy.

In the fifth stage, husbands and wives competed against each other for money, home leadership, and the affection of their children. This resulted in hostility and frustration and possible homosexuality in the children. Many marriages ended in separation and divorce.

Many children were unwanted, aborted, abandoned, molested, and undisciplined. The more undisciplined children became, the more social pressure there was not to have children. The breakdown of the home produced anarchy.

In the sixth stage, selfish individualism grew and carried over into society, fragmenting it into smaller and smaller group loyalties. The nation was thus weakened by internal conflict. The decrease in the birthrate produced an older population that had less ability to defend itself and less will to do so, making the nation more vulnerable to its enemies.

Finally, unbelief in God became more complete, parental authority diminished, and ethical and moral principles disappeared, affecting the economy and government. Thus, by internal weakness and fragmentation the societies came apart. There was no way to save them except by a dictator who arose from within or by barbarians who invaded from without.

Although this is an ancient pattern of decline found in Greece and Rome, it is relevant today. Families are the foundation of a nation. When the family crumbles, the nation falls because nations are built upon family units. They are the true driving social force. A nation will not be strong unless the family is strong. That was true in the ancient world and it is true today.

Social commentator Michael Novak, writing on the importance of the family, said:

One unforgettable law has been learned through all the disasters and injustices of the last thousand years: If things go well with the family, life is worth living; when the family falters, life falls apart.

The Decline of Values

There are many factors in the decline of a nation. Certainly a major one is the breakdown of the family. But another potent but less perceptible force is the power of ideas.

False ideas are bringing about the decline of western culture. Carl F. H. Henry, in his book *Twilight of a Great Civilization*, says:

There is a new barbarism. This barbarism has embraced a new pagan mentality . . . not simply rejecting the legacy of the West, but embracing a new pagan mentality where there is no fixed truth.

Today we live in a world where biblical absolutes are ignored, and unless we return to these biblical truths, our nation will continue to decline.

To understand how we have arrived at this appalling situation, we need to go back a century and look at the influence of five intellectual leaders who still profoundly affect the modern world. The first person is Charles Darwin (1809-1882). In 1859 he published *The Origin of Species* and later published *The Descent of Man*. His writings blurred the distinction between humans and animals since he taught that we are merely part of an evolutionary progression from lower forms of life. Darwinism, as it came to be called, not only affected the field of biology, but became the foundation for the fields of anthropology, sociology, and psychology.

The second person is Karl Marx (1818-1883). He and Friedrich Engels published the *Communist Manifesto* around 1850, and Marx devoted his life to writing about the demise of capitalism and

coming of communism. He understood the importance of ideas. Marx once wrote: "Give me twenty-six lead soldiers and I will conquer the world." (So did Benjamin Franklin.) The twenty-six lead soldiers are the keys on a typewriter. The pervasive influence of communism in the world today is testimony to the truthfulness of his statement.

The third person is Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918). Although he may not be as well known as the other two men mentioned, his influence was just as profound. He was a German Bible scholar whose theory on the dating of the Pentateuch completely transformed Old Testament studies.

Wellhausen argued that the early books of the Bible were not put together by Moses but were gathered together many centuries later by several different men called redactors who wove various strands together. He and his disciples established an anti-supernatural approach to the scriptures which is influential in most denominational seminaries today.

The fourth person is Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). He merely took the logical implications of what Darwin was doing in biology and applied them to what today is known as psychology and psychiatry. Freud argued that humans are basically autonomous and therefore do not need to know God. Instead, we need to know and understand ourselves since our problems stem from those secret things that have evolved in our lives from our past.

A fifth person is John Dewey (1859-1952). He is the founder of modern education and published his first work, *The School and Society*, in 1899. John Dewey was also one of the co-signers of the *Humanist Manifesto* in 1933.

Dewey, like Darwin and Freud, believed that humans are autonomous. They don't need to have an authority above them but can evolve their own system of education. Thus the very foundation of modern education is anti-supernatural.

Ideas have consequences, and false ideas can bring down a nation. The theories of these five men are having devastating consequences in our nation and world. Unless we return to biblical absolutes, our nation will continue its decline.

Spiritual Decline

The decline and fall of nations is usually due to internal factors rather than external threats. Even though some may have fallen to barbarians, their demise ultimately came because of moral and spiritual weakness which manifested itself as military weakness. Historians have listed the stages in the decline of a nation. These should not be too surprising to any student of the Old Testament. The stages of decline parallel the stages through which the nation of Israel passed.

But neither should they surprise a student of the New Testament. In the opening chapter of the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Rome, he traces a similar progression. In fact, Romans 1 shows the decline of a civilization from a societal perspective. Looking at the Hellenistic world of his time, he reflects on the progression of sin in a nation.

The first stage is when people turn from God to idolatry. Although God has revealed Himself in nature to all men so that they are without excuse, they nevertheless worship the creation instead of the Creator. This is idolatry. In the past, this took the form of actual idol worship. In our day, it takes the form of the worship of money or the worship of self. In either case, it is idolatry. A further example of this is a general lack of thankfulness. Although they have been prospered by God, they are ungrateful. And when they are no longer looking to God for wisdom and guidance, they become vain and futile and empty in their imaginations. They no longer honor God, so their foolish hearts become darkened. In professing to be wise, they have become fools.

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This progression happened throughout the Bible and to Greece, to Persia, to Babylon, and to Rome. And if it happened to these nations, then it can happen today. Unless we return to God's principles, decline and destruction are inevitable.

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