Tale of Two Republics

It’s hard to read an historical account of the ancient Roman Republic without being tempted to compare its successes and failures with America. For some, it follows that if the mighty Roman Empire fell because of moral, economic, and military blunders, the U.S. shall relinquish its greatness by committing similar errors. The problem with this argument is that it’s a form of political reductionism that leaves out the providence of God. He alone determines the destiny of nations and peoples. He alone brings revival, causing people to repent and nations to turn from sin.

Although we can find similarities between different historical settings, every historical event is unique. And even though similar patterns of behavior might be found in both eras, modern America is very different from ancient Rome. With all of that said, there are certainly trends within cultures that prove to be deleterious to the social fabric that binds together a nation.

In this article we will compare social trends and attitudes found among the ruling class of ancient Rome with those of modern America. In one sense the empire built by the Roman Republic was itself surprisingly modern. Its success was powered by large scale business enterprises, cutting edge technology, and economic opportunity for the upper class. It also had a highly structured and disciplined army that made it the dominant military force on the planet much like America is today. Although only a small percentage of the total population was involved, the Roman Republic engaged a significant number of people in the political process which was rare for any nation until modern times.

Another similarity between the ancient Romans and modern Americans is that both tend to see themselves as the “most morally upright people in the world.” This dangerous human

tendency is amplified by military success and goes hand-in-hand with the unspoken assumption of “How could an immoral people prosper as we do?”

In the recent book, *Rubicon,* by Tom Holland, the story is told of how changes in the Roman culture and leadership eventually brought an end to 460 years of the Republic, ushering in a period of absolute rule by Augustus in 27 B.C. Using material from this book, we will look at how big business and materialism corrupted politics and foreign relations, how power distorted justice and reduced individuals to a commodity, and how nationalism was twisted into a tool for building political power and personal gain. Finally, we will explore how individuals were able to overthrow the Republic and impose tyrannical rule on Rome in the name of tradition and conservative principles.

America is not ancient Rome. However, without the constraints of a biblical worldview it is not hard to see how a future leader or political movement might steal the republic from the American people all in the name of patriotism and tradition.

Big Business, Materialism, and the Military

Back in the sixties, protestors against the war in Vietnam focused on the danger inherent in what was called the military-industrial complex, the partnership between the American companies producing weapons and military supplies, and those who used them. The charge was that America was using its military to both protect and feed America’s big business concerns, and in return, big business was providing the military with what it needed to be dominant on the battlefield. In a speech in 1961, President Eisenhower warned that

> *In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.{1}*

He went on to explain that

> *This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence—economic, political, even spiritual—is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government.{2}*

Rome had its own military-industrial complex. As proconsul of the East (in 64 B.C.), Pompey occupied Antioch, the capital of Syria, and shortly afterwards Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judea. His justification was to protect Roman interests in the region which turned out to be mostly business interests. Pompey was willing to intervene in or impose direct rule on any territory in the interest of maintaining peace and a good business environment. This *Pax Romana* protected unbridled exploitation by Roman entrepreneurs.

The Roman Republic was fueled by big business and its military victories were often turned into a license to make money. Cities were ransacked for treasure, mining was conducted on a scale not to be witnessed again until the Industrial Revolution, and in one city, smelting furnaces caused pollution so bad that naked skin burned and turned white upon exposure.{3}

A culture that encourages limitless greed and personal glory opens itself up to unbridled corruption and bloodshed. The Romans soon found that the republic they so cherished could not survive with leadership that would go to any lengths, and tell any lie, that might keep them in power. The American republic is also fragile. When a "profit at any cost mentality" becomes too embedded, it corrupts both accounting practices and governmental policy.

God did not spare even his people when it became evident that they were corrupted by greed. The prophet Amos warned Judah that God was bringing on judgment because "They [the people of God] trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed."{4} God is still concerned about justice. It will always be in every nation's interest to seek justice for all people and to act upon ethical principles beyond the profit motive or personal glory.

The Politics of Power

One common trait of both the ancient Roman Republic and the early United States is that they shared a dependence on slave labor. The Romans believed that if a man allowed himself to be enslaved, then he thoroughly deserved his fate. As they conquered much of the known world, the Romans plundered the wealth of each new territory, and human beings were a major part of this booty. The empire established a single market that moved slaves around the Mediterranean Sea in vast numbers. Millions of slaves owned by wealthy and not so wealthy Roman citizens performed most of the tasks that made Rome rich and powerful.

Even though slavery had virtually vanished in Christian Europe, it was reestablished when the Portuguese began to trade with Africa in the mid-fourteenth century. There had always been slavery in Africa, and it was further developed by Arab traders after the emergence of Islam which regulated its

use. Eventually, the Portuguese took over the slave trade and made it more impersonal and horrible than ever. As the Portuguese and Spanish traveled westward, they brought slavery with them. This slave trade became an early component of life in the New World and, eventually, in America.

The result of this dependency was living in constant fear of slaves and a slave revolt. In the Roman Republic, Spartacus led a group of slaves in such a revolt in 73 B.C. that grew to be an army of over 100,000. The rebellion was eventually crushed by politically ambitious leaders Crassus and Pompey. Crassus sent a violent message against future revolts by having the defeated army of Spartacus crucified every forty yards along a one hundred mile stretch of road outside of Rome. America experienced its bloodiest conflict in the Civil War, primarily over the slavery issue. Both cultures endured a degradation of society as a result of slavery. Thomas Jefferson thought that slavery was an evil institution that corrupted the slave owner more than the slave, yet he owned and traded slaves most of his life.

The Roman Republic continued to live with the tension of slave ownership and labor until its demise. The U. S. ended slavery, but has continued to suffer the effects of enslaving an entire people for centuries. Distrust and anger still exist between races in America, and the gospel message is often tainted because the Bible was used as a justification by some for enslaving millions.

When a society recognizes the uniqueness and significance of each citizen, it is acknowledging the biblical teaching that all individuals are made in God’s image. How the current conflicts over other moral issues such as abortion and euthanasia are settled will determine whether we continue to move closer to or further from this biblical principle.

Conservatism Abused

The word *conservative* can mean different things to different people. However, as the name implies, it usually points to someone who is trying to conserve or protect traditional values, values that are often seen as fundamental to both the creation of and the continuance of a nation or political entity. Conservatives argue in defense of what are often called the "permanent things" relating to spiritual, political, and familial ideals. Conservatives in the Roman Republic and the current United States have both referred often to these "permanent things." In some cases, the "permanent things" have been used as a screen to support other agendas or to simply gain power and prestige.

The "permanent things" of the Roman Republic were quite different from today's America. The myth of Romulus and Remus, whose simple childhood home was preserved on a hillside in Rome, is one example. Their legend includes a violent struggle against one another, ending in the death of Remus, which over time came to depict the enduring struggle between the aristocracy of Rome and the plebian class. Another permanent ideal was the freedom from economic or political slavery that was felt by many Romans to be the key to the Republic's success. A corollary to this freedom was the severe meritocracy supported by the unwritten constitution that guided the nation. Each man was to seek glory and wealth in the name of Rome, and his success or failure would determine his destiny. Strong leaders such as Sulla would sometimes violate the ancient rules of Rome and its unwritten constitution in order to "save it" from perceived or real threats to the Republic. For example, in 88 B.C. Sulla led an army on Rome, violating an ancient tradition. Generals commissioned to serve Rome swore never to enter the city with their soldiers, a tradition that had existed intact for hundreds of years. Sulla claimed that he violated this tradition in order to save the Republic from his political

enemy Marius, but he was acting mostly out of desire for personal power and glory.

Ancient Rome also had its traditional religious beliefs and institutions. The temple of Jupiter was at the center of the city as were temples to other Roman gods. Political careers could be ruined if one ignored the traditional role of religion in Roman culture.

America has obvious traditions regarding the role of government, family, and religion. It is unlikely that an outspoken atheist or someone who denied the authority of the U.S. Constitution could be elected president. However, the Roman Republic was lost when men, in the name of conserving the traditions of the Roman people, began to ignore the very rules established by those traditions in their pursuit of personal power and glory.

The Fall of the Republic

Another group which grew increasingly more influential in the Empire and its provinces were the *publicani.* These were businessmen who ran large business cartels that benefited from the unquestioned dominance of Rome's military power. These business ventures sold shares, had shareholder meetings, elected directors to a governing board, and were as profit motivated as any present day multinational corporation. Although they held no official government title, the *publicani* wielded considerable authority in Rome's provinces and were held in contempt for their merciless extraction of wealth by any means necessary.

This military-fiscal complex corrupted what had been a traditional policy of isolationism in Rome. One provincial administrator, Rutilius Rufus, attempted to restrain the abuse caused by the *publicani* and tax collectors but was himself brought to court, convicted, and exiled in 92 B.C.

Eventually, the provincials fought back. Finding the provinces of Asia poorly defended, Mithridates, the King of Pontus, quickly defeated the Roman forces and encouraged the locals to take their revenge. In the summer of 88 B.C. he ordered the massacre of every Roman and Italian left in Asia. Eighty thousand men, women, and children were killed during one bloody night. Mithridates was seen by the Greeks as a divine source of retribution against the hated superpower of the day. The execution of the Roman commissioner Manius Aquillius provides a vivid picture of the animosity held by many towards Rome. Mithridates order some of the gold treasure held by the Romans to be melted down. Then, Aquillius's head was held back, his mouth forced open, and the molten metal poured down his throat.

I am not equating Rome's experience with modern America. It would be too easy and false to match Osama bin Laden's motives and actions with those of Mithridates. But unfortunately, any nation that rises to the level of wealth and power that the U.S. has will attract resentment and jealous hatred. At the same time, we have to be wise stewards of all that God has blessed us with. We should be known for our justice and mercy, not just our military power.

Even if we do everything right, some will resent our actions. That is why Christians in business and government must avoid even the appearance of evil and work to make America a source of healing and freedom for oppressed people everywhere. We cannot allow those who mislabel our deeds cause us to grow weary of doing good. We should never fall victim to donor fatigue when it comes to hunger or natural disaster; God has blessed us with too much to not get involved. The difference between the Roman Empire and the U. S. is our awareness that God requires much from those who have been given much.

Notes

1. Public Papers of the Presidents, Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1960, p. 1035-1040 Found at http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst306/documents/indust.html
2. Ibid.
3. Holland, Tom, *Rubicon* (Doubleday, 2003) p. 41.
4. Amos 2:7

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