

Remembering the Roman Republic: **Can America Reclaim Civic Virtue?**

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—J. Rufus Fears, David Ross Boyd Professor of Classics and G.T. and Libby Blankenship Chair in the History of Freedom, University of Oklahoma



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The history of Rome—especially, the republic’s rise to greatness and its eventual demise—serve to guide and warn modern Americans about the core necessity of civic virtue to the life of a healthy and vibrant republic.

The Roman Republic steadily dissolved as it lost these values. Unless it changes course, the American Republic will lose its greatness as well, becoming a shadow of what was or might have been.

Is it too late for us? Or, can we still learn from the Roman experience, and so avoid its fate? Can we evoke civic virtue in a way that is plagued neither by cynicism nor naiveté? And, despite an atmosphere of contention, can we experience an American renewal?

In the history of the Roman Republic, we find many eerily familiar parallels between its decline and our own troubling trends. As we look around, we don’t see concrete evidence of physical decay or danger. The threat of moral decay is much more insidious. The recognition and reversal of these trends lie at the heart of this essay.

However, a desire for reflective balance is also intended. It would be a mistake to draw rigid parallels between the histories of the two greatest republics the world has known and to frame all future decisions solely on these facts. As we chart our own course along some undeniably similar lines, it would be an even bigger mistake to ignore how Rome came to grips with emerging issues affecting a super power.

The Roman Republic didn’t collapse overnight. It crumbled, little by little. The cracks began to show as it consolidated its power. In the seventy years following this centralization, those cracks grew into fissures. Finally, the pieces fragmented as the Roman Revolution ran its course.

The revolution lasted one hundred years, ending when Octavian took what was left and cobbled it into the beginning of the Empire.

Roman Beginnings



Tradition says that Romulus and Remus were twin brothers. They were raised by a she-wolf after their extended family was slaughtered in an act of mass political assassination. When they came of age, they avenged their loss and founded the city of Rome in 753 B.C.E. According to the ancient legend, the people they formed into this new society were descended from Aeneas, sole survivor of the Trojan War who came to the Italian peninsula as a refugee.

Kings ruled Rome until 509 B.C.E. It is said that there were seven kings, the latter of whose reigns descended to the level of despotism, so that the people ejected the last king from Rome and the Republic was established. The late Regal Period served as an object lesson in how not to govern a society.



American Beginnings

Just as Rome originated in conflict that heroic figures resolved through decisive action, America also began with an heroic revolution against a king. George III of England had become a symbol of bad government. George Washington, America's own larger-than-life leader, was the commanding General of the Continental Army. After the successful American Revolution, he chaired the Constitutional Convention and then became the first President, unanimously chosen by the Electoral College. Even as young as our republic is, Washington has long carried his own mythology—right down to admitting that he chopped down the cherry tree because “I cannot tell a lie.”

Though history's two greatest republics are separated by two millennia, they share deep similarities—skilled early leadership; relentless pursuit of their aims; consolidation of power while expanding their respective borders; unrelenting determination; all the while managing to keep their excesses tempered by justice, the promise of a future better than the past, and the shared value of civic virtue. Both societies called upon citizens and leaders to sacrifice personal interests for the good of the whole.



The Roman Republic Emerges

What lay at the heart of the Roman Republic's character? The Romans were devoted to civic virtue. They were willing to sacrifice their personal interests for the good of the whole, a principle powerfully illustrated by the ability to muster seventy thousand strong from the Italian peninsula as each season for military campaigning began. Unlike the eastern powers of the Alexandrian world, Rome did not rely on mercenaries. Its soldiers provided their own arms as acts of citizenship. And, when the threat was grave, the response was exponentially more potent, as we shall see. The relentlessness, loyalty and thrift of the Roman people and their leaders made it a formidable society.

Rome had no written constitution; a system of checks and balances grew out of its curious mixture of evolutionary change and practical innovation. Much of the Roman social order depended on political tradition. Governance initially involved election of magistrates from the elite classes. Roman consuls assumed the functions of the monarch and stood for election, with two consuls sharing power for a one-year term.

Popular assemblies exercised the power to vote, but, especially in the early years, the weight of voting power varied according to social order and wealth. This conservative approach to government led to the Struggle of the Orders, a class conflict that wove its way through Roman life in the late fifth through early third centuries, B.C.E. The eventual result was power sharing among elite patricians and the more common plebians. The emerging ethos was based on collegiality and respectful regard for one's peers, as well as restraint in the seeking and holding of office and the implementation of new laws. Custom was often more important than strict legislative process.



The American Republic Emerges

As with the complicated system of Roman elections under its unwritten constitution, America developed a system of checks and balances under our written one. The United States Constitution, as originally conceived, provided for direct elections of the members of the House of Representatives; for the several state legislatures to choose the members of the United States Senate; and for popularly chosen electors to determine who would be President. The judiciary was independent and the judges were appointed for life. Other terms of service were clearly defined, and each group had some role in the preservation and advancement of the American Republic.

Not only self-restraint and tradition, as in the Roman model, but a written Constitution containing a difficult amendment process, laid the foundation of the State. When asked what form of government America would have as the Constitutional Convention drew to a close, founding father Ben Franklin replied, "A republic, if you can keep it."

Even so, the Constitution was imperfect. We had our own version of distorted voting power. It was not based on social class among the free citizenry, as in Rome, but consisted of counting slaves as part-people when computing a state's population to apportion its congressional representation. No votes, of course, went to the "part people" living under bondage. And, owning property or being a woman affected one's eligibility to vote or stand for office at times and places in American history. Indeed, they still affect it; the most typical candidate for U.S. Senate has always been the wealthy white male.

Be that as it may, the Constitutional Convention was a success. America developed a system of representative government with the means for a peaceful transition of power.



The Model Roman Leader

Many who rose to prominence in the Roman Republic were citizen-soldier-statesmen. The archetypal leader was Cincinnattus, who served as consul, then later as dictator. To the Romans, "dictator" was not necessarily a pejorative term; it meant a magistrate with extraordinary power who served for a period of six months, or until the crisis that he was called to redress had passed. Cincinnattus was said to have come to the rescue of Rome twice in the fifth century B.C.E. during times of crisis. When those threats were repelled, he promptly retired to his farm. Republican government survived. The Roman military leaders who carried out their duties in the Republican Era served politically, then made way for others. Their society was vested in public service.



The Model American Leader

It is no surprise that America turned to George Washington, citizen-soldier-statesman, to be the first President. Having successfully led the Continental Army to secure independence from Great Britain in the Revolution, he consolidated the young United States with skilled leadership. After two terms, he voluntarily declined to run again, stating in his farewell address that every president must limit himself to two terms in office in order to preserve the spirit of America's Republic roots. The spirit of Cincinnattus lived.



Roman Expansion

As Rome was ordering its internal affairs by refining mechanisms for voting, it also addressed external matters. It began to consolidate its power on the Italian peninsula. The Romans defeated rivals and formed alliances, but were often plagued by attacks from northern barbarians, such as the Gauls. While the Roman army is the historical gold standard for military might and discipline, its story was not one of uninterrupted successes; but when Rome suffered setbacks, it rallied mightily. This character trait of relentlessly pursuing its aims would become a hallmark of Roman history, echoed in the American experience

The citizen-soldier-statesmen who emerged from successful military campaigns gained power and prestige, having won the confidence of the people. Staring down death's throat and prevailing had a way of elevating the status of some above others.

As Rome consolidated power throughout Italy, its alliances strengthened and privileges were extended to those upon whom Rome could rely. Colonization increased, with Roman settlers bringing Roman values, customs, people, and economics to increasingly distant places. The outcome was Roman dominance in Italy, with the development of strong alliances beginning there, even while it was largely being ignored by the older powers to the east.

Later conflicts with its Italian allies during the "Social War" of 91–88 B.C.E. eventually led to their allies being granted Roman citizenship.



American Expansion

Much as the Romans struggled in the early years of the Republic to form a united country and culture on the Italian peninsula, the early decades of the American experiment reflected internal struggle and external expansion. Territory was acquired by purchase and conquest, and settled much in the Roman fashion. Migration occurred from established areas toward the frontiers. America's struggles between North and South, and its dependence on a partially slave-based economy, echoed the experience of Rome, which contended with the slave revolt Spartacus led from 73 to 71 B.C.E.

American consolidation was preserved when the Union prevailed in the Civil War, and was strategically completed with the westward expansion. The culmination of this relentless, century-long process unleashed vast natural and human resources to provide for American emergence as a world power.



Rome Meets Carthage

Rome's increasing influence did not go unnoticed in the West. Carthage was a mercantile and naval power based in North Africa that had been founded by Phoenician people from the eastern Mediterranean. Its public character was more attuned to economics than politics. Distinguishing these two civilizations, Professor of Classics Garrett G. Fagan of Penn State University comments that Rome was principally more motivated by loyalty to allies, sociopolitical issues, and a powerful sense of honor and prestige; Carthage was more motivated by commerce.

If one were fortunate enough to have Rome as an ally rather than an enemy, it was loyal to a fault. Alliances with others drew Rome and Carthage into the First Punic War. It started as a minor dispute over Sicilian spheres of influence and control of sea lanes. But it grew into direct conflict between the two powers of the western Mediterranean. The war lasted over twenty years and ended in 241 B.C.E. Rome prevailed because money-conscious Carthage failed to prepare financially for the construction of a new Roman fleet. Rome had not been a naval power before, and its first sizeable fleet had already been destroyed. That Rome rebuilt its fleet in these circumstances shows its unrelenting determination. Carthage surrendered to Rome and became deeply financially obligated to it as a peace term. The vigor, resilience, and growing power of Rome in the First Punic War were on display for the world.

The peace between Rome and a Carthage bent on revenge did not last long. Hannibal, the great Carthaginian general, invaded Italy in 218 B.C.E. by marching 90,000 men—supported by cavalry and elephants—across the Alps into Italy from the west. In response, Rome mustered 700,000 men to meet the approaching horde. Despite Rome's numerical and home soil advantage, Hannibal won tremendous victories on Italian lands over a three-year period. The most notable was at Cannae. Impatient for a decisive rematch with Hannibal after two major losses, and led by its consuls, the Roman army was caught in a double envelopment at Cannae and massacred in detail. As many as 70,000 were slaughtered. The city of Rome lay almost defenseless in Hannibal's path.

Yet, Hannibal could not, or would not, press the victory. With one Roman consul dead in battle, the other returned to the Senate, wounded and bleeding. He received an ovation and a vote of thanks—on the heels of a devastating defeat. In sharp contrast, a failed Carthaginian general's reward upon returning home was to be crucified.

Rome eventually opened up new fronts against Carthage, and Hannibal withdrew from Italy for Spain in 203 B.C.E. to defend Carthaginian lands there.

Publius Cornelius Scipio (later called "Scipio Africanus the Elder"), an emerging Roman military leader, took the fight to Carthage. He defeated Hannibal at Zama in 202 B.C. The cost was immense to Carthage, as it again surrendered. With this defeat, Rome had effectively vanquished its most lethal foe in the West.



America Meets the Imperialists

Like Rome, we honored alliances. In 1914, Europe became embroiled in controversies over territory and spheres of influence. Authoritarian states, such as Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, went to war with Russia and the liberal democracies of Western Europe. As we came to aid Britain and France, we gained strength and prestige through increased involvement in world affairs. American force tipped the balance in that war.

An infinitely more sinister form of imperialism reared its ugly head within two decades, a form that married territorial ambition with racial and ethnic hatred. We again honored our alliances to protect liberty. As World War II expanded, Franklin D. Roosevelt's lend-lease program to aid Britain served as a lifeline for the lone remaining European democracy standing against Hitler's aggression. Our full-fledged involvement against the Axis Powers followed the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

The early days of the war did not go well for the United States in any theater. Yet, a Roman-style perseverance and resilience paid off, as we again provided the decisive measure of western force, and the Normandy invasion led to the liberation of Europe. As with the First and Second Punic wars that the Roman Republic fought against Carthage, the American Republic twice fought against Germany, the most lethal threat to freedom on the European continent.

Millions volunteered, fought, sacrificed, and set aside personal priorities for the good of the whole, a massive expression of civic virtue. The foundations of this response had been laid long before. Beginning with George Washington, the country turned time and again to citizen-soldier-statesmen for leadership.



Rome Meets Other Foes

By skillful diplomacy and force of arms, Rome was able to extend its influence to the eastern Mediterranean. Even amid the suffering and strain resulting from the Second Punic War with Carthage, the Roman Republic honored its eastern alliances and sent troops to aid the kingdoms of Pergamum and Rhodes, in Asia Minor, against the Seleucid Empire, centered in what is now Syria.

Rome also honored its eastern obligations to send forces to assist allies in Greece. It was invited to intervene during the First and Second Macedonian wars, accomplished what was needed, and then withdrew. Rome even proclaimed anew the traditional “freedom of the Greeks,” and was hailed as a liberator.

But there were limits to its patience. After being called back time and again, and believing there was no satisfactory military solution against the Greek tendency to fight zero sum wars among Greeks, Rome eventually took a permanent place in the East.

Yet, it is telling that Rome had previously been willing to withdraw. The ancients viewed expansion as the natural order of things, as it brought additional power, prestige, and wealth to a people who taxed occupied lands heavily and so relieved the citizenry’s own financial burden. Rome’s restraint, measured against conventional wisdom, was admirable.

The Roman Republic was emerging supreme. Such was its stature that, in 133 B.C.E., the King of Pergamum, having no heir, willed his kingdom to his Roman allies.



America Meets the Communists

With the Axis Powers vanquished in 1945, peace gave way to a new phenomenon: Cold War between nuclear states. It is not surprising that the first two elections in the atomic age saw military veterans chosen to serve as America’s Chief Executive. Harry Truman, Captain of an artillery battery he helped raise in World War I and later a Colonel in the Army Reserves, was a classic citizen-soldier-statesman. He won our first presidential election after he completed the defeat of the Axis Powers in World War II. He implemented the Marshall Plan to rebuild our European allies following the wreckage of Hitler’s aggression. The next person to win the presidential election was Dwight D. Eisenhower, General of the Army and the great allied commander of the European theater. More importantly than the top men, though, is this: when Time Magazine chose its Man of the Twentieth Century, it was the “American G.I.” The best traditions of the Roman Republic lived on in the American warrior.

As one looks back on that era, the greatness of those involved shines brightly. Truman was a New Dealer and a decisive and effective president. Eisenhower emerged from military leadership, and judiciously consolidated the American position at the onset of the Cold War as he presided over an economic expansion.

One cannot consider the New Deal Democrats and Eisenhower Republicans, and fail to see civic virtue—from both the elected leaders and the civic-minded people. The debate was comparatively high-minded, carried on between Democrats who saw the government as a tool to secure the future of the middle class, and Republicans who questioned how to pay for it. The situation was similar to Rome at the end of the Second Punic War—though stretched on two fronts, our enemies were defeated, our allies protected, and we were climbing the pinnacle of moral, economic, military and political greatness. Unlike our Soviet counterparts, when we went to the aid of another country, it emerged the better for our involvement. The countries in the American sphere learned to practice authentic self-government, rather than a sham Moscow-based version. And, we were often there by invitation, not fiat. Western Europe, Japan, and South Korea are obvious examples of success. Vietnam is a painful exception. The internal discord that conflict created also sounded a warning bell for increased American turmoil.



Rome's Trouble Amid Greatness

Even as Rome's power and influence expanded, an undercurrent began that spelled the doom of the Republic. Cato the Elder, an arch conservative member of the Senate, built a political career out of attacking and undermining the great general, Scipio, so that Scipio withdrew from public life and went into self-imposed exile. Cato served as consul and later as censor, a powerful administrative position that reviewed public morals. His legacy was as a fear-monger, bent on hectoring Rome into attacking and destroying the now-feeble Carthage.

The destruction of Carthage in 146 B.C.E. during the so-called Third Punic War was among the most shameful episodes in the history of the Roman Republic. Historians agree that Cato's desire, and his followers' eventual actions, were intended to eliminate Carthage as a commercial power, rather than for the ostensible reason of protecting Rome from harm.

Cato's super-patriotic rhetoric and his xenophobia were not limited to the Carthaginians. He extended his disdain to the Greeks. Not surprisingly, given the vicious spirit that was emerging, Rome also destroyed the ancient Greek city-state of Corinth in 146 B.C.E. Power was mutating into brutality.

With the defeat of its enemies and the expansion of its domain, the influx of wealth into Rome was huge. Here, more seeds of self-destruction were being sown. The wealth was used to bribe officials, control elections, and consolidate land in the hands of the elite, using slave labor to compound the value that the wealthy realized from their acquisitions. The citizen-soldiers, who had taken up arms as an obligation of civic virtue, could not maintain the financial viability of their small lands when competing against the huge agricultural businesses that the wealthy senators and members of the equestrian class were forming. Retired soldiers, once the honorable backbone of the Roman Legions, were becoming part of a landless mob as the wealthy acquired their holdings at distressed, fire sale prices.



America's Trouble Amid Greatness

As with the early signs of disaffection following Rome's success in the Second Punic War, post-World War II America began to experience rifts. Senator Joe McCarthy began his red-bating. Social divisions occurred over issues like civil rights, with demagogues milking every prejudice they could find for political gain. The xenophobia and arch-conservatism of race-baiting and red-baiting cliques recall Cato the Elder.

But still, we rockily moved on through the Korean War, the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam, Watergate, and the Women's Movement, along with the periodic waxing and waning of America's economic fortunes. From the Truman through the George H. W. Bush administrations, we slowly won the Cold War and vanquished our next great lethal enemy, the Soviet Union. Our determination and vigilance are reminiscent of the Roman Republic, and stand in contrast to Carthage—a civilization too preoccupied with short-term accumulation of wealth to part with the money it needed to spend to preserve the empire itself.

American persistence put Richard Nixon in position to open up dialogue with China and the Soviet Union. Later, the conservative hawk Ronald Reagan found someone with whom he could negotiate in the Russian reformist, Mikhail Gorbachev—at least, that is, from a position of strength.

But what else happened over that span of time? Economic data pointed toward stubbornly resilient and sometimes widening gaps between rich and poor. Divisive social issues, such as the civil rights movement and the sexual revolution, began to take center stage. Also, the quality of public discourse badly degraded. While negative campaigning and attacks have been around since at least the Adams-Jefferson presidential campaign of 1800, the tone had generally improved by the early 1900s. From then, until around the Watergate era, political discourse, on the presidential level at least, had reached a level of comparative civility.

By the 1988 presidential election, the battle of ideas had taken a back seat to caricature. Citizen-soldier-statesman George H. W. Bush, who, in World War II, volunteered to serve as one of the youngest Naval aviators in American history, made the calculated decision to attack Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis in a highly personal fashion. Bush painted him as a flake. Between the racially laced Willie Horton ads to show Dukakis was “soft on crime,” and using the Pledge of Allegiance as a club to beat then-Governor Dukakis over the head (he had vetoed as unconstitutional a Massachusetts bill requiring all school children to say the pledge), the elder Bush easily won the election.

He surely could have done so without these tactics. This was a departure from earlier versions of effective negative ads, such as LBJ’s “Daisies” or Reagan’s “Bear in the Woods.” Those ads employed powerful imagery to persuade the public to vote one way or another around national security concerns; but they were not directly personal.

Since then, the office of the President has been further demeaned. The elder Bush’s reelection campaign sought to transform the 1992 race into a referendum on the challenger’s character. The challenger, William Jefferson Clinton, won. Is it merely coincidence that the first two modern presidential campaigns where silliness was the rule, rather than the exception, occurred after the Cold War had been strategically won (1988), and when the field had been cleared of Soviet power (1992)? Or, had we reached the point that the Roman Republic reached after the Second Punic War—with no great external threat visible, the time had come to settle old scores at home?

Clinton was the most able politician of his generation, but squandered much of his political capital (and maybe his legacy) with dalliances and efforts at denial. At least he was a positive campaigner and Chief Executive, a visionary and practical leader able to see and manage the complex relationships among taxes, government spending, the budget deficit, the national debt, the economy, the financial markets, foreign trade, foreign relations, and the phenomenon underlying it all: the growing pattern of globalization. Nor, for his part, did citizen-soldier-statesman Bob Dole spend much time groping around to find mud to sling in Clinton’s direction during the 1996 election.

After that almost bearable campaign, the political discourse took a nosedive again in 2000. Albert Gore vs. George W. Bush was an ugly race. With the younger Bush’s contested election, we had a second straight president who was not a combat veteran. Clinton purposefully avoided military service in Vietnam, a war he opposed. The younger Bush served in the Texas Air National Guard rather than going to Vietnam to fight a war that he supported. Perhaps the lack of volunteer combat military service by either in their generation’s armed conflict contributed to their polarizing effects with an electorate who were still stinging over the Vietnam War.



Roman Revolution

Some tried to reform the troubled Roman Republic. Tiberius Gracchus, grandson of Scipio, was educated as a stoic and was committed to its philosophical concepts of liberty and equality. A reformer by nature, he was elected Tribune of Plebs for the year 133 B.C.E., an office whose role was to serve as advocate and champion of the people. He could convene assemblies and votes, and veto legislation. Tiberius Gracchus soon proposed legislation that would revive old laws limiting the amount of public land anyone could hold in order to reallocate it to small farmers who would be eligible to receive the land because of their military service. He sought to take advantage of the land the King of Pergamum had devised to the Roman Republic, by using taxes from Pergamum to fund a Roman land reform program.



Tiberius Gracchus had early success in his reforms, but later met resistance. Undeterred, he broke badly with the Roman tradition of collegiality by deposing others from office and sidestepping traditional restraints on political behavior. He then failed to honor another tradition of Roman statesmanship by securing an extended tenure in office. The result: even though his reforms may have been noble-minded, he did not follow the Roman customs, leading to opposition from a now-reactionary Senate.

In a pressure-charged moment, opponents within the Senate rose and murdered him, throwing his body in the Tiber River. Three hundred of his supporters were killed along with him. Restraint would no longer rule the day.

Tiberius' brother, Gaius Gracchus, came to power as Tribune ten years later. He was intentionally antagonistic toward the Senate, and sought to curry favor with the people by providing them cheap grain. He lost popularity when rivals did him one better and provided free grain, and when the Roman citizens objected to his plan to expand the full benefits and franchise of citizenship to Italian allies of Rome. Gaius Gracchus and his followers, three thousand in number, were killed in a brawl-turned-riot, and martial law was imposed.

The reformer Tiberius Gracchus, and the demagogue Gaius Gracchus, broke with tradition when exercising their power. The Senate took the departure several steps further, setting the precedent for violent reprisals by killing the Gracchi and their allies.

The social order of the Roman Republic had been broken. Ensuing years would see self-proclaimed “saviors” of Rome, like the dictator Sulla, crush other traditions. Sulla entered Rome under arms to “save” it from his opponents. He also established the practice of proscription, publicly posting the names of his enemies in 82 to 81 B.C.E., authorizing anyone who killed them to claim their property.

Warfare became increasingly open and protracted, and later versions of the landless mobs became wild cards as the first century B.C.E. wore on. Julius Caesar was both a popular favorite of the mobs, and an incredibly able general. He was also a gifted historian and a shrewd politician. He outmaneuvered his chief rival, Pompey the Great, to eventually take control of Rome itself. Yet, he was magnanimous in victory, not posting proscriptions as Sulla had done.

But personal ability and magnanimity, when wielded by one with excessive power, were doomed to fail. The power concentration itself had become an insurmountable problem to republican life. By now, the Revolution had reached the more destructive level of consuming civil war. After Julius Caesar had won the Gallic wars and situated himself in the City of Rome, he was assassinated by his own friends in 44 B.C.E. They claimed to be saving the Republic—a claim that was by now becoming farcical, as office tenures had increasingly been extended and powers expanded beyond the traditional republican restraints. By his will, Caesar adopted his nephew, Octavian, and left him with a claim to the seat of power.

The next phase of the Revolution followed. Lesser players were eliminated in the struggle for Rome before Octavian defeated Marc Anthony and his paramour, Cleopatra, at the naval battle of Actium off the coast of Egypt in 31 B.C.E. Octavian extended his power base beyond the West as he took control of Anthony’s eastern sphere of influence. The wealthy Ptolemaic empire of Alexandrian Egypt was now under centralized Roman control.

The extent of Roman power and wealth had become exceptionally broad. But the Republic was dead. Octavian, later Augustus, consolidated power and assumed the title “Princeps,” holding himself out as first citizen. Augustus maintained some facades of republican structure, but governed in a more autocratic manner, though often wisely and well. After one hundred years of war, it is difficult to blame him for taking this step.



American Discord

The first term of the George W. Bush presidency saw a continuation of unsettling post-World War II trends. The distance between rich and poor increased with the wealthiest Americans receiving huge tax cuts and the poorest laboring under a sluggish economy, heightened unemployment, and a deteriorating jobs base. Divisive social issues—entanglement of church and state, debates over reproductive rights, and gay rights—occupied national attention and became political wedge issues. Extended tours of duty by military reservists and members of the National Guard strung out these volunteers without the President or Congress dealing honestly with long-term military needs for an open-ended war on terror where preemptive action was among the tools in the military kit. This back door draft has had a serious financial and personal impact on volunteers and their families, many of whom did not receive extension of healthcare benefits. It has resulted in increased pressures on them, personal and financial, that make their futures murkier and burden re-enlistment and recruiting efforts. The pattern of hypocrisy continues into 2005, as House Republicans refused to reappoint the chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee because he has traditionally wanted to spend “too much” money on veterans’ benefits. The accumulating wealth and profits stateside, as the soldiers sacrifice overseas, recall the abuses that led to Tiberius Gracchus’ early reform attempts.

Among our elected leaders, civic virtue has often fallen by the wayside, as many have not found a way to treat the military personnel with true justice, rather than with mere words of appreciation. The norm has become to subordinate society’s interests to one’s own narrow interests, rather than subordinating personal desires to the public good. We have lost sight of the notion that, in the long run, we all benefit from shared sacrifice. Cutting taxes in time of war while simultaneously creating huge budget deficits, and encouraging people to discharge their patriotic duty by spending money, are a far cry from the victory gardens and the massive voluntarism of the past.

Political tactics have also continued to degrade. We are not only inundated with negative advertising—hardly novel in campaigns, though more acute now—but are also saddled with the willingness of many politicians to do things simply because “they can.” The Clinton impeachment was a raw exercise of political power. His successful defense: a rallying of partisan opposition.

The quest for political power has become excessive. Newt Gingrich pushed for Articles of Impeachment because he could. He and his lieutenants broke with precedent and displayed the lack of collegiality and political restraint that recalls conflicts between the Gracchi and the Senate. Gingrich had earlier threatened to allow the country to default on payments on the national debt if Clinton did not accept his budgetary priorities. Fortunately, he backed down on the default threat, and the impeachment he helped engineer did not undo the results of a lawful election, or spawn murderous rampages.

Character assassination among politicians is reminiscent of the Roman Republic's decline. Cato the Elder attacked Scipio after his essential services for the survival of Rome were completed. Cato exercised his power in the Senate to undermine the better man, harping on his own "traditional" version of Roman values as justification. All the while, he enhanced his own wealth and political position. Scipio, the great warrior, went voluntarily into exile.

Cato's abuses are further echoed in the discredited political advertisements that the "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth" procured against John Kerry and in CBS releasing bogus "memoranda" regarding George W. Bush's National Guard service. We seem obsessed with attacking the qualifications of someone for the office of president, based on what he allegedly did more than thirty years earlier.

But this shrill tone, unpleasant as it may be, is not the core problem of American public life. It is really more of a symptom, pointing to the root cause: the decline of civic virtue. Many of the elected officials in whom we have placed the sacred trust of the welfare of our republic have abandoned the citizen-soldier-statesman model of civic virtue and become self-serving, shortsighted, opportunists. It is left to the sovereign will of the people, and their continued vigilance, to stop that trend.

The money inundating politics has accelerated our decline. Perpetual fund raising, targeted advertising, and unfettered Internet access allow dissemination of propaganda, which the major media dutifully "report." The result is unchecked and unbridled attacks. Except for the physical violence, it is reminiscent of the unpredictability unleashed by Gaius Gracchus' demagogic appeals or by the Roman mob's rallying around Julius Caesar.

While President Bush initially showed some signs of reaching out since the election, his backers spoke of a "mandate"—from a 51-48% margin! Forty-eight percent of Americas is well over 100 million people.

"Mandate" is hardly a credible use of language here, and gives little comfort that the priorities of the loyal opposition will be fairly considered. And, this sort of distortion of what a word means promises to widen, rather than mend, the existing breaches of our social and political fabric.

A small majority cannot legislate values against a large minority, and a certain respect and tolerance for fellow citizens would be a better tool for progress than ballot initiatives, aggressive legislative agendas, or judicial rulings. At the end of the day, people's relationships with their loved ones, with their communities, and with God as they understand him, are much more likely to affect values-driven private behavior than what comes out of Washington. To fight continually over social or personal issues forces us into discussions about the government limiting constitutional and human rights. Do we want to perpetuate discord even at that level, where the highest personal and community values are at risk?

The model has become brinkmanship rather than negotiation. The legislative bodies have been so closely divided that even considering the possibility of bipartisan compromise came to be seen as a weakening of resolve or as allowing an opening for an opponent to attack. The American political leadership and opinion-shapers have been all too willing to engage in scorched-earth policy. We have now reached the threshold of decay. Whether we cross it is up to us



Roman Remnants

Rome's dominion expanded under the empire, even as its character degraded. Juvenal, the first-century C.E. historian, bemoaned how civic virtue had been overtaken by a desire for "bread and circuses," governmental tools to pacify the masses. The lean, hard people of the Republic, who lived in modest houses, honored tradition, and served as citizen-soldier-statesmen, were being replaced by leaders who put their sumptuous wealth on display.

But Rome itself did not collapse, even though the republican government had. In the second century C.E., it reached new heights of wealth, power and size. It was a time when a good emperor might act like an old-style citizen-soldier-statesman. There is a story of one of the second-century emperors who, while he was traveling among the people, was approached by a widow and asked to hear her petition for justice. When he refused on the grounds that he was too busy, she told him that he should quit being emperor if he did not have time to listen. Sitting under a tree, the emperor heard her out.

The great ones of the second century—Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius—were as accessible as could be hoped in a vast domain. And, they still administered justice impartially.

This all changed in the third century C.E. as Rome fell under greater pressure. Generals and pretenders to the throne came in droves, internally struggling for power, even as the borders were threatened externally. Hyperinflation ensued. Dark days had descended on Rome.

By the fourth century C.E., order was restored. But the emperor had become a remote figure, surrounded by pomp and circumstance, covered in layers of wealth. Bureaucracies multiplied. Governmental offices that in the past had been positions of public trust held by the honorable as a result of their service had become routes to ill-gotten wealth. Tax burdens were excessive as the people were forced to pay for the elites' lifestyles and became encrusted in bureaucracy and a national security state. One gets the haunting feeling that, by the time the western half of the Empire fell in 476 C.E., all which once made Rome great had vanished long, long before. The civic virtue of the Republic had melted away. It was replaced by those ambitious generals and dynasts who sated their lust for power and wealth, and who acted from pride and greed. Their shadow side, the tragic flaw of hubris, consumed the Roman successes. Outrageous arrogance had supplanted civic virtue, and individual power had overtaken the triumph of right ideas.



To Reclaim Civic Virtue

Neither the Roman Republic, nor the Roman Empire, collapsed overnight. There were missed opportunities all along the way to staunch the hemorrhage. In the case of the Republic, a number of possibilities dance around the imagination: Had Cato not called for the destruction of Carthage; had it and Corinth been spared and Roman restraint maintained; had Tiberius Gracchus not broken with tradition in his rush to reform; had Sulla not set the precedent of marching on Rome to “save” it; had Julius Caesar been less imperious; had Augustus restored the Republic in substance after consolidating his power, rather than just preserving its form; then, the outcome may have been vastly different.

But it wasn't. Each expedient decision involved a departure from civic virtue. Their cumulative effects were devastating.

One early warning signal that we share with the Roman Republic is the tendency to be bewitched by clever and compelling distractions. Like Juvenal, the wise observer is vexed with how bread and circuses manipulate us. We are drawn to wealth, which in turn allows us to afford many products and services that take our minds off what matters to the life of a republic. Cable and satellite television and the radio are our constant companions; the internet pulls us into a cyberspace maze. Chain stores and on line shopping add convenience as the message, express or implied, is that worth arises from consumption of what someone else deems to be valuable. It is a narcotic as powerful as the gladiators' games.

As Rome at one time was, America is now in a phase of history when decisions bear compound interest. It is a divided country, though not yet one in acute crisis.

Who will reclaim civic virtue? In reality, all must participate.

There must be a movement away from the Congressional sniping of the last decade, and toward a responsible model of government where representatives reasonably debate the validity of ideas, rather than seeking sound bites which ridicule opponents and employ the tactics of character assassination. The warm images of Republican President Ronald Reagan and Democratic Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill swapping stories and drinking beer together in the White House while working toward a legislative compromise seem coldly distant now.

There appears to be little appetite for bipartisan statesmanship right now. The Speaker of the House pulled from consideration an intelligence oversight bill that had considerable Republican and Democratic support—more than enough to pass the House—because the Republican support, considered alone, was not sufficient enough for the Speaker's taste. He only wanted legislation that a majority of the majority party would support. This triumphalist, party-welfare centered approach to legislation spells trouble.

So does the ease with which the majority party was willing to manipulate or change its own rules in both houses of Congress—until the public called them on it. Having once passed a rule that an indicted member of Congress could not serve in a leadership post (an effort to contrast Republican virtue with Democratic corruption) that reform was quickly forgotten when Republican House Majority Leader Tom DeLay began to face the possibility of indictment.

In the Senate, Arlen Specter’s presumptive chairmanship of the Judiciary Committee was called into question because of his misgivings about the appointment of judges who would curtail abortion rights. The powerful freedom of the press, and the public disapproval of these games, held the GOP lawmakers’ feet to the fire long enough to pull their misadventures up short.

The country as a whole must extricate itself from the bog of divisive social issues on which there will be no national consensus, and which will invite constitutional litigation and wrangling. A variety of state referendums have acted negatively on the question of same-sex relationships. But rather than declaring a victory and laying this political tool down for awhile, the Administration has signaled that it intends to wield it again. It cited the United States Supreme Court’s refusal to review the Massachusetts Supreme Court decision allowing gay marriage—one reached under state law, not federal—as a justification to again seek a Federal amendment banning gay marriage. Given the nation-wide lack of appetite for affording such relationships legal recognition anyway, and the traditional relegation of laws governing domestic relations to the states, the proposed amendment is not necessary to achieve its advocates’ objectives. That they still pursue it reveals more about political calculation than commitment to restoring good government.

America needs to look at same-gender couples, many of whom are already raising families, and recognize that, while marriage may not be the precise word to describe what already exists, they pay their taxes, raise children, run businesses, and often serve in civic organizations and as members of faith communities. Demonizing them for political gain cuts against the grain of core American values.

We need to achieve a sort of detente in our national squabble over reproductive rights, without the Administration sending doctrinaire nominees to the Senate for a judge-by-judge fight over this highly intimate topic. Divisive issues of church-state relations should also be taken off the table. The tendency to try and implement a legislative agenda on the most personal matters—knowing that around half the country will oppose what is being offered—is more about flexing muscle than reform. It is prejudicial to civility, honesty, and compromise.

The Democratic agreement to limit the use of filibusters on judicial nominations, in exchange for the Republican agreement not to try to eliminate the filibuster altogether, edged a little closer to bipartisanship. It also avoided a huge break with tradition, as occurred in the time of the Grachi. Whether the center can hold on such an agreement through at least one--and maybe more--Supreme Court appointments in the relatively near future, is another question. The president’s willingness to meet with leaders of both parties and seek their “advice” in the nomination process before seeking their “consent” in the confirmation process is an important step for which the administration should be commended. The nominee—Judge John Roberts—appears not only to have the solid conservative credentials Bush desired, but also to be a man of sufficient accomplishment and fair-mindedness to satisfy most Senate Democrats. Time will show whether the confirmation process reflects the early impressions

These are good steps; but only the American public can still the perpetual discord over the long term. Even though our votes were sharply divided, the American ideological center of gravity is essentially moderate. To quiet the noise and return to a more traditional way of government, we should acknowledge that private values issues cannot be solved politically, legislatively, or judicially. The battle over them should be set aside in favor of doing something actually conducive to legislation—like dealing with military needs or budgetary problems.

We have cut ourselves off from the proverbial public square, from each other, and also from self-awareness and self-knowledge. We are absorbed by distraction. This growing sense of isolation feeds the dangerous illusion that one person's actions are inconsequential. We must ask ourselves to awaken and start talking to each other about things that matter.

Can civic virtue—an expression of what we do publicly—reemerge as a “values” issue that unites, rather than divides? If it does, then some type of Social Security reform might be able to work. There are possibilities of a good actual compromise rather than parroting one political party's own preferences, then the other's, about what is to be done. We can take an approach to health care that controls costs, extends benefits, assures fair compensation to caregivers, and does not degenerate into name calling over “frivolous” law suits brought by trial lawyers, the excesses of “greedy” insurance companies, and the accusations of doctors being “arrogant” and unable to admit professional errors. This use of loaded language about large groups of people is excessive and, at bottom, dishonest. It creates a straw man to blame for our ills but offers no cure.

Other tensions abound, and must be addressed. We must find a way both to drive the engine of the economy and to protect the environment. And, we must deal with a growing budget deficit and looming national debt—a major shift from the large budget surpluses and debt retirement of the late 1990s.

Foreign policy will also require serious critical thought. America must lead a fractured world. It must rebuild and honor the old alliances and create new ones. Give the Administration credit for trying recently, even though there have been some awkward bumps. If we do not succeed at this, we will be stretched too thin to bear the burdens.

Iraq and Afghanistan hang in the balance. Other nations in the Middle East are showing democratic rumblings. Will we follow the model we established in Western Europe, Japan, and South Korea—leaving light footprints while building strong allies? The other possible model is Vietnam, where the Western powers left deep, rutting footprints, as they did in Latin America.

In Iraq, we are sitting astride huge oil reserves in an increasingly oil-dependent world, what some see as the modern equivalent of the territorial annexation that occurred during antiquity. How we will discharge the responsibility of stewardship over this strategically essential commodity, both now and when Iraq gains a greater measure of sovereignty, remains to be seen. The Roman willingness to withdraw and proclaim “the freedom of the Greeks” provides a sound model.

Questioning one's patriotism because of differing methods of fighting terrorism must go away. If we were able to defeat the Central Powers of World War I, the Axis Powers of World War II, and the Eastern Bloc of the Cold War, we can surely defend ourselves from religious fanatics in the Middle East and Asia—just as the Roman Republic defended itself from the barbarians. But political calculation must give way to principled decision-making. Senior Bush advisor Karl Rove badly damaged his own already shaky credibility by artfully dodging the responsibility of having drawn attention to a covert CIA operative's identity, even as other White House personnel denied his involvement and promised reprisals if anyone on the White House staff were involved in the disclosures. If the issue is serious enough for appointment of a special prosecutor, it is serious enough to hold Rove accountable for whatever role he had in the disclosures, even if his actions were not criminal.

The movement away from opportunism and back toward civic virtue requires a nuanced balance rather than simplistic answers. We need to be prepared, but not a culture of fear; strong, but not a culture of war; and we cannot sacrifice our essential civil liberties, cringing over what a shadowy enemy might do. Otherwise, we will inflict on ourselves what the terrorists could only dream: a Statist rejection of freedom, threatening our own eventual downfall. FDR was right; we have nothing to fear, but fear itself.

In this endeavor, we have critical tools that the Roman Republic did not. One is a written constitution. While we are guided by tradition, we are bound by the core document of our national identity. Willful departure from it actually is an impeachable offense, unlike some other theories of late. Another tool is universal suffrage. Not just male citizens (particularly those of a propertied class with a weighted vote), but virtually all adult citizens, have the right to vote. This, along with constitutional restrictions on governmental activities, empowers the individual to prevail against tyranny of the majority.

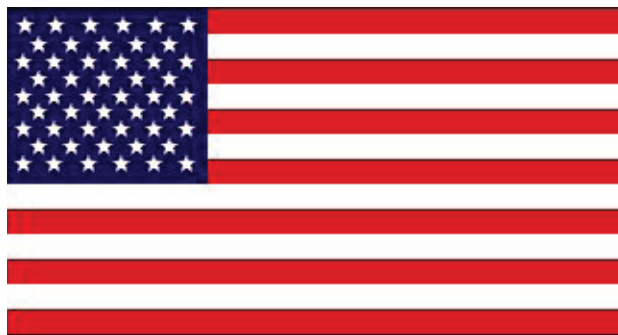
The voters, the citizens, bear ultimate responsibility for the welfare of the Republic. If we take our obligations seriously, and we hold the elected officials to the highest standards, then we can preserve, and even expand, the quality of our own Republic. But we have got to quit snarling at each other for effect as a tactic to gain the upper hand. Serious issues are to be debated seriously--even passionately. But trivialities and games of "gotcha" are a betrayal of the public trust. This process will inevitably lead to some mistakes. We have to be willing to forgive our elected officials, particularly when they are trying to reach a workable solution to a difficult problem. Think of the Romans after Cannae.

By learning the lessons of history, and applying them reasonably to our own era, we can preserve and improve the American experiment. With every election cycle, and every session of Congress convened; with every bill voted on, and every one signed into law; with every life-changing public or private decision; with every business started; with every faith community gathered together; the great promise of our Republic endures. No matter what mistakes another great civilization may have made over two millennia ago, or even that we ourselves have made in the last two centuries, each day offers anew this chance:

**To form a more perfect union . . . and secure the blessings
of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.**

—Preamble

United States Constitution



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