
Why America Is Not a New Rome

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Preface

Comparisons of the Roman Empire, the most powerful state of classical antiquity, and the United States, the most powerful republic of the modern world, have been around for long time, but in a muted, off-center way. Soviet propagandists and European leftists used such comparisons (focused on expansion and far-flung empire building) for decades, but only a combination of events and trends that were too unexpected to be anticipated (and too strange to be invented) made the notion almost commonplace. The key event was the sudden (and amazingly nonviolent) demise of the Soviet empire before the end of 1991. The key trend, preceded by America's speedy and decisive victory in the Gulf War, was also unexpected: after the hardships of the 1980s America enjoyed vigorous economic growth during most of the 1990s, the shift powered primarily by the diffusion of microchip-based manufacturing, commerce, communication, and personal computing.

As a result, the world's richest large economy reached a seemingly unchallengeable position of strategic superiority and unprecedented level of average affluence. But these admirable achievements had their obverse in rising trade deficits, growing private indebtedness, retreat of manufacturing, and excessive consumption; and these trends were accompanied by ubiquitous gambling, endless spectacles of televised violent "sports" (including extremely popular displays of fake, but nonetheless brutal, wrestling), drug addiction affecting millions, and the inescapable presence of celebrity worship. No wonder that many commentators saw in these displays clear parallels with the excesses and vices of ancient Rome.

But then the years of America's vigorous economic growth and irrational expectations (published books expected that the Dow Jones index would reach not just 40,000 but even 100,000) was ended abruptly with the deflation of the aptly named dot-com bubble in 2000 and, much more tragically, the attacks of 9/11 and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, followed less than a year and a half later

by the drive to Baghdad. Again, many commentators saw these events, particularly the invasion of Iraq, as quintessential imperial actions worthy of comparison with the ancient empire. And as that seemingly endless and bloody Iraq stalemate continued year after year, reminding many of Rome's protracted and costly engagements with the barbarians, another trend reminiscent of that empire's chronic troubles unfolded as the unchecked flood of illegal barbarians across America's no longer defensible borders added to the depressing perception of America as a new Rome.

Consequently, that grand analogy was sustained as much by new perceptions of America's profound challenges and visions of its impending decline as by the former similarities of great-power superiority. The earlier image (corresponding to Rome ascendant) was that of America as a great power with many enemies but with no equal, a dynamic society with fabulous domestic riches and aggressive ingenuity. The new image (corresponding to Rome in retreat) saw all of that transformed into ineffectual, impotent irrelevance as a once great polity yielded to excesses of obesity, gambling, and debt even as it confronted the suicidal Islamist challenge: in short, an empire in obvious decline.

The list of prominent U.S. intellectuals who have not surfed this fashionable wave may be shorter than the list of those who have published such facile comparisons. Empire allusions, comparisons, columns, editorials, and reviews have been proffered by people as different in their views as Joseph Nye, dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government; Charles Krauthammer, columnist for the *Washington Post*; and Cullen Murphy, for two decades editor at the *Atlantic Monthly*, who in 2007 published a book of some 200 pages to answer the question *Are We Rome?* The comparison has attracted opinion makers across the political spectrum, such as Gore Vidal and Tom Wolfe, the *New York Review of Books* and the Heritage Foundation.

Not surprisingly, European intellectuals did not need any prompting to (re)join that chorus. When, in 2002, Jonathan Freedland canvassed Britain's leading historians of the ancient world for his documentary on Rome as the model empire, he found that they were "struck by the similarities between the empire of now and the imperium of then." In 2003, Peter Bender, a leading German historian and journalist, wrote nearly 300 pages on America as the new Rome. In 2005, Giovanni Vianino drew direct parallels between *ideologie e prassi of impero Romano* and *impero Americano*. And, inevitably in this age of electronic logorrhea, one could spend many hours trolling through Web sites and chat rooms with such titles as *American Empire* and *America Is the New Rome*.

Much of this could be dismissed as just a fashionable wave of insufficiently informed commenting, irrelevant private scribbling, or superficial comparisons that pick out as singularly revealing some commonalities shared by virtually all complex societies, juxtapose a few analogical habits and preferences, and conclude that they imply identical long-term outcomes. But it is undeniable that the comparison does resonate for a variety of reasons and hence its validity (or lack of it) deserves a closer critical look.

I wrote this book to provide a corrective, not by criticizing prevailing comparisons but by concentrating on several fundamental realities: the very meaning of empire; the actual extent and nature of Roman and American power; the role of knowledge and innovation in the two states; the roles that machines and energy sources played in their quotidian lives; and their demographic and economic realities, comprising population dynamics, illness and death, and wealth and misery.

Not surprisingly, the complex and contradictory nature and achievements of the two great societies suggest many intriguing parallels and some amusing as well as disconcerting similarities. But a systematic appraisal of fundamental realities exposes truly profound differences that make casual comparisons of the two empires at best misplaced but more often irrelevant. Understanding this is important—important in order to avoid misleading parallels, and important in order to look ahead without the burden of false and counterproductive analogies. Superficial (albeit often clever) comparisons may make for provocative remarks on talk shows and intriguing essays or interesting books, but a systematic deconstruction of these recently fashionable preoccupations shows them to be wide of the mark.

At the same time, I have no illusions about the effect this book, or any similarly corrective exercise, will have in changing the public discourse.

Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (Quintilian; 35–95 C.E.)—a famous oratory teacher during Vespasian’s and Domitian’s rule and the mentor of both Gaius Plinius Secundus (Pliny the Elder) and the future emperor Hadrian—captured this challenge perfectly in the fifth book of his *Institutio Oratoria* when he wrote about dealing with dubious arguments that have little or no individual force based on their merit but that acquire great weight because of their numbers:

Individually, these points are trivial and commonplace, but taken together they are damaging—not like a thunderbolt, but like a shower of hail (*Singula levia sunt et communia, universa vero nocent etiamsi non ut fulmine, tamen ut grandine*).

How commonplace the mistaken notion of America as a new Rome has become is readily ascertainable by searching the Internet. A search for “American

inventiveness” and “American productivity”—two attributes that have been essential for the country’s ascendance—elicited in 2009, respectively, about 500,000 and about 5 million Google hits. In contrast, “America as a new Rome” produced nearly 22 million returns, and a query for “American Empire” came back with more than 23 million—a shower of hail indeed, and one so intense that even scores of rational correctives akin to this book are unlikely to attenuate its impact.