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Lessons from the Fall of Rome

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Summer 2003

One day shall come of haughty Rome, a deserved
blow from heaven. You will be plundered and de-
stroyed and with wailing and gnashing of teeth
you will pay.

- Cybeline Oracle

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In these times I think it is important and inspiring to re-
member the fall of Rome, as parable and as analogy. Rome is
remembered as the greatest of ancient civilizations. Its accom-
plishments are celebrated just as the so-called advancements
of this civilization, at the expense of the world, are trumpeted.
From the beginning, Rome had built its empire by conquest
and force of arms. It was ruthless in its lust for power, and
“insatiable in its ambition”, defining qualities characteristic of
all civilization itself. Rome was an imperialist empire, as they
all are, that controlled a great part of their known world and
expanded continually through conquest and colonization. The
Empire amassed huge armies of slaves needed to build up the
monster and on whose backs the empire was founded. But the

enslaved and humiliated barbarians were tired of it. As Rome waged its wars of conquest, rebellion plagued the empire and demanded constant repression.

I do not though make a distinction between different or separate civilizations. There are different cultures and societies, different variations, but there is only one civilization. All the civilized societies for the last 10,000 years are all part of the same monster, the same pathology. I only use Rome as an example. For at the time it was the most egregious example of civilization's destructiveness.

Just like the US, Rome engendered extreme contempt from its neighbors and colonies. At the height of its imperial reign, dislike for the Roman Empire also reached a peak. Resentment festered on the periphery. Not only were people degraded by Rome's colonization of them, but also Roman officials' flaunting of their wealth made them contemptuous and jealous. Romans always reveled in grandiose displays of power. They rode gold plated chariots through the streets with gold woven into their clothes attending lavish parties celebrating their excess. Americans drive around in their SUV's with diamond rings and fancy clothes, all created from the slave labor of their colonies. Americans conquer and slaughter people all over the world, then redirect all their riches and resources back to US corporations. This leaves the people unable to supply themselves with what is left and unable to live self-sufficiently, forcing them to depend on the colonizer. And we wonder why we are hated? We, the Romans, are living in plenty off the blood soaked stolen riches of our conquered and colonized victims.

I have no more faith than a grain of mustard in the future of 'civilization' I know now it is doomed to destruction— probably before very long. What a joy it is to think of, and how often it consoles me to think of barbarism once more flooding the world, with real feelings and passions— however

the civilization it leads does collapse, we dance on its ashes, to stomp out any and all trace of the tendency called civilization to ensure that an era of freedom and harmony will follow.

rudimentary—taking the place of our wretched hypocrisies.

- William Morris

It should be no surprise that the local Roman viceroy parading his riches through the streets would earn the hatred directed against the rulers and governors and all they represent. A later consequence of this was that the civilized rulers of peoples that Rome had colonized grew jealous and demanded that Rome share its wealth. This led several such non-Roman rulers, referred to as barbarians, yet as civilized as any Roman governor, to revolt and attack Rome demanding a portion of its spoils. Coincidentally, this was the situation with the famous barbarian group that sacked Rome in 410 AD that supposedly started the decline of the Roman Empire. The leader of that Gaelic tribe, Alaric, was an intellectual, a thoroughly civilized man who was well read in all the classical works, who spoke Latin fluently and was a great respecter of Rome.

He enjoyed the respect of Roman officials and was thought of as noble by them. He thought he and his people deserved a slice of the pie of Rome's riches. So he ordered his armies to attack Rome from the north and surprisingly met with little to no resistance. His forces were even welcomed at times, as the poor of the Roman cities/colonies sided with him and his armies hoping for a reprieve from the oppressive Roman order. He made it all the way to the city of Rome itself and demanded huge ransoms of gold, silver, crops, and iron when his protests were not heard. His forces were held at bay outside the defended city until slaves within Rome opened up the gates and let the barbarians in.

It was inconceivable that the very city of Rome itself in the heart of the empire could be attacked and destroyed. Romans thought the capital untouchable and never thought they might be vulnerable or that they could be victims themselves. It awak-

ened Rome to the threat its cruel policies created. This attack was an omen of catastrophe.

As Rome grew so too did the rest of the world's hatred of it. Just as Americans do now, Rome faced increasing hostility from the rest of the world it ought to dominate. Before September 11th, anti-US sentiment was at an all time high. With America's new fumbling puppet ruler, son of a former dictator hated for his own bloody rule, America's arrogance and brutality were brought to the surface and made easier to see for what it is.

With America's blocking of the Kyoto protocol, which was a world wide attempt to slow down the industrial emissions of greenhouse gasses, (a pitiful liberal reform attempt at using legislation techniques to stop industrialism's destruction of the planet) world wide frustration directed at the Imperial entity that is driving life on earth towards death rose to a high public pitch. US covert actions and backing of ruthless dictators has earned us the reputation of brutal overlords, and caused great disliking of America for years. Likewise, Rome's military conquests built up enemies of Rome that grew in ranks as the campaigns of conquest continued. These people fought back, waging more and more attacks on the evil empire. Resistance to Rome became more successful when barbarian soldiers who were forced to serve in the Roman army returned to their home and used their new military knowledge against the colonizer they learned it from.

Nature itself seemed to be conspiring against the empire.

Other things of note brought Rome to its demise. Rome had other bills to pay. The chickens *did* come home to roost in Rome in the various attacks and raids, revolts, uprisings and power struggles. But they also came from nature, which Rome had overtaxed beyond its limits. It was time for Rome to pay up on the debt it had borrowed from the ecosystem. The aqueducts that are acclaimed as so technologically advanced, that earned Rome such high respect from modern civilization and that set

any variant of civilization so far, to convince its subjects to maintain faith in it through over domestication, and also to achieve more and more technological advances that keep its decaying systems alive. Technological medicine helped fight the plethora of diseases ravaging the citizens of industrial civilization that surely would have ended it and yet will still bring it to its knees. "Advancements" in agriculture, like poisoning the land and water with fertilizers and domesticating and manipulating the genes that make up the very essence of life, have made it possible to feed over-populated human cities with an unsustainable food source that is quickly failing. The list goes on and on. Without these techno-fixes civilization would have ended as it should have, but none of these is anything but a quick fix whose shallow solutions will fail and lose their glossy image. So, yes, this death machine that is western civilization will ultimately collapse, it's just a matter of when.

Kingdoms fall, cities perish,
And of what Rome once was
Nothing remains except an empty name.
Only the fame and honor of those things,
Sought out in learned books,
Escape the funeral pyres.

—Florent Schoonhoven

When Rome collapsed it was followed by the Dark Ages. Although labeled such by the prophets of this civilization for its backwardness and slow technological progress, the Dark Ages were a period of a sort of proto-modern civilization, a horrible era not any better than what followed or preceded it. Will a similar "dark ages" follow the American Empire's collapse? We need to work hard to make sure that when America and

It is very interesting that Rome ultimately fell because of civilization itself. In fact, one of civilization's most basic tenets led to its collapse. The characteristic feature of civilization is displacement. Shut out by the Chinese landlords, the Huns had no option but to move west. As they moved they pushed all tribes in their path west as well. This cycle of displacement continued and many groups were pushed as far west as they could go and were pushed up against Rome's eastern borders. Expanding civilizations elsewhere displaced the famous barbarians that attacked Rome in the last few centuries.

From 235 A.D. to 285 A.D., a strong epidemic, declining supply of wheat, and barbarian invasions marked the beginning of the decline of the Roman Empire. The last emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was disposed of the throne. It is very interesting that the first and the last Emperors of Rome were named Romulus. The first president of the United States was named George, the current president is also named George. . . might he also be the last?

The fall of Rome was a magnificent event. An event to be celebrated, as it was the collapse of what was at the time the most destructive, alienating, and brutal society. Rome fell slowly, over a period of centuries. Civilization is collapsing, ever degenerating. Sometimes slowly, sometimes in fits of ecological catastrophe and social breakdown. America is also falling. But America is much larger an empire than Rome was, and all its vices, habits, hierarchies, and exploitation dwarf Rome in destructiveness. Its obsessions with ecological destruction make the modern techno-industrial empire all the more unsustainable.

The fall of Rome should be instructive. The contempt, jealousy, and hatred from its oppressed and colonized, the destruction of its ecological base, its over-extended empire, and top heavy bureaucracy all led to its fall. I propose that modern civilization has surpassed even Rome in all these factors. The only thing keeping this corpse propped up is its ability, superior to

Rome apart in history; drained the water reservoirs that once quenched its diabolical thirst. These water sources that allowed so many to live sedentary lives so unnaturally in huge numbers, crowded into cities made of dried earth, eventually ran out and stopped feeding this crazed juggernaut. The natural aquifers had been drained, and the ecosystems that thrived in them destroyed.

The roads Rome are famous for destroyed ecosystems across its empire. These roads allowed for easy transport of personnel, military trade, and the everyday managing of the empire. They separated intact ecosystems, disrupted animals' territories, and created artificial boundaries that affected essential animal behavior. Furthermore, they created water runoff problems and erosion. The roads, which allowed Rome to grow and maintain its empire, contributed to an ecological disaster.

Truly, the heritage of Rome is a desert. It clear-cut the forests in its colonies just as surely as it did its own. Civilization's touch destroys nature wherever it goes. Over-hunting, and agricultural attempts to feed the massive population depleted the "natural resources" (a civilized word for plants and animals). Soil erosion and salinization by agriculture sometimes led to the inability to feed the population, and it contributed in the long run to the collapse of the empire.

Words cannot express how bitterly we will be hated among foreign nations because of the outrageous conduct of the men we have sent to govern them. All the provinces are complaining about Roman greed and Roman injustice. I remind you gentlemen, Rome will not be able to hold out against the whole world. I do not mean against its power and arms at war, but against its groans, tears, and lamentations.

- Cicero

Rome was the greatest empire in the world because it was ever expanding. It grew to encompass all the land bordering the Mediterranean Sea, into Africa, the Middle East as far as the Caspian Sea. It extended far to the north throughout France and deeply into England. But the empire overextended itself. It grew so big that even with its many tentacles it could not maintain control. The empire had become unmanageable. Its armies could not be everywhere at once, and took too long crossing the empire when needed. It became impossible to maintain order so far from the capital.

Rome, as a large and complex society, had a huge bureaucracy. Bureaucracies reproduce themselves, and are ever growing. Eventually, the bureaucracy grew so large that it became unmanageable, it grew top heavy, and crumbled under its own weight. Getting food and provisions to the armies on the frontier became harder as the frontiers expanded further out. Orders took too long to get to the far reaches of the empire and direct control became impossible. When Rome fell it was waging wars on all sides, defending all its borders. On a parallel note, we are seeing a rise in attacks directed against America and its symbols and monuments of power.

I think something that should not go unnoted are the slave revolts within Rome. Rome's slaves outnumbered its citizens two to one in some places, so great attention was needed to keep them in control. Slaves were feared by the aristocracy who knew that if given the chance, many would slit their throats while they slept. The truth in the situation was expressed in the old proverb "Every slave is an enemy", showing that the Romans knew they were despised by their slaves.

Of course, a huge factor in the fall of Rome was the struggle for power. Late in Rome's history the Empire split between the East and the West. It is worth noting that it was in one of these struggles for power that emperor Constantine reportedly saw the vision of a burning cross in the sky with the

There were two main classes, the Plebian class made up mostly of Roman farmers and the poor, and the Patrician class who were the high-ranking nobles. All the officials in Rome were from the Patrician class. The richest were wealthy as the empire itself, but most of the inhabitants were packed into small multi-story apartments. Behind the splendor of the Forum where the Senate met, there were vast areas of crowded slums.

The wars of expansion had brought wealth and slaves. A half million slaves were taken from the conquest of Carthage alone. 10,000 slaves a day were brought in through Rome's main port. At its peak 1 in 3 people in Rome was a slave. Until the 5th century B.C. Rome was dotted by family farms, but small family farms were driven out by the large estates that started developing and came to dominate the landscape. The small farmers couldn't compete with the large estates that employed slave labor. It was also common for some peasants to return from compulsory military service to find that their land had been bought or stolen by aristocrats.

Soon the peasants were displaced and drifted into the cities, creating a new urban underclass. This caused the city of Rome to grow to 7 million people, the largest city in Europe until the Industrial Revolution. No jobs were available because the huge slave population was used to perform the needed tasks. But thousands of hungry citizens would have been a threat to the peace of the city. So the government set up a program to feed the poor called the "dole", a daily ration of food and small sum of money. Soon, half the people living in the cities were given the grain dole. One-fourth of the grain from Africa was given to the poor of Rome. 70-80% of the population relied on one grain.

Our history now plunges from a kingdom of gold,
to one of iron and rust

- Eutropius, Roman historian, end of 3rd century
A.D.

ferred a unique chance to behold that novelty. It seems that the animals represented wildness as a whole. Scenery in the Coliseum would be changed to replicate the world that the beast was from to reenact the hunt. This was done to recreate the process of conquering the wild, the ritual of civilization.

The crowds had such an appetite for exotic animals that many of the animals used for coliseum games were hunted to extinction. A whole species of African elephant was among many others used in the games that were made extinct. In a humorous letter, Cicero discusses the shortage of wild animals to be captured in the province of which he was provincial governor: "there is a remarkable shortage of the animals, and only a few of 'those panthers' remain". The stench of death at the coliseum became so overwhelming that they tried to cover it up with a system of sprinklers spraying perfume throughout the stadium. I am reminded of all the myriad ways in which the stench of death that civilization carries with it are covered over, or ignored.

An interesting analogy between Roman culture and American is that the gladiators were seen as sports heroes are today. They were admired by children and some small toys of gladiators were found. Many statues of famous gladiators had figures of wild animals as their penis, making clear the connection between patriarchy, domination, and conquest.

Tacitus said in the 2nd century A.D.,

Robbery, murder, are all disguised under the Name
Empire.

As Rome grew, so too did the gap between rich and poor. "A cruel inequality that would haunt the empire till its very end". Rome was booming from spoils of war and nature. If you were rich enough to enjoy it, life in Rome was indeed like the Rome we hear of. But for most, it was a life of squalor. Class lines were rigidly drawn, and hostility between the classes was intense .

words "In hoc signo vinces", "By this sign you will conquer". He had the cross painted on the shield of his army and was victorious against his rival for power in a bloody battle outside of Rome. This was the first in a long line of violent battles fought for power under that sign, the cross. When his armies were victorious he converted to Christianity and declared it a legal religion in Rome, giving it the legitimacy and boost it needed to rise to power and become the agent of destruction that it did. Before this, Christianity was a small unpopular cult. This move to make it legally accepted not only spelled disaster for the world and its future, but also even for Rome itself.

The largest way in which Christianity aided Rome's downfall was the role it played in the bureaucratic split between East and West Rome. Part of the reason Constantine moved the capital to Constantinople was because Rome was still mostly Pagan and not Christian. The division into two empires, really undertaken by Dioclesian, was an attempt to stop the decline of the empire. The split quickened the collapse because it created a large number of additional government officials and bureaucracies. These added to the heavy inflation weighing on the empire. This was possibly the only time Christian missionaries and zealots hurt civilization instead of expanding it.

It wasn't long until Christianity produced the first ascetic monks, which should be no surprise since in this new religion suffering was a mark of holiness. They practiced self-deprivation and a rigid renunciation of desire. It effectively tamed desire and instinct. Christianity directly embodied the values of civilization. Constantine later used Christianity to unify the empire because it preached the values that civilization is based on: obedience, discipline, and monotheism. Constantine ruled with absolute power and saw himself as the thirteenth apostle. Soon there were over sixty decrees outlawing other religions and Christianity took no time developing its oppressive patterns for years to come.

The Western Roman Empire centered at the original capital at Rome fell first in 476 AD, followed a few centuries later by the Rome of the East, which degenerated and then rose again as part of the Byzantine Empire.

While stands the
Coliseum,
Rome shall stand;
When falls the
Coliseum,
Rome shall fall;
And when Rome falls
- the World.

- Lord Byron

With their world collapsing into chaos, the Roman's thirst for macabre distraction grew. Rome celebrated its anniversary and its victory over Romania in the most fitting way, with 117 continuous bloody days of ongoing gladiatorial games in the Coliseum in which 9,000 gladiators died and countless more animals were slaughtered, while barbarians hammered at the walls and rebellion broke out in the provinces. In fact, distraction was a key feature of Rome. Intent to distract themselves, most Romans "did not notice the social fabric shredding around them". The Roman rulers learned early on the value of appeasement in controlling the people, and in keeping them distracted. Rome's most effective means of doing this was "Bread and Circuses". The "Bread and Circuses" was the government giving the people what they wanted, to keep them happy. The Roman government gave out food to the poor to keep them content, a daily ration of food and small sum of money, and provided lavish entertainment to divert their attention.

The great gladiatorial games of Rome were part of Rome's methods of distracting and controlling the people. Even the poorest people could at least look down on those punished in the Coliseum. These games and competitions served the purpose that T.V. does now. Most emperors spent huge sums of public money keeping the people amused. The Coliseum itself was built as a gift to the people, and admittance was free. It was an attempt to buy off the people. The events were ultra spectacles. The gladiators, from the word gladius for sword, went to great lengths to keep the crowd entertained and distracted. When the gladiators fought they made it as dramatic as they could to increase the spectacle, making large swings with their weapons when they weren't necessary.

It is easy to see how important the games were to the rulers; there was an amphitheater in every Roman town. In fact, an amphitheater was seen as essential to every roman city, along with a market place, theater, and courthouse. The word coliseum itself comes from the word Colossus. The famous arena was actually named the Coliseum during the Middle Ages, after the colossal statue of Nero that stood beside it. But its real name at the time of its use was the Flavian Amphitheatre.

The Coliseum held 60,000 spectators, more than most of the modern stadiums. The amphitheater in the city of Pompeii held 5 times more people than its total population. But the immense popularity of this form of distraction is best exemplified by the size of the Circus Maximus. The Circus Maximus was the circular racing arena, also in the city of Rome, where the chariot races took place. It held 200,000 spectators!

Animals were used extensively in the Coliseum games. The animals were there to wonder at, to fear, to dominate, and to die. They were wild, captivating spectacles from beyond the order of civilization, captured at civilization's edges. The frontiers had been pushed out so far that there was little exposure to the other, the savage for the average Roman. So when exotic animals were brought back from Rome's distant campaigns, it of-