

THE PLAIN DEALER

NONFICTION

Some interesting answers to an unoriginal question

Are We Rome? By Cullen Murphy. Houghton Mifflin, 272 pp., \$23.

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A creaky drollery - variously attributed to Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, among others - identifies America as the only society to have passed from barbarism to decadence without an interval of civilization in between. The implied comparison, of course, is with the rise and fall of Rome.

Parallels between Rome and America have a long pedigree. The founders of our country frequently and self-consciously invoked the stern civic virtues of the Roman Republic in making their revolution and creating a nation. A downstate city commemorates Cincinnatus, a Roman landowner who, like George Washington, saved his country, then voluntarily relinquished power and returned to his farm.

More recently, the Roman Empire has become a favored trope for describing America. "Declinists" bemoan our moral laxity at home and "imperial overstretch" abroad. "Triumphalists" hail the United States - the "indispensable nation" - for maintaining the global pax americana.

Now comes Cullen Murphy, longtime managing editor of the "Atlantic Monthly" and currently "Vanity Fair's" editor-at-large, with "Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America."

Such meditations are often ponderous, but Murphy's book is uncommonly witty and wise. He displays an insouciant touch in noting the coincidence that Rome's legendary founder and her last emperor were both named Romulus, and wondering what "if the demise of America were to occur under a president named George."

Even while teasing out similarities between ancient Rome and modern America, Murphy remains well aware that analogy is not the same as analysis. He refrains from drawing facile "lessons of history," the only thing the past teaches for certain is that the future is unpredictable. And he largely eschews the obvious comparisons centered on "decadence" and military might. Neither jeremiad nor celebration, this volume employs Rome's past as a framework to ask trenchant questions about our own present and future.

Murphy explores five major areas in as many chapters. One is the self-centered, blinkered worldview held equally by those who inhabited the "eternal city" on the Tiber and "inside the beltway," along the Potomac. A second, related topic is the curious mixture of "studied ignorance, intense involvement and instinctive withdrawal" from the rest of the world exhibited by ancient Romans and many modern Americans. Inevitably, such outlooks lead to the arrogance of power and some nasty surprises.

A third chapter concerns both the Roman legions and the 21st-century U.S. military becoming "too large to be affordable and too small to do everything" asked of them. One baneful consequence is the recruitment of barbarian tribes or the hiring of private security firms to defend national interests. Another is a gulf that increasingly separates civil society from its military.

Murphy's fourth key point centers on the erosion of the "distinction between public and private responsibilities" evident in imperial Rome, and our recent "privatization binge." In Rome, this led to a complex, corrupt web of lobbying and patron-client deal-making. In our own day, its excesses culminate in the likes of Jack Abramoff.

Finally, Murphy investigates the idea of "borders" not merely as fixed and impermeable boundaries, "but as a dynamic zone where the interactions of different cultures" inaugurate significant transformations on either side. The Roman Empire and the United States have not only enormously influenced the outside world; they also rank among history's greatest assimilation machines.

So, are we Rome? According to Murphy, "In a thousand specific ways . . . obviously no. In a handful of important ways . . . certainly yes." Based upon his findings, he offers several general policy prescriptions intended to prolong the American experiment, still ripe compared to Rome's run.

More profound than any of these, however, is his observation that two factors ultimately ensure a society's health. One is its peoples' material and spiritual well-being. The other is their confidence in themselves and that society. As the Roman historian Livy wrote, "An empire remains powerful as long as its subjects rejoice in it."

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