

Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America

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Book by Cullen Murphy

Houghton Mifflin \$24, 272 pages

In order to demonstrate the power of the Roman Empire, the Emperor Hadrian once ordered a unit of mounted cavalry to swim across the Danube and back again in perfect formation. On seeing this the barbarian leaders "stood in terror of the Romans". Nearly 2,000 years later, as the Balkans crisis raged, US negotiators fostered the co-operation of the Serbian leader, Slobodan Milosevic, by seating him under a Cruise missile. The desired effect was much the same.

Such illuminating analogies form the bulk of Cullen Murphy's *Are We Rome?*, a mesmerising book on the similarities between the superpowers of Rome and the USA. While the Capitoline Hill in Rome is explicitly mirrored by Capitol Hill in Washington D.C., Murphy sees the ceaseless flow of grain into Rome, matched by the flow of taxes into Washington's coffers, as the truer likeness. And he notes an endemic corruption that pervades both - although political contributions now come in hard denarii rather than olives and fish.

At the edges of the empires, Roman military bases in the north of England share much with American bases in Iraq. And though the US army dwarfs even the massive Roman legions, its problems are comparable. As geographical distances once starved Roman armies of military intelligence, now the sheer wealth of information hamstring the US - as when the warnings about September 11 were lost in a surfeit of data. "Bureaucracy is the new geography," Murphy states.

As Roman legions once subcontracted crucifixion to private contractors and protection of the empire to barbarian clans, so the Pentagon now uses "extraordinary rendition" to outsource interrogation, and calls on such companies as MPRI, AirScan and DynCorp to deploy troops, run military bases and launch coups, all in its name (and pay). Murphy worries that the nation's military is becoming increasingly aloof from citizens' concerns, and that a form of corporate feudalism is rapidly approaching in which Americans will become little more than serfs to private concerns. Civilian contractors are the barbarians of today.

Of course, when Murphy asks, "are we Rome?" he is really asking whether America will end like Rome - in dissolution. But he does not believe history is doomed to repeat itself. Asserting with Livy that an empire remains powerful "so long as its subjects rejoice in it," his cure is to promote assimilation, foster cosmopolitanism, and somehow regain an uncynical faith in strong government. He suggests that national service would resuscitate the patriotism of the early American (and Roman) republic, and bring the citizenry back in touch with the military. It is a classical solution - unfashionable, impractical, yet undeniably sane.

George Pendle is the author of "The Remarkable Millard Fillmore: The Unbelievable Life of a Forgotten President" (Three Rivers Press).

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