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## "Are We Rome?"

**Hollowed out by arrogance, corruption and a bloated military, the greatest empire the world has ever known fell. Is America doomed to follow in its footsteps?**

By Gary Kamiya

Jun. 07, 2007 | Comparing the present historical epoch to a past one is an excellent intellectual parlor game. It requires you to know enough about the two periods to assess their similarities and differences. It encourages a broad, synthetic analysis and a long view. And it defamiliarizes the present, forcing you to look with fresh eyes at cultural and political realities you had previously taken for granted. At its worst, it can become a mere display of superficial knowledge, in which facile analogies take the place of real engagement. But at its best, it can illuminate both periods, creating that simultaneous sense of recognition and mystery that the best history does.

Cullen Murphy's "Are We Rome?" is an example of the parlor game played at its best. Murphy, the former managing editor of the Atlantic Monthly, brings just the right combination of erudition, audacity and caution to this tricky undertaking. He isn't afraid to make informed generalizations about both contemporary America and an empire that ended more than 1,500 years ago, yet acknowledges the limits of such generalizations, and the areas where historical ignorance rules. He offers stimulating discussions of the similarities, both obvious and hidden, between America and [Rome](#), but also points out that in profound ways their citizens would find each other utterly alien.

And wisely, he avoids trying to do too much. The words of the Greek poet Callimachus, "A big book is a big evil," may not be universally true, but they certainly apply to the genre Murphy is working in. Simply to acquire a working familiarity with the theories that have been advanced to explain the fall of the Roman empire -- Murphy notes that a German historian has listed 210 of them -- is a massive undertaking; to advance an original thesis is the work of decades; to compare Rome to America could occupy a [Casaubon](#) -- the pedant who searches in vain for a "Key to All Mythologies" in George Eliot's "Middlemarch" -- for several lifetimes. Mercifully, Murphy is no pedant. He wears his considerable knowledge lightly, avoids overdrawing his analogies and focuses in on a few areas where the comparisons are most illuminating -- and where we would do well to change our ways. You painlessly learn a lot about ancient Rome in this smart, briskly paced book, and a lot about contemporary America, too -- not all of the latter quite as painless.

The Rome-America comparison predates the American Revolution. In those days, Murphy notes, Americans were drawn to the Roman Republic, seeing in it a reflection of their own nascent republic. Today, for obvious reasons, it's the empire that grabs Americans' attention -- although no one can agree upon whether America

really possesses an empire or not. The comparison, he notes, "serves as either a grim cautionary tale or an inspirational call to action." Those who are inspired include figures whom Murphy calls the "triumphalists," who "see America as at long last assuming its imperial responsibilities, bringing about a global Pax Americana like the Pax Romana at its most commanding, in the first two centuries A.D." In this camp are neoconservative pundits like Charles Krauthammer, [William Kristol](#), Max Boot and "the triumphalist-in-chief, trading jodhpurs for flight suit," [George W. Bush](#). These figures unapologetically advocate that the U.S. dominate the world. Against them stand the "declinists," who believe that America is overstretched, that its "imperial need for secrecy, surveillance and social control, all in the name of national security, is corroding our republican institutions." The declinists include the likes of Chalmers Johnson and Paul Kennedy. There is also an in-between group, led by the historian Niall Ferguson, who argue that the U.S. *should* be an imperial power, but lacks the gumption.

Then there are those critics who see doom and gloom when they compare Rome to America. On the left, the urban planner Jane Jacobs saw the decline of family and community, bad science and the ascendance of economically based individualism as leading to a "post-Roman" dark age. On the right, the saber-rattling classicist Victor Davis Hanson attacks Americans as decadent, weak-willed and weak-kneed.

Murphy himself is no triumphalist. He might be called a moderate declinist. He argues that America, like Rome, is threatened by self-inflicted wounds -- in particular our mania for privatization, our fading belief in government and the ensuing decay of civic society, our vast and unsustainable military, our ignorance of the outside world and our short-sighted attitude toward immigration and assimilation.

These positions stamp Murphy as an old-school liberal, albeit hardly a knee-jerk one. Clearly aiming at the big historical picture and not wanting to get caught up in ephemeral political disputes, Murphy goes out of his way to avoid framing his argument in partisan terms. This is a laudable impulse, but Murphy's reluctance to take a deeper historical look at the Bush administration ends up feeling excessively cautious and constrains his argument. Bush's entire approach to governance epitomizes all the tendencies in modern American life that Murphy finds most dangerous. Yet Murphy never explores the important question of whether Bush's secretive, imperial presidency is a historical anomaly, a perfect storm created by the rare convergence of 9/11 and a rigid, ideologically driven president, or the shape of the American empire -- and emperors -- to come. This is an issue that bears directly on Murphy's thesis.

Are we Rome, or not? At a crude level, the parallels are striking. "Rome and America are the most powerful actors in their worlds, by many orders of magnitude," Murphy writes. "Their power includes both [military](#) might and the 'soft power' of language, culture, commerce, technology, and ideas." The two are comparable in physical size. Both are open societies, made up of newcomers and [immigrants](#). Both are drawn to grand feats of engineering. ("Whenever I see the space shuttle, standing upright and inching slowly on its crawler toward the launching pad, I think back to the Rome of Hadrian's day, and the gargantuan statue of the Sun-God, as tall as the shuttle, being dragged into place by 24 elephants," Murphy writes.) Both Romans and Americans are extremely litigious, believe in private property, enjoy ritually humiliating public figures, have a love-hate relation with the nouveau riche, and see themselves as the chosen people.

On the other hand, Murphy points out that the dissimilarities are just as striking. The Roman Empire lasted more than a thousand years; the U.S. isn't even 300 years old yet. Rome's entire history took place during the Iron Age, while "America in its short history has already leapt through the Industrial Age to the Information Age and the Biotech Age." Rome often lived on the edge of famine; America's economy is unbelievably robust. Rome held slaves; America rejected slavery. Rome started as a city-state; America as a continental power. Rome had no middle class; "for America the middle class is the core social fact -- our ballast, our gyroscope, our compass." Rome was never particularly democratic. Rome looked down on entrepreneurship

and valorized inherited wealth; America worships self-made men. Rome was aggressively expansionist; America prefers to conquer the world through indirect economic means.

At an individual level, Murphy argues, the differences are still more striking. "As individuals, Romans were proud, arrogant, principled, cruel, and vulgar; Americans are idealistic, friendly, heedless, aggressive, and sentimental (but yes, often vulgar, too). I'm not sure that Americans, cast suddenly back in time, would ever warm to second-century Rome, the way they might to Samuel Johnson's [London](#). In their mental maps, their intellectual orientations, their default values, Romans and Americans are further apart than most people suspect. Romans were as bawdy as Americans are repressed. Roman notions of personal honor and disgrace, and the behavior appropriate to each, have no real counterpart in America; Roman officials would unhesitatingly commit suicide in situations that wouldn't make Americans even consider sitting down with [Barbara Walters](#) (much less consider resigning)." Anyone who watched the superb [HBO series "Rome,"](#) with its shockingly casual acceptance of murders, suicides and sex, will have a visceral sense of what Murphy means.

Going beyond these broad similarities and differences, Murphy finds six specific parallels between ancient Rome and America today. "The parallels aren't fixed in place, and they don't point to an inescapable future," he says. "Taken as they are, though, they trace a path that leads to foreseeable consequences -- a path, after all, that Rome has already been down."

First, just as Romans saw Rome as the literal center of the world -- they placed in the Forum a stone omphalos, or "navel," that they believed stood over the entrance to Hades -- America's political ruling class suffers from delusions of Beltway grandeur. "[T]he way the tiny, elite subset of Americans who live in the nation's capital see America -- and see Washington itself," Murphy argues, is a "faulty premise" that "leads to an exaggerated sense of Washington's weight in the world: an exaggerated sense of its importance in the eyes of others, and of its ability to act alone." He tartly recounts the way that courtiers in such self-obsessed capitals become obsessed with prestige. In JFK's time, "only 29 people held the coveted title of 'assistant,' 'deputy assistant,' or 'special assistant' to the President; by the time [Bill Clinton](#) left office, there were 141 such people."

Second, there's military power. Like Rome, America suffers from a "two cultures" problem, in which military and civilian society are increasingly alien to each other. A Roman historian wrote that soldiers returning from distant posts were "most savage to look at, frightening to listen to, and boorish to talk with." Murphy notes: "America's Delta Force would fare no better in Saddle River, Brentwood, or Winnetka." Moreover, like Rome, America is unable to sustain its enormous military, and is forced to turn to outsiders -- for Rome, barbarians, for America, contractors. "The Iraq War is the most privatized major conflict since the Renaissance," Murphy notes.

Third, Murphy cites massive privatization and its attendant sins, corruption, the loss of faith in government and the degradation of civil society. To my mind, this is the most original and compelling part of his book. "Rome had trouble maintaining a distinction between public and private responsibilities -- and between public and private resources," Murphy writes. When this happens, "central government becomes impossible to steer. It took a long time to happen, but the fraying connection between imperial will and concrete action is a big part of What Went Wrong in ancient Rome." Similarly, "America has in recent years embarked on a privatization binge like no other in its history, putting into private hands all manner of activities once thought to be public tasks." Murphy says that "the privatization of power isn't a phenomenon of the margins, a footnote to history -- it's a central dynamic of American public life."

The result, he argues, is not only corruption, the what's-in-it-for-me mentality epitomized by the sleazy likes

of Jack Abramoff, but loss of government's "management capacity." In part this is because private contractors don't answer to the same laws and regulations that government ones do; in part it's because government itself is simply vanishing. The loss of efficiency and command and control is bad, but still worse are the intangible ramifications of privatization: "the loss of civic engagement and loyalty across the board is a very real threat." Murphy declines to explicitly single out the Bush administration, and in a larger sense the small-government ideology of the Republican Party, as largely responsible for this trend. But that does not alter the fact that his book is a blistering implicit refutation of the GOP's anti-government ethos, and the still more degraded crony capitalism practiced by Bush.

Murphy illuminates one key facet of the decline of Rome by citing the Oxford historian Geoffrey de Ste. Croix, who explored the evolution of a single Latin term: the word "suffragium," which originally meant "voting tablet." Citizens could cast votes, although in practice great men who ran patronage systems controlled large blocs of votes. Over time, Roman democracy withered, but the patronage system remained, and the word "suffragium" came to mean only the pressure that a powerful man could exert on one's behalf. Eventually, the word came to denote simply the money paid for a favor: a bribe. Ste. Croix's devastating conclusion: "Here, in miniature, is the political history of Rome."

In a telling historical-etymological comparison, Murphy looks at the history of the word "franchise." It too originally "had to do with notions of political freedom and civic responsibility": It denoted the right to vote. "Only much later, in the mid twentieth century, did the idea of being granted certain 'rights' acquire its commercial connotation: the right to market a company's services or products, such as fried chicken or Tupperware ... In the Wiktionary, the commercial meaning of 'franchise' is now the primary definition. The definition involving political freedom and the right to vote comes fifth." Murphy's disturbing conclusion: "Looking back at the history of 'franchise,' then, it's tempting to write this epitaph: Here, in miniature, is the political history of America."

The fourth parallel Murphy sees is Rome and America's mutual ignorance of the outside world. Just as Rome disparaged and underrated the people outside its borders, so Americans tend to be dismissive of other cultures and peoples, and shockingly ignorant of them.

Fifth, there's the issue of borders. Rome successfully dealt with the presence of outsiders not by erecting an iron wall but by interacting with them and assimilating them.

Sixth and finally, there's the sheer complexity of Rome and America. Such mega-powers "inevitably become impossible to manage, because the very act of managing has unpredictable ripple effects, of global scale, which in turn become part of the environment that needs to be managed." To this problem, there is no simple answer, except to concentrate on those factors that are within our power to change.

Can we reverse these trends? Is America doomed to share Rome's fate? Murphy is too sophisticated to answer such a question directly. He points out that in an important sense, Rome never did fall: "Its methods of agriculture, its patterns of trade, its cities and ports, its buildings and infrastructure, its modes of administration, its names for objects and places, its laws, its elites -- to varying degrees in various places all of these things lived on, for longer and shorter periods, making the path forward an irregular transition rather than a catastrophic revolution." Another institution that preserved Rome was the church. "In many ways, for good and ill, a version of Rome was carried forward into new places and eras by the Catholic Church -- its language, many of its values, much of its administrative structure, some of its dress."

Despite this, Murphy admits that the fall of Rome was real, a major event in world history: "a great unity was irrevocably diminished; a great and wondrous order became a thing of the past." He astutely points out that

when contemplating the end of Rome we feel not regret -- Rome was far too brutal and amoral for us to regret its passing -- but "something far more elemental and emotional: the brutal reminder of impermanence."

There is no magic formula that will guarantee any nation or empire's perpetual survival. Nor is finding one even necessarily Murphy's real interest. He is as concerned with creating a society that we want to live in as one that will endure. In exploring this, he first lists several possible future scenarios that might allow America to endure, but that would not create a society anyone would want.

First is the "Fortress America scenario," in which everything revolves around national security, privacy is curtailed and the executive branch dominates: "[Diocletian's empire](#) taken to some future American extreme." Second, there's the "City-State scenario," in which great cities become de facto city-states and central authority withers. Finally, there's the "Boardroom scenario," in which "corporate feudalism on a global scale" triumphs, armies, economies, water and resources are privatized, and huge corporations run the world.

To prevent these unhappy scenarios from coming true, Murphy advances a set of policy prescriptions based on the Roman historian Livy's injunction that "what makes a society strong is the well-being of its people -- basic justice, basic opportunity, a modicum of spiritual reward -- and the people's conviction that 'the system' is set up to produce it."

Here is Murphy's four-part "Titus Livius Hundred-Year Workout Plan." First, America needs to learn about the wider world, by being open to immigration and foreign students and learning foreign languages. (On a lighter but still serious note, Murphy points out that America's [entry into the world of soccer-playing nations](#) is a good sign.) Second, America needs to "stop treating government as a necessary evil, and instead rely on it proudly for the big things it can do well ... The Social Security check every month, the safe drugs and highways, the guaranteed student loans, the health-care safety net in old age, the sandbags when the rivers flood -- their inherent benefits aside, these things promote a sense of common alliance and mutual obligation that dwarf narrow considerations of 'efficiency.'" Third, we should "fortify the institutions that promote assimilation," increasing support for public schools and public health services for immigration and abandoning the futile attempt to wall off our borders. We should institute a program of national service for all young people, "which would revive the militia ethic of long ago. 'We're all in it together' is a spirit that Rome lost." And fourth, we should reduce the bloated size of our military by allowing allies to carry more of the load, and adopt a long-range energy policy that would free us from reliance on Mideast oil and the need to police the region.

Can Americans overcome their weaknesses -- which Murphy says include "their hyper-individualism and their moralizing messianic streak" -- and evolve into a country that might resemble the one he describes? He notes that America may lack one supreme Roman quality: "the stubborn urge, the absolute need, to persevere -- to prevail at all costs in any undertaking, whatever the moral and human price might be." But Americans possess something the Romans didn't, Murphy argues: a deep belief that we can and should make things better, a willingness to change. While Romans were smug and self-satisfied, Americans are open to self-transformation and societal transformation. "The genius of America may be that it has built 'the fall of Rome' into its very makeup: it is very consciously a constant work in progress, designed to accommodate and build on revolutionary change," he writes. "Rome dissolved into history, successfully but only once. America has done so again and again." For Murphy, in the end, the way Americans can avoid the fate of Rome is simple: Be American.

Murphy's optimism may not seem particularly justified right now, but historical time is long. "This, too, shall pass" can be read as a cautionary comment on the fall of mighty empires -- but it also applies to malignant presidencies. History can be an oppressive weight, but it can also be a light in the darkness. Murphy's book

reminds us both to look backward, and to look ahead.

-- By Gary Kamiya

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