

The New Rome: The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America

by Cullen Murphy, Icon Books, 2008, 278 pp.

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The title of Cullen Murphy's delightful book *The New Rome* should really be *Are We Rome?* That, at any rate, is the question that motivates the book – the 'we' in question being the United States. (Indeed, I strongly suspect that an editor insisted on 'The New Rome' to ensure that the book would sell equally in non-American markets.) Murphy poses it in the prologue and then promptly draws six parallels between Rome then and America now: how each power sees itself and the problems each has with military power, the privatisation of power, the perception of the barbarians beyond the imperial borders, the definition of those borders, and the growing complexity of the world each tried to manage. Each of the book's chapters explores one of these parallels.

The result is, before anything else, a great read – always engaging and often amusing. Consider the comparison of imperial architecture. The Jefferson Memorial in Washington is a miniature of Rome's Pantheon; Washington's Union Station was inspired by the baths of Diocletian; and the Washington Monument 'recalls the obelisks brought to Rome after the conquest of Egypt.' (p. 27) Or ponder the 'omphalos syndrome,' a Greek name for navel-gazing, which the Romans elevated to a higher art than even today's Washingtonians by erecting 'the official Umbilicus,' a 'circular brick pile' marking the center of the world in the middle of the Roman Forum. (p. 50) Within Washington the dome of the Capitol might compete with the elongated circle of the Oval Office for this honor, but Washington itself, as any edition of the *Washington Post* makes clear (the news of the world outside Washington is often relegated to a separate section) has no doubt whatsoever that it is the center of the universe.

Regarding Rome's canonical legions, Murphy states the problem faced by both Roman and American generals succinctly. Both assumed responsibility for patrolling and policing virtually all the known world. But 'what happens when you can't keep it up?' (p. 65) What happens when the supply 'tail,' as in 'tooth to tail ratio,' is simply too long? When the costs of keeping the soldiers fed, cared for, and equipped comes to dwarf all other items in the imperial budget? When the types

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of combat the legions are expected to face from one end of the empire to the other simply become too varied? The Pentagon is facing all those questions, just as its Roman forbears did.

The Romans turned to the very barbarians they fought against, recruiting them into the legions as increasingly independent bands once they were ‘conquered.’ Alaric, the Visigoth leader who sacked Rome in 410 A.D., rose to the rank of general under the Emperor Theodosius. The modern American equivalent is Blackwater, just one of the vast army of private contractors the Pentagon now relies on. As Murphy wryly puts it, ‘Yesterday’s Conan the Barbarian is today’s Conan the Contractor.’ (p. 87) He asserts that for the some 150,000 American servicemen and women in Iraq, another 100,000 serve alongside them as civilian contractors. (p. 88)

This is the phenomenon that we know as privatisation, or as some describe it, the ‘outsourcing of American power.’ But Murphy’s description of privatisation in the Roman empire chronicles an even broader and more disturbing trend: ‘the deflection of public purpose by private interests.’ (p. 98) The essence of this trend is reflected in the changing definition of the Latin word *suffragium*. It originally means voting tablet, or ballot. In the relatively brief days of the Roman Republic, citizens could vote to elect individuals to specific offices, although Murphy tells us that in practice wealthy and powerful Romans controlled large voting blocs of citizens – an early version of machine politics. Over time, any semblance of actually voting fell away, and *suffragium* ‘came to mean the pressure that could be exerted on one’s behalf by a powerful man, whether to obtain a job or to influence a court decision or to secure a contract.’ (pp. 96-7). The web of reciprocal patron-client relationships undermined the republican ideal of service as a public duty and substituted a self-interested *quid pro quo* system, although still one based on networks of personal obligation. The next inevitable step is to add the universal solvent of money, so that *suffragium* ultimately comes to mean ‘not the influence brought to bear but the money being paid for it: “a gift, payment, or bribe.”’ (p. 97) In English the word suffrage still means ‘the vote,’ as in suffragettes. But given the corruption of American campaign finance, the armies of lobbyists who write bills in their Washington offices, and the growing returns of private influence-peddling based on even a short time in public office, that definition seems increasingly hollow.

Yet even as Rome began to rot from the inside, Romans made the critical error of continually underestimating the talents and capacities of those on the outside. In 9 AD. the Roman commander P. Quinctilius Varus led his three legions – some

15,000 soldiers – into a fatal ambush prepared by the German prince Arminius. Murphy describes the battle as the Romans' first encounter with 'asymmetric warfare,' something the Pentagon now knows all about. It essentially means the ability of a small force that knows the terrain and has local support to harass, trick, and punish a much larger one. The larger lesson here is not about military prowess, however. It is about Romans not understanding that those far from the *omphalos* could be just as smart, talented, and creative as they were. Having just spent 10 months with my family in Shanghai, I can personally attest to the importance of this lesson. Our two sons, aged 9 and 11, came back with a completely different understanding of the nature of global competition, having witnessed first-hand Korean parents assigning an extra hour or two of math homework on top of the teacher's assignments and having seen many 10 year olds learning their third and fourth languages, having already mastered English and Japanese, or English and Spanish, etc.

By this point in the book, American readers will be worried. But Murphy has a half-reassuring message. If we *are* Rome, then 'the fall' will not be experienced as such – more a gentle decline barely perceptible across the span of individual lifetimes. Washington officials will no longer get the automatic deference their predecessors were accustomed to at international meetings; indeed, Washington may not be the first place a foreign leader calls or consults on critical regional or even global issues. We will be challenged, as Russia challenged us by sending its troops so brazenly into Georgia, but pundits will point out that we have been challenged before and no single incident will mark a definitive moment of loss.

Alternatively, the 'fall' may not be a fall at all. Toward the end Murphy asks this question directly: Whether in 476 or some other date, he writes, at some point the Roman Empire 'came to an end. Is "fall" the right word to describe it? And is understanding what happened to it the right way to think about what may happen to America?' How can we say Rome 'fell' when we still use its alphabet; its language became the backbone of an entire group of European languages; its agriculture, its trade patterns, its law, its physical infrastructure, its modes of administration, all lasted for centuries or more. And the Catholic Church remains a vastly powerful global force, ruling still from the eternal city with mass still in Latin and vestments taken directly from Roman secular authorities.

All those things are what Joseph Nye would call Rome's 'soft power,' the ways in which it drew people and shaped their environments and culture. From that

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perspective, no matter what becomes of America's geopolitical ranking, it can be certain to continue to shape the world through Hollywood, its universities, its technology, and its values. Consider the Olympics. Although held in Beijing, with an unmistakably Chinese cultural and political context, the athletes of all countries approached their events wearing American-designed athletic clothing (the new Speedo aerodynamic suits, for instance) and listening to either American or American-inspired music on their American-created iPods. Many, indeed, from countries across the world, had moved to the U.S. to train. And for all the Chinese domination of gymnastics, a traditional Chinese discipline, the leading sport today in China is basketball, and LeBron James was welcomed every bit as warmly as Yao Ming.

Indeed, if, as many people across the world think, globalisation is just a synonym for Americanisation, then what may look like the relative decline of American hard power is masking the vast expansion of American soft power. We may lose our imperial position, but only because we have a harder and harder time telling the difference between 'them' and 'us.' Murphy discusses precisely this phenomenon in the Roman context as well, noting that while 'barbarians' clearly and satisfyingly demarcates 'the other,' a far more accurate statement would be to say that Rome was overrun by its own immigrants – outlanders who gradually became inlanders (pp. 166-7).

In the end, however, Murphy concludes that we are *not* Rome. We are not Rome because we cherish and thrive on change and self-improvement; elite Romans believed, by contrast, that they lived at the pinnacle and could not wish for more. The status quo, a Latin term, was to be embraced and preserved, not benchmarked and surpassed. Ask Americans "What do you have faith in?" and ordinary Americans will give an answer that even the most privileged of Romans would not have: that improvement is possible.' (p. 206).

Murphy is right. What he underplays, however, is that the American belief in progress is not unguided. It is bounded and directed by a set of values that we believe are universal and attribute precisely to the Western heritage flowing from Pericles' Athens and the Roman Republic. Liberty, equality, democracy, justice – these are the benchmarks of the Constitution and of our folktales and civic myths. Murphy observes that the Romans lived comfortably with and depended on slavery for centuries, without many prickings of conscience, much less an abolitionist movement. He sees this as a critical difference between us and Rome, but he

overlooks the value of having the ringing Jeffersonian phrases of the Declaration of Independence and the drier but legally binding clauses of the Constitution ready to hand should the American drive for self-improvement need a kick-start. The Romans handed down their legal system and their centralised bureaucracy, but it was Britain, another empire, that developed and bequeathed the means not of expanding state power but of constraining it through the exercise and enforcement of individual rights.

As a parting gift, however, Murphy offers a range of possible futures for the United States based on different Roman scenarios. The future he favors is the one called for in Rome by Livy, who believed that ‘what makes a society strong is the well-being of its people – basic justice, basic opportunity, a modicum of spiritual plan’ and the belief of the people that their government can and will provide those things. To that end, Murphy outlines ‘the Titus Livius Hundred-Year Workout Plan.’ He calls for national service, increased civic engagement, more cosmopolitan education, more support for the forces of assimilation to take the latest round of immigrants and help them contribute all that they can to their new nation.

Nothing in these recommendations is new. But they resonate with particular force at the end of *The New Rome*. Because if we are not Rome, then the parallels explored over the course of the book – our over-reliance on the military, our arrogance, our twisting of public institutions and assets for private gain – are not predictors of what we will become but warnings of a fate that can be averted. We can still make our own destiny; in my view, the best place to start is to reaffirm our commitment to being a republic rather than an empire. Along the way, we would do well to take a good hard look at the eagle in the mirror, and let us learn from what we see.

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