The Glory That Was
Why America is the New Rome (and why that’s not a bad thing)

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“There is but one nation which at its own cost, through its own exertions, and at its own risk has gone to war on behalf of the liberty of others. It renders this service not to those across its frontiers, or to the peoples of neighboring states, or to those who dwell on the same mainland, but it actually crosses the seas in order that nowhere in the wide world may injustice and tyranny exist, but that right and equity and law may be everywhere supreme.”

-Titus Livius, Ab Urbe Condita

In 509 BC, under the leadership of Lucius Junius Brutus, the Roman people overthrew their Etruscan rulers and established the city of Rome as a sovereign republic. The descendants of that original band of republican patriots would go on to forge one of the greatest and most enduring empires in human history. At the height of its power, the borders of the Roman Empire stretched from the freezing and mist-shrouded Scottish Lowlands all the way to the arid, dusty plains of Mesopotamia, encompassing the territory of more than forty countries and spanning three separate continents. In one form or another, the Roman state would survive for almost two millennia, from the time of the Peloponnesian War all the way up to the dawn of the Renaissance. As a beacon of civilization and stability, Rome was truly without an equal in the ancient world.

It should come as no surprise that numerous other kingdoms and empires sought to compare themselves to Rome over the centuries. Both the Kaisers of Germany and the Tsars of Russia adopted their royal titles from the Caesars of Rome. Napoleonic France, Victorian Britain and Ottoman Turkey all claimed to be the inheritors of the ancient Roman tradition, whether in its Republican or Imperial forms. The notorious Hapsburg dynasty ruled over a polyglot entity known as the Holy Roman Empire, although, in the words of Voltaire, it was
“…neither holy, Roman, nor an empire.” Even Benito Mussolini, the 20th century dictator of Fascist Italy, could not resist the allure of wrapping himself in “the glory that was Rome”.

And yet, in the modern era, Rome has been utterly demonized. In countless novels and films throughout Western popular culture, the Romans are almost universally depicted as a band of proud and swaggering conquerors, casually indulging in the most gross and sensual pleasures while ruthlessly imposing their system of beliefs upon the poor, downtrodden Hebrews, Carthaginians, Gauls or whichever nation happens to be the victim of the moment. The novel and subsequent movie Ben Hur (and indeed much of the New Testament) are classic examples of such negative depictions, as are numerous more recent works, such as that splendid piece of historical inaccuracy that is the movie Gladiator (and I say this as a man who can quote virtually every line from that movie). Referring to the works of the Roman author Sallust, Stanley Bing sarcastically writes, “No episode of Sex and the City offers a steamier scenario of spicy urban debauchery than do tales of the late Republic. Irregular gratification! Debauchery! Disgusting luxury! Shocking! And why weren’t we invited?”1 Likewise, laments Thomas Madden, “It is not surprising that so many people view the ancient Romans as aggressive and immoral conquerors, given that they are rarely portrayed as anything else in the media. In the HBO/BBC series Rome, the city and empire are fetid pools of perverted sex, horrifying violence and appalling treachery – traits that coincidentally make for smashingly good ratings.”2 Generalized portrayals such as these reflect a widespread feeling of contempt for Rome in our modern society.

Of all the great powers in modern history (or at least the “Western” ones), the United States of America may be the only one that has shown reluctance to be compared to their Roman

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1 Bing, 96.
2 Madden, 11.
predecessors. Unlike Imperial Britain or Napoleonic France, America sees Rome not as a glorious symbol of the past, but as a tainted legacy of corruption, decadence, and brutality. There is also the element of “the decline and fall” at work; no empire’s collapse is more famous (or infamous) than that of Rome’s, and America, in its role as the lone global superpower (a role once occupied by Rome), is uncomfortable with the notion of being compared to a state that ultimately failed. This fear is understandable, just as it is also thoroughly misplaced; all empires fall, sooner or later, whether in a brief, violent episode or a long, drawn-out decay. What America should focus on instead is how long Rome was able to endure, in the face of war, famine, economic meltdown and a legion of other calamities over the two millennia of its existence.

The truth of the matter is that Rome was a state that took inordinate pride in its traditions of political fairness and the separation of power. Its earliest code of laws, the Twelve Tables, would greatly influence both the British and American Constitutions, particularly with its revolutionary concept of checks and balances; “Like the American Constitution, the Tables not only restricted what individuals could do, but more interestingly what government could do. So, for example, Table 9 forbade the government from executing anyone without a fair trial and a clear conviction.”

Even the lowliest plebeian was to be afforded his own criminal trial, while even the wealthiest patrician was to be held accountable for his misdeeds. Niccolo Machiavelli, the great Florentine political theorist, always expressed his fondness for the Roman system and its rule of law, as would the French philosophe and later the Founding Fathers.

Even after Rome’s bloody transformation from a senatorial republic to a divine Imperium, the great majority of Roman leaders considered themselves honor-bound servants of the Roman people. The emperor Marcus Aurelius, best-known for ruthlessly crushing the

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3 Madden, 29.
Germanic tribes along the Danube in 175 AD (as seen in *Gladiator*), had this to say in Book One of his Meditations: “And from him I received the idea of a polity in which there is the same law for all, a polity administered with regard to equal rights and freedom of speech, and the idea of a kingly government which respects most of all the freedom of the governed.”⁴ Even some of the cruelest tyrants in Roman history, bloody-minded butchers like Nero and Caligula, made efforts to portray their actions as being done in the name of the Senate and the people.

Foreign policy is another subject in which the Roman state has traditionally been given a rather unfair treatment by modern historians. The stereotypical image of long columns of bronze-helmeted, crimson-cloaked legionaries sacking and burning a helpless city, sowing the fields with salt and putting the inhabitants to the sword has been immortalized in paintings and literature, obscuring the truth. Even respectable historians such as retired general Donald Armstrong have fallen prey to this delusion; in his book *Reluctant Warriors*, he states: “For the Rome of Carthage’s degradation, war embodied the essence of policy. Rome suffered progressively from a disease which, to coin a word from the Greek *polemos*, for war, might be called polemomania: she had a psychopathic attraction to war (…) But more than the desire for material gain lay behind Roman policy. Rome lusted for world dominion and the lust grew as obsessive as Carthage’s concern with wealth. And as one of her own historians, Florus, wrote, Rome ‘scattered the flames of war over the whole world.’”⁵

What Armstrong and most other critics of Roman “polemomania” fail to take into account is the fact that these episodes of extreme violence were the exceptions rather than the norm. Wholescale massacres such as the sack of Carthage (146 BC) or the destruction of Jerusalem (79 AD) only occurred after Rome had exhausted all other options. In fact, the

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⁴ Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, Book One.
⁵ Armstrong, 62.
majority of Rome’s earliest wars were purely defensive affairs; after their successful conclusion, Rome reverted to its traditional policy of isolationism. Far from wanting to acquire dominion over the world, the citizens of the Republic simply wanted to be left alone. It was only after the Gallic invasion (and subsequent sacking of Rome) in 280 BC that Roman statesmen came to realize that their much-cherished policy of isolation was a delusional fantasy. As Bing somberly notes in his normally tongue-in-cheek *Rome, Inc.*:

“From that time forth, Rome maintained a gigantic military force, and never again allowed itself to be on the wrong end of an attack. Much as the assault on September 11, 2001, produced a certain form of perpetual watchfulness and aggression in its target, Rome from that time forth determined to maintain an unprecedented level of vigilance, and never to be in the position of responding to, rather than initiating, an act of aggression.”

The Senate determined that the only way to effectively guarantee Rome’s national security was to assume a twofold approach of containing and neutralizing outside threats while simultaneously building up a system of mutually protective alliances. Even then, these wars of neutralization were only undertaken to preserve the safety of the Roman people and their ever-expanding safety net of allies. “Rather than an empire, the Romans wanted peaceful friends (…) Only when a region proved itself incapable of remaining peaceful did the Romans annex it as a province – as they later did in Greece, Macedonia and Africa.”

One could liken the fallout from the Gallic sack to the similar shift in American foreign policy following the catastrophic failure of its isolationist system on December 7, 1941. As much as the United States did not wish to involve itself with the rest of the world and its troubles, the rest of the world could not be counted on to share that position. The Yammamotos and Bin Ladens of the world needed to be encountered and engaged on their own ground, or else

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6 Bing, 43-4.
7 Madden, 171.
they would engage us on ours. In many ways, the foreign policy of the United States today is almost identical to that of Republican Rome more than two thousand years ago.

The best example of this similarity can be seen in the parallels between Rome’s Second Macedonian War (200-197 BC) and America’s series of military conflicts with Iraq (1990-present). The Roman declaration of war came in response to King Philip V’s aggression towards the Roman allies of Rhodes and Pergamum, while the United States was pushed into attacking Iraq after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and appeared poised to do the same to Saudi Arabia. Each nation, therefore, went to war not for the purpose of extending their national boundaries, but rather to uphold the commitments they had made to their allies. Both the Romans and the Americans were also magnanimous in victory; According to Plutarch, Philip’s Greek allies were shocked by the leniency of the Roman commander, Titus Flamininus:

“For they had been told by the Macedonians of an invader, at the head of a barbarian army, carrying everywhere slavery and destruction on his sword’s point; when, in lieu of such a one, they met a man, in the flower of his age, of a gentle and human aspect, a Greek in his voice and language, and a lover of honour, they were wonderfully pleased and attracted; and when they left him, they filled the cities, wherever they went, with favourable feelings for him, and with the belief that in him they might find the protector and assertor of their liberties.”

Through his noble conduct after the Macedonian defeat, Flamininus not only won the loyalty and friendship of the Greek city states, but even the grudging respect of Philip V, who, after first swearing an oath of alliance with Rome was permitted to retain his throne and kingdom. His newfound friendship came in handy when Roman and Macedonian forces joined together to successfully beat back the armies of King Antiochus of Syria several years later.

Likewise, after the Second Gulf War, American policymakers sought above all else to turn Iraq from a potential regional danger into a key strategic ally and friend. Thomas Madden summarizes it best:

8 Plutarch, 304.
“Although ancient Rome and modern America routinely defeated their enemies, both abhorred the idea of conquest. Instead, both turned conquered enemies into friends (…) In war after war – including the current war in Iraq - the United States first defeated its opponent and then turned it into an ally. After the Cold War the United States began bringing eastern European countries into NATO. There continues to be discussion of Russia itself joining the alliance. Today, many of the strongest and most faithful allies of the United States, countries like England, Germany, Italy, Austria, Turkey and Japan, were at one time America’s enemies.”

Just as Rome used Macedon to thwart Antiochus, America has taken the defeated Iraq and is trying to set it up as a bulwark to contain the influence of Iran. Any other empire would have divested Philip of his crown (and quite possibly his head) on the spot and turned his kingdom into a province under their own rule. But Rome did not. And neither does America.

This brings us to the subject of what may be Rome’s greatest achievement: the Pax Romana, or Roman Peace. Following the victories of Gaius Marius over the Cimbri and Teutones in 100 BC, the Roman heartland was not threatened with foreign invasion for another five centuries. While rebellions, border raids and civil wars still occurred, no foreign foe would again enter the core provinces of Italy, Gaul and Spain until the Gothic Rebellions of 378 AD. So effectively did the Roman legions guarantee this peace that, for the first time in history, towns and cities were built without walls for defense; such was the trust that the people had in the armies of Rome to keep them safe. The modern parallels are striking: “Not very long ago European countries had built the largest and most lethal military forces in history. Today it is difficult to imagine any European country having the ability to put up much of a fight against a determined aggressor (…) in 1939, Belgium had an army larger than that of the United States. Today Belgian active duty military personnel number around 40,000. The United States has 1.5 million.”

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9 Madden, 128.
10 Madden, 211-2.
trust in America’s ability to protect them; it is the same for them today as it was for Roman client-states like Pergamum, Samnium, and Thrace centuries ago.

Admittedly, some of the traditional republican virtues of early Rome were seen as far less admirable to modern-day Americans, with the practice of slavery being a particularly repugnant institution. Indeed, slavery would eventually come to be the cornerstone of the Roman economic system, particularly in the core Italian provinces, with nearly a quarter of the empire’s population being of slave status by the end of the 1st century BC. But it was not the sort of slavery that we are familiar with; to the Romans, a man was not made a slave based upon the pigmentation of his skin, but rather on whether he had raised arms against the Roman people or violated the laws of the Republic. As time went by, many Roman elites sought to improve the lot of slaves throughout the empire, although they still believed the institution as a whole was necessary for the survival of the state. As Emperor Marcus Aurelius said, “No longer let this be a slave, no longer be pulled by the strings like a puppet to unsocial movements, no longer be either dissatisfied with thy present lot, or shrink from the future.”

The American Founding Fathers themselves held similar attitudes on slavery, as a great many of them hailed from Virginia, where slavery was virtually essential to their economic well-being.

The Roman concept of race was also incredibly unique for its era. At a time when the Greeks, supposedly the most progressive and forward-thinking of ancient civilizations, casually dismissed all foreigners as stupid and uncultured barbarians, the Romans were busily enfranchising the Samnites, the Etruscans and many of their other Italian allies with Roman citizenship, granting them political rights equivalent to those of the most ancient and distinguished patrician families in Rome. No self-respecting Greek polity would ever allow a non-Greek to attain any level of political power, not even the proudly democratic Athenians.

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11 Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, Book 2.
Rome, on the other hand, promoted officials based on ability alone. Indeed, many of Rome’s greatest emperors were not ethnically ‘Roman’ at all; the vaunted conqueror Trajan, who extended the border of the empire to its maximum extent, was a Spaniard, while Constantine the Great, best known for his conversion to Christianity and the founding of Constantinople, hailed from the Balkan province of Illyria. Perhaps most shocking of all, the powerful 3rd Century soldier emperor Septimius Severus was not even fully Caucasian – by blood, he was half-Libyan. It is truly mind-boggling to think that, 1800 years before the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States, Emperor Severus of Rome was making history as the first non-white head of state in the West. (The parallels between Obama and Severus stop there, for the latter was legendary for his cruelty, warmongering and ruthless persecution of Christians).

Indeed, the Romans even exceeded the United States by also having the first Middle Eastern head of state in the figure of Philip the Arab, who became Emperor during the Crisis of the Third Century. Such a scenario is nearly unthinkable in the current American political climate.

In the brilliant Monty Python film *The Life of Brian*, there is a scene where the “Judaean People’s Front” is meeting to discuss their impending rebellion against Roman authority. The group’s leader, Reg, rhetorically asks “What have the Romans ever done for us?” There is a moment of silence, and then one of the group members raises his hand and says “Um, the aqueduct?” Seconds later, another member adds, “Sanitation system.” “And the roads!” adds another one. Soon the entire group is calling out additional things the Romans have done for their Hebrew subjects, including irrigation, medicine, education, public order, peace, and of course wine. It is a satirical movie, but the point they raise is actually quite a good one. For all of their orgies, conquests, crucifixions, civil wars and gladiatorial excesses, the Romans brought far more good into the world, just as America, for all of her unilateralism, questionable economic
policies and abysmal popular culture, does the same in today’s world. There is no shame or stigma in comparing America to Rome; if anything, we should be so lucky to simply measure up to their legacy.

“Patria est communis omnium parens.”
(Our country is the common parent of all.)
-Marcus Tullius Cicero