



Are We Going the Way of Rome?

by Lawrence W. Reed



There's an old story worth retelling about a band of wild hogs which lived along a river in a secluded area of Georgia. These hogs were a stubborn, ornery, independent bunch. They had survived floods, fires, freezes, droughts, hunters, dogs, and everything else. No one thought they could ever be captured.

One day a stranger came into town not far from where the hogs lived and went into the general store. He asked the storekeeper, "Where can I find the hogs? I want to capture them." The storekeeper laughed at such a claim but pointed in the general direction. The stranger left with his one-horse wagon, an ax, and a few sacks of corn.

Two months later he returned, went back to the store, and asked for help to bring the hogs out. He said he had them all penned up in the woods. People were amazed and came from miles around to hear him tell the story of how he did it.

"The first thing I did," the stranger said, "was to clear a small area of the woods with my ax. Then I put some corn in the center of the clearing. At first, none of the hogs would take the corn. Then after a few days, some of the young ones would come out, snatch some corn, and then scamper back into the underbrush. Then the older ones began taking the corn, probably figuring that if they didn't get it, some of the other ones would. Soon they were all eating the corn. They stopped grubbing for acorns and roots on their own.

"About that time, I started building a fence around the clearing, a little higher each day. At the right moment, I built a trap door and sprung it. Naturally, they squealed and hollered when they knew I had them, *but I can pen any animal on the face of the earth if I can first get him to depend on me for a free handout!*"

The moral to that story happens to be the connecting link between the course of ancient Rome and the path which America has been taking for much of the last century.

Roman civilization began many centuries ago. In those early days, Roman society was basically agricultural, made up of small farmers and shepherds. By the second century BC, large-scale businesses made their appearance. Italy became urbanized. Immigration soared as people from many lands were attracted by the vibrant growth and great opportunities the Roman economy offered. This growing prosperity was made possible by a general climate of free enterprise, limited government, and respect for private property. Merchants and entrepreneurs were admired and emulated. Commerce and trade flourished and large investments were commonplace.

It is certainly true that slavery existed within Rome's sphere of influence. That's deplorable from any standpoint, of course. But to be fair to the Romans, it must be said that slavery was far more common and far more brutal in the rest of the world in those days.



Remarkable Achievements

Historians still talk today about the remarkable achievements Rome made in sanitation, transportation, the arts, public parks, banking, architecture, education,

and administration. The city even had mass production of some consumer items and a stock market. With low taxes and low tariffs, free trade and private property, Rome became the center of the world's wealth.

At one time, the political and military power of Rome dominated Europe and the Mediterranean. Roman roads facilitated speed of travel and communication to a degree that would not be surpassed until the development of the railroad, the steamship, and the telegraph in the 19th century. Roman law and justice enabled the traveler to journey throughout the empire with a considerable degree of safety. "The benefits of the *Pax Romana* [the peace of Rome]", says Arther Ferrill in "The Fall of the Roman Empire," "included the development of one of man's most impressive codes of law and an administrative system that met the needs of men of varied languages, ethnic backgrounds and cultural traditions. The poet Virgil was not far wrong in claiming that his nation ruled the world in peace and justice."

All this disappeared, however, by the fifth century AD, and when it was gone, Europe was plunged into darkness and despair, slavery and poverty. In the space of 700 years, explains Max Shapiro in his book, "The Penniless Billionaires," "the Appian Way, where Roman legions had frequently paraded in celebration of victory, was clogged with rubble and weeds. Wild dogs roamed through the ruins of the Forum, in search of food. And the 60,000 souls who inhabited the desolate place which had once been called the Eternal City now referred to it as 'the great cow pasture.'"

Why did Rome decline and fall? The record is abundantly clear on this point. Rome fell because of a fundamental change in ideas on the part of the Roman people—ideas that relate primarily to personal responsibility and the source of personal income. In the early days of greatness, to a considerable degree, each Roman regarded *himself* as the chief source of income. Each individual looked to himself—what he could acquire voluntarily in the marketplace—as the source of his livelihood. Rome's decline began when large numbers of citizens discovered another source of income: the political process or, *the state*.

When Romans abandoned self-responsibility and self-reliance and began to vote themselves benefits, to use government to rob Peter to pay Paul, to put their hands into other people's pockets, and to envy and covet the productive and their wealth, they set into motion Kershner's First Law: "When a self-governing people confer upon their government the power to take from some and give to others, the process will not stop until the last bone of the last taxpayer is picked bare."

The legalized plunder of the Roman welfare state was undoubtedly sanctioned by people who wished to do good. As Henry David Thoreau once said, "If I knew for certain that a man was coming to my house to do me good, I would run for my life." Another person coined the phrase, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." Nothing but evil can come from a society bent upon coercion, the confiscation of property, and the degradation of the productive.

Early in the process, a politician named Clodius ran for the office of tribune on a "free wheat for the masses" platform and won. Candidates for office began spending huge sums to win public favor and then plundered the population afterwards to pay their campaign debts.

When Julius Caesar came to power in 48 BC, he found 320,000 persons on government grain relief. Temporarily slowing the welfare state bandwagon, he ordered the welfare rolls cut to 200,000. Within a half-century, the rolls were back up to well over 300,000.



Government Bread

A real landmark in the course of events came in the year 274 AD. Emperor Aurelian, wishing to provide cradle-to-grave care for the citizenry, declared the right to relief to be hereditary. Those whose parents received government benefits were entitled as a matter of right to benefits as well. Aurelian gave welfare recipients government-baked bread (instead of the old practice of giving them wheat and letting them bake their own bread) and added free salt, pork, and olive oil. Not surprisingly, the ranks of the unproductive grew fatter, and the ranks of the productive grew thinner.

Surely, many Romans opposed the welfare state and held fast to the old virtues of work, thrift, and self-reliance. Just as surely, some of these sturdy people gave in and began to feed at the public trough in the belief that if they didn't get it, somebody else would. That attitude only hastened the slide into bankruptcy.

The central government also assumed the responsibility of providing the people with entertainment. Elaborate circuses and gladiator duels were staged to keep the people happy. The equivalent of a hundred million dollars per year in the city of Rome alone is one modern historian's estimate of what was poured out on the games. These days, many Americans think that by virtue of being artists they are entitled to grants from the federal government at other people's expense. If handouts for the arts constitute a legitimate function of government, by what possible rationale can just about any other handout be resisted?

In Rome, the emperors were buying support with the people's money. After all, government can give only what it first takes. The emperors, in dishing out all these goodies, were in a position to manipulate public opinion. As Alexander Hamilton observed, "Control of a man's subsistence is control of a man's will."

By the second century AD, many cities had spent themselves deeply into debt. Beginning with the emperor Hadrian, municipalities which got themselves into financial difficulties lost their independence as the central government placed them under the authority of imperial curators. Local authority was increasingly replaced by the power of the central government.



Taxes & Regulations

Civil wars and conflict of all sorts increased as faction fought against faction to seize control of the huge state apparatus and all its public loot. Of 27 emperors or would-be emperors between 180 and 285 AD, all but two met violent deaths.

High taxes and burdensome regulations were the order of the day. Business enterprise was called upon to support the growing body of public parasites.

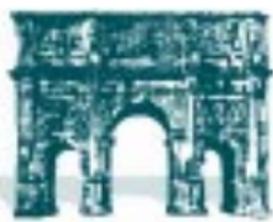
All this robbery and tyranny by the state was a reflection of the breakdown of moral law in Roman society. The people had lost all respect for the sanctity of private property. This author is reminded of the New York City blackout of 1977, when all it took was for the lights to go out for hundreds to go on a looting spree.

The Christians were the last to resist the tyranny of the Roman welfare state. Until 313 AD, they had been persecuted because of their faith and their unwillingness to worship the emperor. Under Diocletian, Christians were cast into dungeons, thrown to the wild beasts in the amphitheater, and put to early death by every other mode of torture that ingenious cruelty could devise. In this year, Emperor Constantine granted them toleration in exchange for their acquiescence to his authority.

Constantine himself professed Christianity but his personal morality belied his word. Within three years of his announced conversion, he put a nephew to death, drowned his wife in a bath, and murdered his son.

Meanwhile, Constantine showered the Church with land, gifts, and patronage at taxpayer expense. Thus corrupted, the Church lost its old simplicity and high moral standards. It, too, had jumped aboard the gravy train.

In the year 380, a sadly perverted Christianity became the official state religion under Emperor Theodosius. Rome's decline was like a falling rock from this point on.



Foreign Policy

In another arena, the foreign policy of Rome in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries had become one of weakness and appeasement. Politicians, too busy buying votes at home with pie-in-the-sky programs, ignored the Empire's defense. Barbarian "converts," whose loyalty was still suspect, were even permitted to hold important posts in the Roman military establishment.

In 410, Alaric the Goth and his primitive Germanic tribesmen assaulted the city and sacked its treasures. For three days, Rome was plundered. Palaces and temples were stripped and Roman citizens were raped and killed by the thousands. The once-proud Roman army, which had always repelled the barbarians before, now wilted in the face of opposition. Why risk life and limb to defend a corrupt and decaying society?

The end came rather anti-climactically in 476, when the German chieftain Odoacer pushed aside the last Roman emperor, Romulus Augustulus, and installed himself as the new authority.

Some might say that Rome fell because of the attack by these foreigners. Such a claim overlooks what the Romans had done to themselves. When the Vandals, Goths, Huns, and others reached Rome, many citizens actually welcomed them in the belief that anything was better than their own tax collectors and regulators. It is more accurate to say that Rome committed suicide. Like the wild hogs, Romans first lost their freedom, and then they lost their lives.

By the time of Emperor Antoninus Pius, who ruled from 138 to 161 AD, the Roman bureaucracy was as all-embracing as that of modern times. The historian Trever wrote that by the third century, “the relentless system of taxation, requisition, and compulsory labor was administered by an army of military bureaucrats Everywhere were the ubiquitous personal agents of the emperors to spy out any remotest case of attempted strikes or evasion of taxes.”

Another writer, W. G. Hardy, said several years ago that in later Rome, “what the soldiers or the barbarians spared, the emperors took in taxes.” The crushing cost of the military, the top-heavy bureaucracy, and the public programs taxed the middle class out of existence.

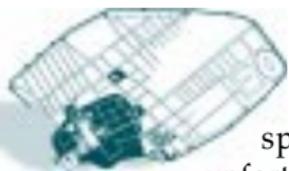
Clearly, the state gradually became the prime source of income for an increasing number of Romans. The high taxes needed to finance this drove business into bankruptcy and then nationalization. Whole sectors of the economy came under government domination in this manner. The first industry in Rome to be taken over was transportation—shipping in particular. Interestingly, the first industry in America to suffer comprehensive control was also transportation—specifically, railroads.

Emperor Nero may have been the original architect of urban renewal legislation. In the 10th year of his reign (64 AD), a great fire left more than half of Rome in ashes. It was rumored then, and many historians now believe, that Nero had ordered the conflagration to be lighted to clear the ground for a rebuilding of the city.

Nero is said by Gaius Suetonius in “De Vitae Caesarum” to have once rubbed his hands together and declared, “Let us tax and tax again! Let us see to it that no one owns anything!” That reminds this author of Harry Hopkins’ famous allusion to the welfare state during the Roosevelt years: “tax and tax, spend and spend, elect and elect.”

In 91 AD, the government became deeply involved in the business of agriculture. Emperor Domitian, to reduce the production and raise the price of wine, ordered the destruction of half the provincial vineyards.

As the old virtue of self-reliance gave way to political redistribution of income, priests, teachers, and intellectuals extolled the virtues of the almighty emperor, the provider of all things. The interests of the individual were considered a distant second to the interests of the emperor and his legions. A spiritual vacuum ensued, which was filled partly by the rise of cults and partly by worship of the emperor. The latter reached its zenith under Emperor Diocletian in 285 AD. No one could approach him without prostrating himself on the ground and kissing the hem of his garment. Formerly, the proud, free citizens of Rome had refused to render such servile adoration to any of their magistrates and rulers.



Natural Disasters

The Roman Empire, amid this sickening spectacle of moral decay, fell victim to an unfortunate series of natural disasters and plagues. Earthquakes, volcanoes, and harsh storms caused great damage. By 200 AD at least one-fourth of the population of the whole empire, both civilian and military, had perished by a plague brought from the East.

A later one, from 252 to 267, was nearly as bad. A morally righteous and strong people might have recovered and rebuilt, but these disasters only reinforced the growing despair of a desperate people. The fabric of Roman society was rotting away under the influence of government paternalism, bureaucracy, and spiritual malaise.

Cheapened Money



Rome also suffered from the bane of all welfare states—inflation. The massive demands on the government to spend for everything created pressures for the multiplication of money. The Roman coin, the denarius, was cheapened and debased by one emperor after another to help pay for the expensive programs. Once almost pure silver, the denarius by 268 AD was little more than a piece of junk containing only .02 percent silver. American dimes, quarters, and half dollars, incidentally, contained 90 percent silver as recently as 1964; today, they contain no silver at all.

Flooding the economy with all this new and cheapened money had predictable results: prices skyrocketed; savings were eroded, and the people became angry and frustrated. Businessmen were often blamed for the rising prices even as government continued its spendthrift ways.

The easy money policies produced periodic crises in the economy. The panic of 86 AD and a severe economic contraction of a few years later are examples. The government responded by imposing penalties for trading in gold, especially for exporting it, much as Franklin Roosevelt did in 1933.

Demanding relief from economic disorder, the people of Rome cried out for a strongman. He arrived in the person of Diocletian who, in the year 301, imposed his famous “Edict of 301.” This law established a system of comprehensive wage and price controls, to be enforced by a penalty of death. The chaos that followed inspired the contemporary historian Lactantius to write in 314: “After the many oppressions which he put into practice had brought a general dearth upon the empire, he then set himself to regulate the prices of all vendible things. There was much bloodshed upon very slight and trifling accounts, and the people brought provisions no more to market, since they could not get a reasonable price for them; and this increased the dearth so much that at last after many had died by it, the law itself was laid aside.”

From Welfarism to Despotism



Diocletian also ordered that all offices, trades, and professions, in so far as possible, were to be made hereditary. Young men were forced to carry on in the trade of their fathers. There was no escape from this regimentation. The welfare state had become a despotism.

This tyrant left his mark on history in other ways, too. It was during his reign that fully half the men of the Empire were on the government payroll. Not only did he impose across-the-board wage and price controls in relative peacetime, but he also resigned from office, in the year 305. Nearly 17 centuries later, Richard Nixon would become the first American president to impose peacetime wage and price controls and also our first chief executive to resign from office.

History does seem to have an uncanny knack of repeating itself now and then. America, by elevating government power at the expense of individual responsibility, has made some of the same mistakes that Rome made centuries ago. In a famous statement, philosopher George Santayana warned that those who ignore history are condemned to repeat it.

No one reading this, however, should despair for the future. The growing intrusiveness of government in America is not inevitable; it is not something beyond the control of the American people. It is, rather, the consequence of faulty ideas, which can change if only this message is carried forth by those who cherish liberty. Indeed, there are very promising indications that the intellectual battles these days are being won—often *decisively* won—by the friends of freedom and limited government, not by those who foolishly seek to put government in the driver’s seat.

Most people who cherish freedom oppose the welfare state for moral, philosophical, spiritual, and economic reasons. We would do well to add another reason: the lessons of history! As we work to restore and preserve those ideas and institutions which made our nation both free and great, let’s keep these words in mind:

The penalty men pay for indifference to public affairs is to be ruled by evil men. —Plato

All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing. —Edmund Burke

The hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who—in a period of moral crisis—maintain neutrality. —Dante

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