

# Rome and America: The Ideology of Decline

by Harold B. Jones, Jr.

**W**riting in 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville attributed the United States' commercial success to American merchants' willingness to face uncertainty and danger. Europeans, he said, wait for good weather and return to port if the ship is damaged; the American "departs while the tempest still roars . . . while on the go, he repairs his ship, worn down by the storm."<sup>1</sup> The American settler, Tocqueville said, was "a very civilized man . . . who plunges into the wilderness of the New World with his Bible, a hatchet, and newspapers."<sup>2</sup> When Anthony Trollope traveled down the Mississippi in 1860, he found people living in sod huts and laboring from dawn to dusk. There was no prospect for an immediate improvement in their condition, yet they were optimistic about the future and felt not the slightest desire to return to civilization.<sup>3</sup>

These pictures contrast sharply with that of Americans being expected to take comfort from Secretary Tom Ridge's "message of reassurance and confidence" about the Department of Homeland Security's vigilance over a holiday weekend. They contrast also with the picture of people standing in lines at the airport, removing their shoes, and waiting meekly for an approving nod from a dull federal employee. The old atti-

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tude of self-reliant independence has died. It is not simply that the world has changed, but that Americans have. It is not simply that our government has become intrusive, but that we do not resist its intrusions. Like every other people at every other time in history, we are getting the government we deserve.

My article "Homeland Security Circa AD 285" described the bureaucratic expansion that left an empire helpless before its enemies.<sup>4</sup> But there is more to the story than that. By the end of the third century, Roman character was a thing of the past. The courageous ingenuity of the farmers who put on sword and shield to resist first invading Gauls and later the armies of Hannibal had disappeared. If it is true that Rome fell less to the barbarians than to its own stifling bureaucracy, it is true also that the bureaucracy took its power from citizens' inability to see the challenges of their time as a call to personal creativity and effort. Rome's fate was the result of a change in the way the Romans thought about themselves and their world.

The most important result of government controls, said F. A. Hayek, is "a change in the character of the people."<sup>5</sup> While this may be true, it is only half the truth. The other half is that extensive government controls give expression to the ideas of the people among whom they appear. They can arise only among a people who are psychologically prepared to submit to them. The similarities between the ancient and the modern experiences are worth considering.

Among the proper functions of government, Adam Smith listed military defense. The desperate condition in which the Empire found itself late in the third century was not entirely unrelated to the fact that after the death of Trajan and again after the death of Marcus Aurelius, Rome's armies were withdrawn from their positions along the northern frontiers. As soon as the pressure on the borders eased, barbarian hordes began to sweep across them.

Viewed in this light, President Bush's aggressive "war on terror" is an act of genius. Terrorism is like every other human endeavor in that it labors under the constraint of limited resources. These resources can be deployed more conveniently in assaulting soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan than in attacks on Western targets. The recent bombing of Spanish train stations, while frightening, is probably less dreadful than what would be happening if the battle had not been moved into Islam's own backyard. Like Rome at its height, the United States is protecting itself by means of relentless pressure on those who threaten it.

But there is more to the story than that. The Empire's invaders were driven by economic rather than ideological interests. They were more interested in finding enough to eat than in plunder. "Where the tribes could buy or obtain food peacefully," says Paul Johnson, "they seldom resorted to violence."<sup>6</sup> By narrowing the range of possibilities for peaceful trade, the policy of using the provinces' riches for the benefit of the capital city thus played a part in arousing tribesmen's hostility and in encouraging them to press on until they came to the walls of Rome itself.

## **Living at the Expense of Empire**

The policy of exploiting the provinces, in turn, was an expression of the Romans' conviction that they were entitled to live at the expense of their empire. This conviction is remarkably similar to that of Western farmers, who think that in exchange for their votes they have a right to be subsidized by the taxpayers. World Trade Organization

discussions in Cancún failed in large part because of third-world representatives' unhappiness with such things as America's \$1.6 billion cotton subsidy, which glutts world markets and makes it impossible for countries like predominantly Muslim Chad and Mali to compete. The Brussels-based Center for the New Europe has said the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy is a major contributor to the poverty of Latin America, Asia, and Africa; it kills 6,600 people a day.<sup>7</sup> If the \$125 billion the United States plans to spend on its farm program between 2002 and 2012 were eliminated, Islamic farmers might not suddenly love the United States, but their hatred would be somewhat blunted by their delight over having such a rich market for their produce. Americans, meanwhile, would have the advantages both of cheaper T-shirts and a lower tax bill.

It might be too much to hope that free trade could take the bitterness out of Islamic fundamentalism. Fanatics with a grudge against the world and a propensity for showy violence may be simply a fact of modern life. There is nothing new about organized terror: it goes back at least to some strains of anarchism, to the Western Federation of Miners, and to the Industrial Workers of the World. On the other hand, these were all responses to economic pressures associated with the rise of international protectionism late in the nineteenth and early in the twentieth century. However that may be, it is certain that Islam's unhappiness with modernity is not entirely unrelated to policies giving expression to Western farmers' conviction that they should not have to meet the challenge of international competition.

The farmers' conviction, in turn, is similar to the steel industry's belief that it had a right to be sheltered from the efficiencies of foreign business. It is similar also to the conviction recently expressed in highly skilled workers' opposition to free trade. Design engineers, machinists, and experts in information technology want to be protected from the competition of China and India, where well-trained engineers are willing to work for less than they would be paid in the

United States.<sup>8</sup> American industry and workers agree with American agriculture in believing that they are entitled to a shelter from the storms of change.

Like the citizens of third-century Rome, Americans believe they have a right to live safely behind high walls. But there are hungry people waiting at the gates, and the only alternative to peaceful exchange is war.

## The Source of Weakness

A few years before Tocqueville visited America, John Quincy Adams's Department of State announced this policy: "The American Republic invites nobody to come. We will keep out nobody. Arrivals will suffer no disadvantages as aliens. But they can expect no advantages either. What happens to them depends entirely on their individual ability and exertions, and on good fortune."<sup>9</sup> The citizens of early nineteenth-century America seem to have understood they had no right to anything except the results of their own efforts.

Over the course of the twentieth century, that understanding disappeared. The citizens of the United States learned to think of themselves as entitled to whatever their votes could buy. Herbert Hoover was elected president because he promised "a chicken in every pot" and was replaced when the said fowl failed to materialize. Franklin Roosevelt was speaking to an existing conviction when he talked about "self-evident" rights to well-paid employment, "adequate food, clothing, and recreation," medical care, retirement income, and protection from the insecurity of old age.<sup>10</sup> In its 1970 decision in *Goldberg v. Kelly*, the U.S. Supreme Court adopted the thesis of Charles Reich's 1964 *Yale Law Journal* article: government benefits met the constitutional definition of property, "not much different from the absolute right of ownership that private capital once invoked," as Reich put it.<sup>11</sup>

Americans once believed that property was the result of personal thought and effort. They now think of it as the result of a court decision or legislative fiat. Far from avoiding the government, they seek its intervention on their behalf. In his *Wall Street*

*Journal* article about the Medicare prescription-drug bill, AARP CEO William D. Novelli talks repeatedly about such things as "retiree benefits" and "accessible" prescription drugs.<sup>12</sup> "We are stepping up our efforts in the states to strengthen Medicaid coverage and supplemental prescription drug programs," he says self-righteously. He seems not to understand that this involves costs, which someone must pay. As far as he is concerned, America's seniors are entitled to whatever they think they need simply because they are America's seniors.

But it is not just seniors. Every group that can think of a label for itself presses its claim to special treatment. When Aaron Wildavsky added up the membership of all the groups that had succeeded in gaining some form of "protection," he found that the total came to 374 percent of the American population.<sup>13</sup> We all think we have a right to get more for less effort; we all want to be freed from the burdens of competition; we all want to enlist the government in our cause.

This is because we cling to ideas our ancestors would have rejected as nonsense. A hundred and fifty years ago Ralph Waldo Emerson told the crowds who had gathered to listen to him that "though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn" could come to a person except through his or her own effort. "Nature suffers nothing to remain in her kingdoms which cannot help itself. The genesis and maturation of a planet, its poise and orbit, the bended tree recovering itself from the strong wind, the vital resources of every animal and vegetable, are demonstrations of the self-sufficing and self-relying soul."<sup>14</sup>

These words would strike modern Americans as uncaring. The bookkeepers, mechanics, artisans, and secretaries to whom they were originally addressed nodded to one another and agreed that it was just ordinary common sense.<sup>15</sup> Our ancestors were acutely aware of something we seem to have forgotten: the relationship between "earning" and "deserving." Like the ancient Romans, the people of the United States seem universally to labor under the illusion that their citizenship is a free ticket to the good things of life.

## The End of Civilization as We Know It

Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* begins with the death of Marcus Aurelius in AD 180. The date was a turning point because it was the moment at which power passed into the hands of leaders who were unable to meet the demands of their times. This was a function less of personality than philosophy. The second century was the high tide in the story of Rome because it was an age during which the educated classes were imbued with an ideology that made for order and progress. When that philosophy went out of style, the Empire began to come apart.

The second century was the great age of Stoicism, which according to William Lecky "furnished the principles of virtue, coloured the noblest literature of the time, and guided all the developments of moral enthusiasm."<sup>16</sup> Although it included no specifically economic doctrines, Stoicism encouraged the self-reliant attitudes on which free markets depend. Its emphasis on individual responsibility, the inevitability of change, and the ultimate beneficence of short-term discomfort created a spirit of independence in everyone who came under its influence.

The last of the great Stoic philosophers was the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Describing the work of his predecessor, he praised Antoninus Pius' "unvarying insistence that rewards must depend on merit." The Stoic political ideal, he said, was "equality and freedom of speech for all, and a monarchy concerned primarily to uphold the liberty of the subject."<sup>17</sup> Aurelius' thinking foreshadowed Adam Smith's doctrine of the "invisible hand": in one place he says that "a man is always justified in seeking his own good,"<sup>18</sup> and in another that "all of us are working together for the same end; some of us knowingly and purposefully, others unconsciously."<sup>19</sup> "Look at the plants, the sparrows, ants, spiders, bees," he advised, "all busy with their own tasks, each doing his part towards a coherent world-order."<sup>20</sup>

The similarity between these ideas and the sentiments of our American ancestors is



Marcus Aurelius

more than merely a coincidence. The nineteenth century was the second age of Stoicism. Emerson was a life-long student of Seneca, a Stoic sage.<sup>21</sup> Second-century Romans found the Stoic ideal in the stories of Plutarch; nineteenth-century Americans found it in the stories of Horatio Alger and the McGuffey's *Reader*. The George Long translation of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* went through many printings because it was on the "must read" list of Victorians on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>22</sup>

In the time of Aurelius himself, however, the Stoic ideal was becoming unfashionable. His footnote on where he was writing tells us a great deal: "Among the Quadi, on the River Gran,"<sup>23</sup> in other words, out on the frontiers, defending Rome from the consequences of its own protectionism. Behind the frontiers, imperial and municipal authorities found the public's entitlement mentality pressing them for the maintenance of "fair" prices for grain, oil, and wine. Prevented by such regulations from obtaining a return on their efforts and their capital, landholders found themselves unable to patronize the shops of urban arti-

sans. Voluntary cooperation began to disappear, and men who thought the crises of their time could be solved by means of force seized the reins. Aurelius was called back from fighting the barbarians to put down a rebellion by Avidius Cassius. The next hundred years would be the century of the generals.

“The marvelous civilization of antiquity,” Ludwig von Mises says, “perished because it did not adjust its moral code and its legal system to the requirements of the market economy.”<sup>24</sup> It would be better, in terms even of Mises’s own ideas, to argue that ancient civilization grew rich under the influence of one moral code and disintegrated as that code disappeared. One ideology carried it to prosperity and another to disaster.

America became great because its citizens once subscribed to the principle of individual responsibility. What will happen now that this principle has been discarded remains to be seen. The Roman experience suggests that it will not be pleasant. □

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000 [1835–40]), p. 386.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 290.

3. David C. McClelland, *The Achieving Society* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1961), p. 13.

4. *Ideas on Liberty*, April 2003, [www.fee.org/~web/Jones.pdf](http://www.fee.org/~web/Jones.pdf).

5. F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, 50th anniversary ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994 [1944]), p. xxxix.

6. Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), p. 128.

7. Deroy Murdock, “U. S. Farm Welfare Harmful to Third World’s Health,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 19, 2003, p. A17.

8. Michael Schroeder and Timothy Appell, “Skilled Workers Mount Opposition to Free Trade, Swaying Politicians,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 10, 2003, p. A1.

9. Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 288.

10. Fred L. Israel, ed., *The State of the Union Messages of the Presidents of the United States* (New York: Chelsea House, 1966), III, p. 2881.

11. Charles Reich, “The New Property,” *Yale Law Journal*, April 1964, p. 787.

12. William D. Novelli, “AARP Stays Sharp,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 4, 2003, p. A16.

13. Philip K. Howard, *The Death of Common Sense* (New York: Warner Books, 1994), p. 126.

14. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self Reliance,” in *The Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Random House, 1944), pp. 28, 43.

15. Johnson, *American People*, pp. 405–08.

16. Maxwell Staniforth, “Introduction” to Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth (London: Penguin, 1964), p. 9.

17. Marcus Aurelius, *ibid.* pp. 39, 40.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

21. Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), p. 307.

22. Maxwell Staniforth, “Translator’s Note” in *Meditations*, p. 32.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

24. Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action*, 3d ed. (New York: Regnery, 1966), p. 769.

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