



Are We Rome?: The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America

By Cullen Murphy

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The rise and fall of ancient Rome has been on American minds from the beginning of our republic. Today we focus less on the Roman Republic than on the empire that took its place. Depending on who's doing the talking, the history of Rome serves as either a triumphal call to action or a dire warning of imminent collapse. In *Are We Rome?* the esteemed editor and author Cullen Murphy reveals a wide array of similarities between the two empires: the blinkered, insular culture of our capitals; the debilitating effect of bribery in public life; the paradoxical issue of borders; and the weakening of the body politic through various forms of privatization. Murphy persuasively argues that we most resemble Rome in the burgeoning corruption of our government and in our arrogant ignorance of the world outside -- two things that must be changed if we are to avoid Rome's fate.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Lurid images of America as a new Roman Empire—either striding the globe or tottering toward collapse, or both—are fashionable among pundits of all stripes these days. *Vanity Fair* editor Murphy (*The World According to Eve*) gives the trope a more restrained and thoughtful reading. He allows that, with its robust democracy, dynamic economy and technological wizardry, America is a far cry from Rome's static slave society. But he sees a number of parallels: like Rome, America is a vast, multicultural state, burdened with an expensive and overstretched military, uneasy about its porous borders, with a messianic sense of global mission and a solipsistic tendency to misunderstand and belittle foreign cultures. Some of the links Murphy draws, like his comparison of barbarian invaders of the late Empire to foreign corporations buying up American assets, are purely metaphorical. But others, especially his likening of the corrupt Roman patronage system to America's mania for privatizing government services—a "deflection of public purpose by private interest"—are specific and compelling. Murphy wears his erudition lightly and delivers a lucid, pithy and perceptive study in comparative history, with some sharp points. (*May 10*)

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From *The New Yorker*

Murphy writes that "Americans have been casting eyes back to ancient Rome since before the Revolution," and goes on to interrogate the comparisons drawn both by "triumphalists," who see the world's only superpower in terms of the Roman Empire at its height, and by "declinists," who see America as "dangerously overcommitted abroad and rusted out at home," like Rome before its fall. Murphy makes telling points about the solipsism of political élites and the impact of corruption and cronyism on civil society, but he stops short of predicting America's fall. (Indeed, he argues that it is simplistic to say that Rome fell.) Instead, he points to a malaise exemplified by the debasement of the term "franchise," once associated with freedom to vote, and now with commerce: "Here, in miniature, is the political history of America." Murphy prescribes antidotes, and finds grounds for cautious optimism in the words of Livy: "An empire remains powerful so long as its subjects rejoice in it."

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From *Booklist*

Murphy lists six parallels to support his argument of why the U.S. today is much like the Roman Empire: a powerful military but not enough people to fill it; a practice of contracting government work to private agencies; immigration problems and immigrant communities that threaten us from within; prideful ignorance about the outside world; accelerating decadent national character; and leaders influenced by moralizing religion and superstition. Murphy points out that the U.S. is seen as "dangerously overcommitted abroad and rusted out at home, like Rome in its last two centuries." He quotes the historian and columnist Chalmers Johnson: "Roman imperial sorrows mounted up over hundreds of years. Ours are likely to arrive with the speed of FedEx." Murphy, editor at large at *Vanity Fair*, believes that improvement is possible. Whether readers agree with him or not, the book is bound to be persuasive and provocative. *George Cohen*

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Users Review

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