November 2020 Entry (on the end of empires)

"For those of us who reach a certain age, our personal futures decline leading to ultimate extinction. So, it is very natural for us to assume that is true for countries as a whole. If we are becoming more decrepit, countries must be becoming more decrepit. Politics that appeals is politics that offers hope and purpose. Donald Trump has never offered hope, he doesn't know that language, and his most important supporters, they offer the opposite, they offer gloom, fear, terror, and decline, and a message that touches people of a certain age, but that repulses everybody else and that isn't true. We have the ability, as Ronald Reagan kept promising, to restore and renew the country, and when we do, we will discover that the ideas of 1989 [he mentions other past ideas] they can be repurposed for a new era." – David Frum (Sr. Ed. The Atlantic), Morning Joe, MSNBC, August 17, 2020.

What David Frum describes here is reflected in GGDM in the Census Power activations (2 Taxation & Census, also And The Cradle Will Rock, 3 Culture, p. 382, and, but even more directly and on point various proficiencies, e.g., the Regeneration Proficiency, 3 Culture, p. 398, the Education Proficiency, 3 Culture, p. 386, etc.).

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"Since the fall of the Republic, the authority of the Roman Senate had largely eroded under the quasi-monarchical system of government established by Augustus, known as the Principate. The Principate allowed the existence of a *de facto* dictatorial regime, while maintaining the formal framework of the Roman Republic. Most Emperors upheld the public facade of democracy, and in return the Senate implicitly acknowledged the Emperor's status as a *de facto* monarch. Some rulers handled this arrangement with less subtlety than others." – from Wikipedia article, "Domitian," captured December 31, 2019.

I think about things differently than many people; I cannot help but to wonder if we have just seen the zenith of the United States as a nation, a culture, a power. The Roman Empire had periods of good and bad emperors; e.g., the 'five good emperors' and the Crisis of the Third Century; every polity does and some don't survive if it happens early in their history (see also Lynn Montross quote in 3 Carriers & Fighters, top of p. 1077). Rome took centuries to disappear, sometimes had resurgent periods, and so did the Ottoman Empire, and the same would be true for the United States. But steadily, Rome lost important advantages along the way: Moral deterioration, failure of moral authority in the world order, steady decline in leadership, perversion of culture, cult of personality, suppression and censorship, debasement of the currency, embrace of political violence, etc. And the Ottoman Empire came to a standstill and stagnation after the defeat at Vienna in 1683, just a century before the American Revolutionary War. I know this is not something we like to think about, but I am not being unpatriotic in thinking of this, in fact, rather the opposite: If one were building a three-story building, it would be prudent to ask under what circumstances might it fall down?

One of the core conclusions of GGDM is that Rome increasingly failed to answer the Why Not question (initially discussed in 2 Disruption, p. 269) on all levels, both individual and in the meso- and institutional-levels. The Why Not question was an important insight extended into the fall of the Western Roman Empire that is discussed throughout GGDM, and especially in How Isaac Met Hari and Terminal Patients, 3 Disruption, pp. 288-289 and Roman Parley, 1 Expansion, p. 883. Sadly, at least in the last years, this seems to become true of the United States as a whole.

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"Time also proved that Ottoman land warfare had reached its zenith under Soliman the Magnificent, whose three successors were a drunkard, a lecher and a madman." – Lynn Montross, War Through the Ages (3rd Ed., 1960), p. 230.

There is a video on YouTube called "Is the United States 'Hitting Bottom'" (dated July 26, 2020) which is a socially-distanced interview hosted by the venerable Ted Koppel. The video compares 2020 to 1968, another 'bad year' in American history. Rome hit rock bottom in the 3rd Century and did seemingly recover somewhat. But it was gone into the wastebasket of history by about 450 A.D. But even Romans knew in the 4th Century that the Roman Empire was but a receding shadow of what it had been in the noonday sun. And that their world was changing.

As stated in GGDM, the United States will not last forever, some "historical accident" (Joseph Tainter) will tip the scales, see discussions in Terminal Patients, 3 Disruption, p. 290 and Shattered States, 5 Government Titles, p. 640. The United States is currently 244 years old and we think it is already an old nation with so much world history behind, but in comparison to the Roman Polity which lasted from about 400 B.C. to 480 A.D. (roughly 800+ years) and the successor rump state, the East Roman or Byzantine Empire which lasted until 1453 A.D. (nearly another thousand years, with some continuity hiccups), the United States is still young.

A background theme running through GGDM is the idea of hegemonic frontier potential (see 4 Order, p. 573 and also Conquest by Entitlements, 5 Culture, p. 430) and the advent of industrial-technological warfare in the 20th century. The *historical coincidence* that propelled the rise of the United States as a world power in the 20th Century is that the United States reached its hegemonic frontier potential and the end-result of the most significant human population shift in history (see Jared Diamond feature quote 1 Expansion, p. 875) at the same time that industrial economics, and industrial warfare, came to dominance, a role for which the United States was uniquely suited. It is thus that in the 1960s, with the frontier long closed and the potential reached, that America and the West's enthusiasm for space exploration was a reinstatement of a longing for the lost frontier potential and this was most famously echoed in the original Star Trek television series.

Two factors in common for the decline of polities such as the United States and the

Roman Empire (as discussed throughout GGDM) might be summarized as lack of frontier potential (expanding resources) and the Why Not question (social cohesion). Both Rome and the United States were at their vital best when they had a frontier and were expanding; Augustus Caesar sealed the Roman Empire by turning away from expansion and the United States frontiers naturally ended in about 1885 (the American Western Frontier was officially closed by Congress after the 1890 census). The Why Not question takes on even more importance (in both cases) after the frontier is closed, and related to this is, as discussed in GGDM, the Roman acceptance during the Second Triumvirate, of political violence (discussed in GGDM under Bitterness & Murder, 6 Government Titles, p. 657) as the normal course (see also Joseph Addison "Mischiefs of Party Spirit").

It is thus that circumstances dictate more than any other the happy coincidences of macrohistory that allow powers to rise and fall. One might assume (and probably this is a problem for cliodynamics) that a similar situation existed in the classic world of antiquity that led to the rise of Rome over all other tribes and states – what was the question of the time, what was the happy coincidence of the Roman Republic? Is coincidence in this sense emergent?

Yet we know that the world slowly changed (and Rome didn't, really) leading to the eventual fall of the Western Roman Empire. What macro-historical changes would render the United States obsolete? Because it will happen.

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"I think that when you are in a successful political system that's been around for a long time, the assumption is that that system has something natural that makes it succeed. And you don't assume that that system is flawed or that the system may be undergoing changes that could completely undermine it. And the other thing that is important is that in the Roman context, these crises would happen maybe once a generation, and you would live through it and you would assume that was bad, but now things are back to normal and we can move forward. And it's only with the ability to see more than a century's sequence of change that we can say actually this is a very long process of degeneration and decline. But the people living through it didn't live through that century.

And I think in the US we see something very similar. When did this process of political degeneration start in the United States? Did it start in the '60s. Did it start in the '90s. Did it start in 2016? But we continually think these things reset, but the reality is, of course, we might be part of a process that started 60 years ago and we just haven't noticed that we are in the middle of a process that will last a very long time." – Prof. Edward Watts, Chair of the History Department, UC-San Diego, appearing on the David Pakman Show, October 3, 2020.

It seems that I am not the only one who is thinking along these lines. A couple of months after I wrote the initial draft of this entry, David Pakman placed a video on YouTube

titled "[Could the US Fall Like Rome Fell](#)?" (dated October 3, 2020), featuring Edward Watts, Chair of the History Department, UC-San Diego.

<u>David Pakman begins thus</u>: "So, increasingly I am hearing things from my audience about, listen all great empires have fallen in history, sometimes they fall slowly, the idea of the United States as this permanent empire is ahistorical and you wouldn't even necessarily know it while it is happening. So maybe as an analogous situation, we can talk a little about Rome…"

Epilogue, March 2021

"Can the U.S. fall like Rome?" is the underbelly of "Make America Great Again" which the November 14, 2019 Atlantic Magazine YouTube video "Will America Fall Like Rome?" shows both Ronald Regan and Donald Trump using in speeches. Regardless of the racism attached to MAGA (e.g., "Make America White Again") the Roman connection seems to be an intellectual undercurrent, dating back to the founding days of the country where the founders envisioned reestablishing a Roman-like Republic (e.g., Cincinnati, OH was named in 1790 for Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, a 5th Century B.C. pious, humble, selfless farmer-warrior hero of the Roman Republic). This November 2019 video from the Atlantic predates the October 3, 2020 David Pakman Show segment I used in the entry above, and there is similar video from Vice News titled, "How America Could Fall Like Rome," dated March 21, 2021!

By Charles W. Phillips