W e'll always have Rome. From Caesar and Cleopatra to Marcello Mastroianni and Anita Ekberg, from Brutus to Garibaldi, from the Colosseum to the Vatican, the people and places of the city on the Tiber justify the ancient claim that Rome would be a place “without end.” True, what was once the largest metropolis in the world is now merely the fourth-largest city in the European Union, outstripped in population by a city founded, under the name of Constantinople, as a second capital for the Roman Empire. Once known as “New Rome,” Istanbul today is Europe’s largest city.

Yet (old) Rome punches above its weight and carries symbolism beyond its power. During the Renaissance, Machiavelli invented modern politics through his reinterpretation of Roman history. And in the wake of the French Revolution, Napoleon took Rome as the model for his new empire.

But what about us? Outside of Italy, no country has given Rome so large a place in its imagination as the United States. The founders might have flirted with the idea of making America a Christian Sparta, but it was Rome they settled on as a model for the new country, basing much of the Constitution on what they saw as the sober balance of power in the Roman republic.

What ancient Rome built was so big and so long-lasting—the city of Rome had an empire for 700 years and its successor state in the eastern Mediterranean for another millennium—that it provides enough historical data to continue to keep scholars busy for years to come. Its leaders astound and appall us; its literature enthralls us; its ruins amaze us. And ancient though it is, the history of Rome has proven adaptable. For example, the emergence of new powers around the world offers the prospect of comparing

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Book Review by Barry Strauss

DEATH OF THE REPUBLIC


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Rome with non-Western empires in China, India, and the Muslim world. (See, for example, Walter Scheidel’s *Rome and China: Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires* [2009].) But just as the destruction of Troy fascinated the audience of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, so the fall of Rome, as much as its rise, continues to rivet us.

Cullen Murphy’s 2007 book, for example, *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America*, argued that the United States dangerously resembled the ancient empire in its corruption and arrogance and needed to change its ways if it wanted to avoid Rome’s fate. Mike Duncan’s *The Storm Before the Storm: The Beginning of the End of the Roman Republic* (2017) is more allusive, but it too sees dangerous parallels. Duncan suggests that we may be on the same road to dictatorship as the Roman republic was after the bloody decades that tore the elite’s consensus apart. Mary Beard’s *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (2015) makes a strong case that we have a tremendous amount to learn from the Romans. She begins her book with a dramatic scene from the Roman republic’s turbulent final years: Cicero’s confrontation with the revolutionary Catiline. Unable to resist the awe of a political murder, I, too, turned to the theme of the republic’s fall in *The Death of Caesar: The Story of History’s Most Famous Assassination* (2015). Caesar’s younger contemporary, the poet Catullus, is at the center of Daisy Dunn’s *Catullus’ Bedspread: The Life of Rome’s Most Erotic Poet* (2016), a book that shows through the life of a sensualist that, whatever else the Roman republic was in its death throes, it was not dull.

**Why, then, did the republic turn into a monarchy?** Why did a regime known for the outspoken freedom of its political speech turn into one in which members chose their words carefully or sometimes paid with their lives? Freedom had not died completely, and under good emperors Rome was no tyranny, but the blunt, open, and public give-and-take of republican political discourse was gone. Once a prominent place of public debate, the Roman Forum was now more like a museum.

Although many scholars would say that by Caesar’s day, the fall of the republic was inevitable, Watts argues correctly that the republic could have survived. Had Caesar been less brilliant and unscrupulous or had Pompey been luckier; had Brutus and Cassius capped off the murder of Caesar by buying off his veterans with a hefty raise; had an able Octavian succumbed to one of his various illnesses and left the more pliant Antony as the Senate’s main enemy, then the Romans might have managed to govern themselves without turning to monarchy.

They could only have done so, however, if the political elite had been willing to com-

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**THE FOLLY OF WAR**

**AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY 1898-2005**

Donald E. Schmidt

380 pages $25.95

*The Folly of War* is a hard-hitting, well-documented, and readable account, he looks back to the republic’s heyday in 280 B.C. and traces its bloody and violent fortunes over the next two-and-a-half centuries, ending again with Augustus.

Watts states that his book began out of a series of conversations about how the ancient world can help us understand contemporary political challenges. While acknowledging the differences between Rome’s republic and today’s, he argues that Rome’s strengths and weaknesses “reveal which political behaviors prove particularly corrosive to a republic’s long-term health.” He emphasizes behavior, underlining “the serious problems that result both from politicians who breach a republic’s political norms and from citizens who choose not to punish them for doing so.”

Roman politicians indeed broke their regime’s political norms, and in the most violent ways. Watts traces the lamentable catalog of a century of ruin, from the Senate-led lynching of the two reforming Gracchi brothers in the late 2nd century B.C., followed by civil war, the march on Rome, and the purges of Marius and Sulla, to the thuggish behavior of Julius Caesar and his contemporaries, to another civil war in the 40s (this time between Caesar and Pompey), to the dictatorship and murder of Caesar shortly after, to yet a third civil war between Antony and Octavian. Finally, having rebranded himself as Augustus in 27 B.C., Octavian announced that he had brought peace and restored the republic. Peace he had indeed brought: the peace of an exhausted, frightened public that preferred anything to another civil war. But restoring the republic? Well, no, not unless one reads the Latin flexibly, as “renovating” the republic, and even then, it was at best a hostile takeover. Augustus carefully avoided the words “dictator” and “king”—fighting words to Romans—but he was, in fact, the unwrowned monarch of Rome.
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promise. As Watts details, that quality, along with humility and altruism, was in all too short supply among Roman politicians. Yet some of the most selfish among them at least understood the economic needs of ordinary people. Watts wishes that the Roman people had punished elite politicians for their misbehavior. Perhaps they would have, but the purblind implacability of the old guard drove them into the arms of the populists.

In order to maintain the republic’s political order, Rome needed to do two things after acquiring an empire, for the sake of justice and expediency. First, it had to share the loot with ordinary soldiers and families who had built that empire. Yet, just the opposite happened: the soldiers were robbed blind by the oligarchs who dominated Rome and Italy. Watts does a fine job of outlining the ways in which empire divided Italy into a new class of super-rich and a growing number of newly poor. When reformers like the Gracchi tried to do justice to Rome’s veterans, the ruling class destroyed them. Later peaceful attempts at reform did no better. In the end, the Roman poor found that the only road to reform was to march in the armies of men like Sulla and Caesar, who cared little for republican political norms but paid their soldiers well.

Second, Rome needed to make a deal with the elites of its conquered peoples. A city-state like Rome could not govern an empire of tens of millions of people without either engaging in permanent repression or gaining the consent of the governed. Permanent repression was not an option, because it would require so big an army that it would break the budget and overwhelm the political system. Gaining the consent of the governed was, however, a genuine possibility. Since most of the lands Rome conquered were hierarchical societies, Rome merely needed to win the favor of the various provincial elites. Doing so, as it turned out, brought a measure of peace and limited prosperity to most of the conquered lands as well.

Unfortunately, most of the men who governed the republic intended to keep power concentrated in the hands of a very few old families. They had no intention of bringing foreign elites into the tent. Like the Davos elite railing against populists, Rome’s oligarchs branded the people’s champions as beyond the pale. As for the people themselves, the Roman nobility acted as if they were an inconvenient detail. And so they wrote their own obituary.

Demagoguery is poison for republics. But there is another slow and secret poison that destroys republics as well, and that is the complacency of the moderates, the people who pride themselves on their wisdom, education, and qualifications (whether noble blood or elite diplomas). Had men like Brutus and Cassius understood the need to broaden the base of the republic’s support, then they might have been able to keep the republic. Unfortunately, they were too narrow-minded and bigoted to see beyond the confines of their proud nobility. They were also too tight-fisted to give up their own fortunes.

Caesar and Augustus were less scrupulous but far more visionary. And so, in the end, it was men who cared nothing for the republic’s political rules who inherited the earth. They began the process of turning Rome from a conquering republic into a bureaucratic empire that paid its soldiers and enlarged its elite.

As Edward Watts admirably shows, republics are mortal. They die when the political class lacks the wisdom to change and compromise, ignoring calls for justice. That is a lesson from Roman history we would do well to remember.

Barry Strauss is professor of history and classics at Cornell University, and the author, most recently, of Ten Caesars: Roman Emperors from Augustus to Constantine (Simon & Schuster).
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