

Frightening: This Description of the Decline of Rome sounds like America

The date traditionally assigned to the Fall of the Roman Empire is 476 A.D., when Odoacer marched on Rome and deposed the last emperor.

But Rome's internal decline began long before then. As Will Durant [famously said](#), "A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself within."

In his 1899 classic [Roman Society in the Last Century of the Western Empire](#), Samuel Dill described some of the signs of this internal decline. The signs listed in the following paragraph eerily mirror some of the same things America is currently struggling with:

"In this chapter we shall try to discover the more deep-seated causes which, far more than the violent intrusion of the German invaders, produced the collapse of society which is known as the fall of the Empire of the West. A careful study of the [Theodosian] Code will correct many a popular and antiquated misconception of that great event. It will reveal the fact that, **long before the invasions of the reign of Honorius, the fabric of Roman society and administration was honeycombed by moral and economic vices**, which made the belief in the eternity of Rome a vain delusion. The municipal system, once the great glory of Roman organising power, had in the fourth century fallen almost into ruin. The governing class of the municipalities, called *curiales*, on whom the burdens of the Empire had been accumulated, were diminishing in number, and in the ability to bear an ever-increasing load of obligations. At the same time, **the upper class were increasing in wealth and power**, partly from natural economic causes,

partly from a determined effort to evade their proper share of the imperial imposts, and to absorb and reduce to dependence their unfortunate neighbours. In this selfish policy they were aided by **the tyranny and venality of the officials of the treasury, whose exactions, chicanery, and corrupt favouritism** seem to have become more shameless and cruel in proportion to the weakness of their victims and the difficulties of the times. And while the aristocratic class were becoming more selfish, and the civil service more oppressive and corrupt, the central government was growing feebler. It saw the evils which were imperilling the stability of society, and making provincial administration a synonym for organised brigandage. Its enactments abound with full and accurate descriptions of these disorders, and fierce threats of punishment against the criminals. But **the endless repetition of commands, which were constantly being disobeyed,** was the surest sign of impotence. The decay of the middle class, the aggrandisement of the aristocracy, and the defiant tyranny and venality of the tax-gatherer—these are the ominous facts to which almost every page of the later Code bears witness.”

The society Dill describes in the last century of the Roman Empire is one burdened by increasing gaps in wealth, a declining middle class, tax evasion, corrupt politicians, cronyism, and the loss of self-government among the people.

Hmmm... It sounds all too familiar.