

Rome and the Decline and Fall ... of Bureaucracy?

We have all heard the comparison between the fall of Rome and the current state of decline in America. The comparison is often repeated, and its warning should not be forgotten. One writer who states this clearly is the historian Thomas Cahill. Writing on Roman decline in the book *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, Cahill [observes](#):

There are, no doubt, lessons here for the contemporary reader. The changing character of the native population, brought about through unremarked pressures on porous borders; the creation of an increasingly unwieldy and rigid bureaucracy, whose own survival becomes its overriding goal; the despising of the military and the avoidance of its service by established families, while its offices present unprecedented opportunity for marginal men to whom its ranks had once been closed; the lip service paid to values long dead; the pretense that we still are what we once were; the increasing concentrations of the populace into richer and poorer by way of a corrupt tax system, and the desperation that inevitably follows; the aggrandizement of executive power at the expense of the legislature; ineffectual legislation promulgated with great show; the moral vocation of the man at the top to maintain order at all costs, while growing blind to the cruel dilemmas of ordinary life—these are all themes with which our world is familiar.

In the current context of moral decay, political division, and societal dysfunction, this passage resonates even more strongly than it did in 1995 when it was published. If the comparison is valid, America may soon cease to exist because many of the factors that led to Rome's demise are present in American and Western culture.

But is that really the lesson of Rome's fall? From the city's perspective, almost certainly. But what about the rest of the former Roman empire? Was it really in the region's best interests to be part of the Empire? It's the same question that Central Asia dealt with in the aftermath of the Soviet Union, and other civilizations have dealt with throughout history. So, although the Roman Empire fell, the lesson isn't quite so obvious. Most of the handwringing about America's impending doom presupposes that its continued existence is desirable.

So, let's take another look at the fall of the Roman Empire, this time from the work of historian Chris Wickham. In a chapter called "Crisis and Continuity" in [*The Inheritance of Rome*](#), Wickham tries to look at what ended and what lasted as the Roman Empire broke apart.

His claims brings a new clarity to the analogy. Here is a summary:

1. The fall of the Roman Empire can only be applied to western Europe. The eastern Roman Empire survived and thrived, with a great deal of continuity with the Roman Empire.
2. Even in western Europe, south of the Alps and the Loire river the political culture of Rome survived.
3. All of Europe underwent a 'dramatic economic simplification' in this period. But the local units stayed the same and prospered.
4. 'Barbarian' conquerors sought to emulate the Roman elite class by amassing land instead of education.
5. The greatest societal and political shift that took place from the year 400 to the year 550 in northern and central Europe was the transition from a tax based Imperium, with its bureaucracy, to a land based fabric of polities.

6. This land-based network was also a network of increased provincialization.

If taken all together, these paint a very different picture from the “ashes, ashes, Rome fell down” handwringing. It paints an accurate picture of the foundations of the feudal system. This system, although very unlike our own, was capable of addressing catastrophic invasions and fostering the growth of a new culture that eventually thrived: Medieval Europe.

Perhaps the warning to the Western World is more like this: Be careful, or your carefully constructed globalism will ebb away into a new provincialism.

But in the world of the tyrannical bureaucrat, would that be such a bad thing?

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