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The Lessons of the Roman Empire for America Today

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I am honored to give a lecture named after Russell Kirk, who told us to ponder the permanent things, such as history and human nature. It is about human nature and history that I want to speak to you this afternoon.

We are on patrol today in Iraq. Men and women of the United States armed forces in armored vehicles patrol the streets of Baghdad. They pass in the way of so many who have come before them: the Egyptian charioteers of Ramses II, the Macedonian phalanx of Alexander the Great, the Roman legionnaires of Caesar and Trajan, the Crusaders of Richard the Lion-Hearted, the legionnaires of Napoleon, the Camel Corps of Lawrence of Arabia.

All of these have come through the Middle East. Many of them have come with the best of intentions, by their lights, to bring stability, even freedom to the Middle East. All have passed away. The Middle East has been the graveyard of empires.

In the course of history, we have come to take up that burden. We live in a time as momentous as that of the American Revolution, the Civil War, the days after Pearl Harbor. In each of these watersheds in our history, we have not only taken up the burden, but we have advanced the cause of freedom.

In the American Revolution, we saw to it that a nation could be established under liberty and law. In the American Civil War, we purged ourselves of the great evil of slavery so that we could go on and become a model for the world. In World War II and

Talking Points

- The founders crafted our Constitution to reflect the balanced constitution of the Roman Republic, but they also understood, with the Romans, that no constitution would work unless it was vitalized by civic virtue: Patriotism must vitalize every constitution.
- The founders hoped that, in America, we would see these virtues of ancient Rome, and they knew that under such a constitution the United States would grow into an empire. They hoped that Rome of the republic would be our enduring model, but they feared that one day our model would be Rome of the Caesars.
- The institutions of freedom are very difficult to transfer. The Romans came to understand that freedom is not a universal value: that people over and over again have chosen security, which is what the Roman Empire brought, over the awesome responsibilities of self-government.

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the Cold War that followed, we advanced the cause of freedom so that today, more people live in freedom than at any other time in history. That is the result of America bearing this burden.

I think that September 11 is just as important a date as Pearl Harbor, and we now advance into a new and dangerous era. Think of Winston Churchill when he said how Britain set out across unknown seas, through uncharted waters towards unknown shores, guided only by the beacon of freedom. We have another guide, and that is history and the lessons of history. For the founders of our country, history was the most important single discipline that every citizen of a free republic should study.

Historical Information vs. Historical Thought

I want to talk to you about historical thought. There is a great deal of historical knowledge around today. We are awash with books on history, massive biographies about historical figures. Information on history is much broader than ever before, but there is very little historical thought across both spectrums in the political world.

As Lord Acton said, historical thought is far more important than historical knowledge. Historical thought is using the lessons of history to understand the present and to make decisions for the future. In other words, it was by using history as an analytical tool and making use of the lessons of history that our founders brought our Constitution into being.

Ponder the miracle of that Constitution. When it was drafted, we were 13 little republics struggling along the eastern seaboard. When George Washington wanted to go somewhere, he went exactly the same way that Cicero did: He walked, he sailed, he rode a horse. If he wanted to send a message, it went the same way that Cicero sent one or Caesar sent one: by horse, by sail, by walking.

That same Constitution gives us liberty, law, and prosperity, though we are now the superpower of the world. We could sit down right now, and with your laptop you could correspond with the Antipodes of Australia. We live in a world of technology that would have amazed even Benjamin Franklin.

They were able to create this Constitution because they learned from history, and the history that was most instructive for them was the history of the Roman world, the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire. They crafted our Constitution to reflect the balanced constitution of the Roman Republic, with the sovereignty of the people guided by the wisdom of the Senate, with a powerful executive in the form of the commander in chief, the consul. But they also understood, with the Romans, that no constitution, however good on paper, would work unless it was vitalized by civic virtue, by the willingness of each individual to subordinate his own good to the good of the community as a whole. To use an old-fashioned word, patriotism must vitalize every constitution.

The founders hoped that, in America, we would see these virtues of ancient Rome, and they knew that under such a constitution the United States would grow into an empire. They already spoke of a rising empire of America. They hoped that Rome of the republic would be our enduring model, but they feared, and rightly so, that one day, perhaps today, our model would be Rome of the Caesars, Rome of the first and second centuries A.D. For Rome of the Caesars and the United States today are the only two absolute superpowers that have existed in history.

By an absolute superpower I mean a nation that is dominant militarily, politically, economically, and culturally. The United States is absolutely dominant militarily, politically, economically, and we dominate the world culturally. We may never produce a Beethoven or a Bach, a Goethe or a Shakespeare. That is not how our culture dominates. It is our music, our McDonald's, our popular culture that spreads all over the globe. Look at a terrorist. He will be holding someone hostage while wearing sneakers, Mickey Mouse tee-shirt on, listening to terrible music and dreaming of a McDonald's when this is all over. That is how our culture rules the world.

The Roman Empire: A Vast Superpower

The Roman Empire of the first and second centuries A.D. was just such a superpower. It stretched from the moors of Scotland out to the Tigris and Euphrates River valleys of Iraq today, and from the North Seas of Germany to the sands of the Sahara.

If you were going to take a trip through the Roman Empire in the second century A.D., you would start off in the United Kingdom, cross over to Belgium and Holland, through Germany and France, on down to Switzerland and Austria, and to Hungary and Romania and Bulgaria, down through what was Yugoslavia and to Greece and then on to Turkey, through Syria, Lebanon, into Iraq, Jordan, Israel, Egypt. We would pass on into Libya, into Tunisia, Algeria, and up into Morocco and then on up into Spain.

If you were to take that journey today, even in the day of the euro, you would need to change your money at least a dozen times, you'd need a dozen visas, and there would be places you would not want to go. But in those days, one language—the language of Rome, Latin—carried you anywhere in that empire. Or it could be Greek, which was equally an official language of the empire.

With the Greek language, St. Paul could travel all over the eastern Mediterranean, preaching and talking himself out of trouble, for there was also one set of laws that governed that vast empire. When St. Paul is arrested and the tribune gets ready to give him a beating, Paul says, “You can't beat me; that is a violation of my civil rights as a Roman.” The tribune says, “Let me see your citizenship papers,” and Paul shows them to him, and the tribune says, “Where did you get those? How did you get them? They cost me a huge bribe to get to be a Roman citizen.” Then he's worried that Paul is going to bring him up on charges of violating his civil rights.

So the law of Rome protects you all over this vast empire, and there is one currency, the currency of Rome. There is this vast geographical expanse and within it a peace and prosperity that many of those areas would not know again until the 20th century—and some of those areas still do not know today—under the immense majesty of the Roman Empire. It was a time so peaceful that the Roman historian Tacitus in the second century A.D. complained that there were no wars in his days, and thus he could not write about the glories the way that his predecessor Livy had been able to.

Presiding over all was the Roman emperor. He was the commander in chief. The office of emperor—*imperator* means nothing but commander in

chief—had evolved out of the executive power of the consul of the old republic, and the Roman Empire of the first and second century A.D. brought forth a series of leaders with few equals in history.

Whenever you're talking about Rome, you must fight against the nonsense of a movie like *Gladiator*. You must fight against the nonsense of this program called *Rome*, some degraded spectacle on HBO.

Julius Caesar; Augustus; the grim and remorseless Tiberius, who governed the provinces with fairness and justice; Vespasian; Titus, the darling of the Roman people; Nerva; Trajan; Hadrian; Antoninus Pius; and Marcus Aurelius—small wonder that Gibbon, who knew the history of Rome, wrote that if a person were to pick that one period in the history of the human race when mankind was happiest, he would, without hesitation, take that period of the second century A.D.

In addition, Rome had a small but efficient civil service that educated its members to this burden of governing with justice and with individual freedom: men like Pliny the Elder and his nephew, Pliny the Younger, the finest kind of civil servant, and a bureaucracy so efficient and so capable that monstrosities like Caligula and Nero were nothing but a small blip on the scale of imperial progress and the guarantee of individual rights.

Three Components of Freedom

For the Romans understood that freedom really is an ideal of three components, which are not all mutually inclusive: national freedom, freedom from foreign domination; then political freedom, the freedom to vote and to choose your magistrates; and finally, individual freedom, the freedom to live as you choose as long as you harm no one else.

National freedom was largely extinguished under the Romans, and many said it was a good thing, for in the ancient world it had brought nothing but war and turmoil. Political liberty was more extended than has sometimes been thought, because the Romans believed in a decentralized form of government. The emperor made all the decisions for foreign policy, but there was a great deal of local self-control. But it was individual freedom, the freedom to live as you choose, that had a

guarantee and extension under the Roman emperors that it had never had before under the old free city-states of Greece and the Roman Republic.

All of this was guarded by one of the best and one of the most cost-efficient armies in history—360,000 Roman soldiers guarded this vast frontier. The empire was connected by a superb network of magnificent Roman roads that you can still travel over today. In Rome you can see a bridge built in 63 B.C. that still carries traffic. All over that empire, every day, pure water was brought through aqueducts that gave the ordinary Roman a larger supply of fresh pure drinking water, with all that means for hygiene, than an inhabitant of Chicago or Paris had in 1920s.

And for all of this the ordinary Roman worked only two days a year to pay his taxes, because the emperors understood that with the money left in the hands of the individuals, it was then invested.

This brought prosperity under a free market economy and an economic unity that the Mediterranean world would not see again until our own day. Cities from London in Britannia, Pergamum in Asia Minor, Alexandria in Egypt, Cologne in Germany became flourishing centers of trade. If you were redecorating your house in Rome, you could have marble cut in Egypt, Thessaly in Greece, and Numidia in North Africa shipped to your house and installed in a matter of months.

It was a time of social mobility. You could begin life as a slave, purchase your freedom, and go on to become a billionaire by the standards of the day. It was also an age of cultural diversity. The Roman emperors believed that it was part of their mission to foster the culture of others. So Roman emperors built temples to the gods of Gaul, to the gods of Egypt—in fact, most of the great temples you see today as you go up the Nile are results of the Roman age in Egypt. The Roman emperor was worshipped as Pharaoh by the people of Egypt. At the same time, they believed that every nation, every empire must be bound together by a common set of cultural values founded in religion.

Their common set of cultural values was the heritage of classical Greece, and Rome became the bearer of the culture and civilization of Greece. The plays of Euripides and Sophocles were performed

in the theatres of Spain and Pompeii to audiences which could understand them put on in the original Greek. Thucydides became the model for the historian Tacitus, even as Herodotus had been the model for the historian Livy. The sculptures of classical Greece informed and shaped the sculptures of the Roman Empire, even as the Pantheon was built to portray new spiritual values but building upon the great architectural legacy in Greece.

The Romans believed there must be an imperial divinity, Jupiter Optimus Maximus, the supreme god who had given an empire to the Roman people. His temple decorated the forum of every Roman city throughout that vast empire. To honor the gods of Rome, by the year 212 A.D., every freeborn inhabitant of the Roman Empire became a citizen, protected by the laws of Rome, for it was also an age of creativity and innovation in which the cultural foundations for the next thousand years of European civilization were laid.

In architecture, the Pantheon, designed by the Emperor Hadrian—warrior, administrator, architect, poet—expressed in concrete the new concept of monotheism, of one god who governs the entire universe the way one emperor governs the world. There in the Pantheon, with its use of space to convey a mystical religious experience, was laid the foundation for the Gothic cathedrals of medieval Europe or Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.

In narrative art, the column of Trajan, built to celebrate his victories over the Dacians in 105 and 106, laid the foundation for 1,000 years of Christian art in which, for those who could not read, the narrative of divine achievement and of virtue and salvation was laid out in pictures.

In science, it was the age of Galen, whose textbooks would still be the basis of European medical education in the 15th century. It was the age of Ptolemy, who drew his map of the world as he knew it. Ptolemy's calculations were slightly off, and he showed that China was closer to Europe than it really was; and poring over that map, Christopher Columbus came to the conclusion that he could sail to the West and come to China.

It was the age of spirituality in which, from emperor down to peasant in the field, the soul

became the prime concern. It was the age in which monotheism began to grow and develop and cults of “Savior Gods” arose and individual salvation became the central concern. It was the age which would give birth to both, ultimately, Islam and Christianity.

And it was the age in which Roman law laid the foundation for the system of jurisprudence that still governs half the world. Roman law was the creation of an earlier republic now refined for a world empire. This was the age of Roman jurists like Ulpian, who founded the law of this empire on the ideals of natural law, that all men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That was *jus naturale*, the law of God based upon absolute right and wrong. It was their job as jurists, and then as practical judges, to translate that into the *jus gentium*, the law of mankind, or into the *jus civile*, the law of the individual empire of Rome; but its foundation was still the ideal: that all men are created equal.

Rome, Germany, and the Middle East

This was the creativity of the Roman Empire in this age of individual freedom and prosperity. For two centuries it achieved its goal, but it would ultimately decline and fall, and the question is, why? Historical events come about because of human decisions that are made, and the Romans failed to solve two critical issues of foreign policy: the Middle East and Central Europe.

The Romans began their intervention in the Middle East in the second century B.C. They came first out of a sense of self-defense: to bring order and stability to that region. They then became enmeshed in the politics of the region, and by the first century B.C., they attempted to establish client states based upon fundamental Roman institutions including a degree of political liberty. They then found themselves drawn into military occupation and then into direct rule until, by the second century A.D., almost the entire Middle East was under Roman direct annexation.

But there was still the problem of Iran. That vast empire was basically passive as long as it was left alone by the Romans, but Julius Caesar had a solution for Parthia, for the empire of Iran, and it was

conquest. In 44 B.C., he was planning the expedition, first to conquer Parthia and then to swing back through the Black Sea region and conquer and annex all the Germanic tribes.

He was assassinated, and his successor, his adopted son Augustus, perhaps the shrewdest statesman ever to live, decided that Parthia was too much for the Romans to absorb. He came up with an exit strategy by which the Parthians and the Romans would recognize spheres of influence, and Iran stayed outside of the Roman domination.

But the Middle East became a quagmire for the Romans—civil war in Judea, trouble in Egypt—and the Romans poured in more and more of their treasure and stretched the limits of their army as far as they could be stretched. It became a constant drain, and, more than that, it became a drain upon the focus of the emperors. As a result, they neglected Central Europe. Again, by a decision made by Augustus, the Romans failed to absorb the Germanic tribes, divided into numerous ethnic groups but all ferocious warriors and fiercely independent.

Then the imponderable happened.

In the third century A.D., Iran changed from a passive to a powerfully offensive nation under a revitalized religion, a monotheist religion, the worship of Ahura Mazda, the Lord of Truth, the religion that had once been prophesied by Zoroaster. Iran began to sweep into the frontiers of the Roman Empire, which were too stretched in terms of its military and other commitments. As a result, the Persian forces swept right through the fairest provinces of the Roman East. At the same time, the Germanic tribes formed new federations and coalitions and swept into the Roman Empire in the West, including Gaul and Britain.

Rome recovered from this crisis, but in a form that left it utterly different than before. It had once rested upon the back of a strong and vigorous and loyal middle class. Now every aspect of Roman society became rigid, formalized. The army became ever larger, ever more inefficient; the bureaucracy became ever larger to collect ever more taxes; and the very spirit and, ultimately, the loyalty of the middle class was destroyed. Finally, in the seventh century A.D. under the banners of Islam, the East swept all the

way into Spain. In Italy, barbarian German chieftains sat in the half-ruined palaces of the Caesars.

Lessons for Today's World

If we were to draw lessons from the Roman experience for today, I would begin by telling you that, as the founders thought, since human nature never changes, similar circumstances will always produce similar events. But I would say at the same time, as Churchill did, that history is both a guide and an impediment to understanding the present.

Lesson one would be that liberal democracies do not make for good neighbors. The liberal democracies of Greece led to constant war. Ultimately, the rise of the Roman Empire was the only solution to a Mediterranean world that had known nothing but warfare, frequently between competing democratic nation-states. The peace and prosperity of the Roman Empire was brought about by subordinating those liberal democracies to an all-encompassing imperial rule.

The Romans were not afraid to take up that burden of imperial rule. As the poet Virgil said, the Greeks will always be our superior in literature and sculpture, even in science. It is the destiny of the Romans to wear down the haughty and to raise up the weak. That is how they saw their mission in bringing peace.

Second, the institutions of freedom are very difficult to transfer. The Roman Republic was a nation of liberty and, under law, a democratic republic. That could not be transferred to other parts of the world. The Romans came to understand that freedom is not a universal value: that people over and over again have chosen security, which is what the Roman Empire brought, over the awesome responsibilities of self-government.

Third, the Romans learned that you cannot govern a world empire with a constitution designed for a small city-state. That is what Rome was when it was founded in 753, and when it became a republic in 509 B.C., it was a small republic by the Tiber River. That constitution could not bear the burden of a world empire, and the military dictatorship of the Caesars was a result of the decision the Romans had to make. Did they wish to remain a free republic or be a superpower? They chose to remain a

superpower and to accept the military dictatorship of Julius Caesar and his successors.

That was their fourth lesson: Once you have begun upon the path of being a superpower, there is no drawing back. Thucydides had already painted that portrait at the time of the Athenian empire, the democratic Athens and its great empire. Once you have become a power, you cannot step back from it; you have aroused too much hatred. You must follow that path to the end, and the Romans chose to follow it to the end.

And because they did, because they assumed that burden, they give us their fifth lesson: What ultimately matters is the legacy that you leave behind, for all things human pass away. The Romans called their city the eternal city, and the emperors evoked the theme of *Aeternitas*, but they knew that one day Rome would pass away. But it left behind a legacy: this legacy of law, this legacy of architectural, artistic creation, but above all the spiritual legacy.

For that might be our final lesson: You are never sure what your legacy is going to be. If you had come up to Hadrian, or if you had come up to Tiberius, and asked, "What is your legacy?" they would have said, "It's Roman law; it's these great buildings." None of them would have said it was that spiritual force born on the far frontiers of their empire in the form of a teacher put to death as a traitor to the Roman order.

So we must ask ourselves the question: Are we willing to follow that path of empire? Do we have the reserves of moral courage that the Romans did to undertake that burden of empire? And what will be our legacy? For I am quite convinced that of all the people who have passed through the Middle East, of all the people who have passed through history, there has been none so generous in spirit, so determined to leave the world a better place, and so imbued with the technology and the wealth and the opportunity to leave a legacy far more enduring and far better than that of the Romans.

Selected Questions

Q: One of the final blows to the declining Roman Empire was the rise and spread of Islam that started in the seventh century, and the following centu-

ry the Roman Empire collapsed. Do you imply some lesson to be learned by the sole superpower of today?

A: That's a very good question, and the short answer is "Yes." It goes back to Thucydides. For Thucydides, Pericles is the model of how to solve everything by reason and persuasion, and Pericles lays out a very careful plan by which Athens will become the superpower of Greece.

You can never deal, however, with the imponderables. The accident or what you cannot reckon will happen *does* happen, and no Roman emperor, no matter how imbued with foresight, could have imagined that the peninsula of Arabia would be united under a mighty and great warrior like Muhammad and that this force would pour out of Arabia and sweep over the Roman East and all the way across to North Africa.

I think the lesson is: Where, in our own day, is that great coalition and energy of force developing that will one day topple the existing order the same way the Germans turned into a coalition power, stronger than anything the Romans could mount? Foresight is the ability to look into the future, to come up with solutions that are good for the short term and the long term. Foresight is the most precious quality a leader can have, and it is the rarest.

Q: You mentioned that liberal democracies make bad neighbors, and that stands in stark contrast with our current belief that democracies won't attack one another and, therefore, all the world should be a democracy. How do we extrapolate that lesson to today's world?

A: There are two ways of doing that. One is what most contemporary analysts do when they refer to the ancient world: define out all other democracies. They say the democracy of Athens was not a liberal democracy because individual rights were not guaranteed. That's just nonsense. The individual Athenian had a core of rights guaranteed as much as anything we have today, such as the right to trial by jury, freedom of speech, so it was as much a liberal democracy as ours is by its own lights. Sparta, too, was a democracy. Yet Greece

was literally destroyed in its greatest age by the long war between Athens and Sparta. It was essentially a war over competing ideas of freedom.

Moreover, the most democratic century in history was the 20th century, and it was a century of the two greatest wars. Hitler came to power in what was a democracy, the Weimar Republic. So I think it is a very false notion that liberal democracies do not go to war with each other. We're simply pouring that into the old framework of the nation-state, which has been so unstable in the 20th century.

Q: It is in a sense ironic that this lecture is named for Russell Kirk, one of the early "paleoconservatives" who would, like Pat Buchanan, favor a republic rather than an empire. What is the fate of those of us who would prefer our American Republic rather than the imperial superpower role into which it seems to be segued?

A: The American people will have to make that decision as to whether we want to be a free republic or a superpower. That is a crossroads that we will come to just as the Romans did. They first attempted to govern their empire with this old constitution, and it simply did not work. It is, however, possible to adopt a constitution so that you preserve the essence of political liberty and, at the same time, develop the institutions that can govern such an empire and preserve and expand the position of a superpower that brings peace and prosperity to the world.

We do not like to call ourselves an empire, though some of the founders didn't mind using the term, but it's a fairly neutral term. It is nothing more than *imperium* in Latin or what the Greeks called *arche*. It is "rule," and it is a neutral term; "imperium" can be used the same as "good rule."

The other lesson is the hybris of empire. The great danger of empire is the inability to see yourself as others see you. The world is filled with examples of imperial nations, like France, that were convinced they were bringing liberal ideas to areas that simply did not want them. That hybris of being so sure that your ideas are right for everyone is one of the greatest of dangers. That's why Herodotus began his history with the Trojan War and then

went on to the Persian Wars. For him, that was the great example of an empire that destroyed itself through hybris, the outrageous arrogance of thinking you were wise when you are not wise. At least one check upon that is the lessons of history.

Q: Is it your position that we have not yet crossed that point such that we have entered an imperial age and thus lament the fall of the republic?

A: I would say we're very much like Rome around 88 B.C. We're still a republic, we still have our free elections, and we still have a great deal of opportunity. But in 88 B.C., the full dimension of Rome's involvement in the Middle East and its role of superpower began to come home to it. They chose to go down a road of intense partisan politics, fighting over small issues rather than seeing the big vision and, for a while, lacking leaders with a kind of foresight. So you can still enter the imperial age as a free republic and maintain that free republic.

Q: Your talk raises the big question in my mind of whether or not there are any historical examples of potential empires that looked at history and decided to remain republics or something else, and successfully so.

A: Yes. The best instance is that of Sparta. Sparta had a balanced constitution that was much admired by our founders. Sparta went to war in 431 against the Athenians to preserve, they

believed, the liberty of Greece, which was the liberty of these small, independent nation-states. Having gained that victory, they then tried to govern an empire and found it impossible and withdrew. They had already made that decision even more dramatically at the end of the Persian Wars; in 479, they were in place to become the dominant power in Greece, and they returned home.

Herodotus ends his history with a very curious story in which a Persian goes to King Cyrus, the founder of the Persian Empire who, for the Greeks, was the model of prudence and moderation, the very antithesis of hybris. The Persian says, "We ought to rule the whole world now. We've got the chance." And Cyrus says, "No. You will end up becoming slaves of others. Let us stay home and govern ourselves well."

As the reader of this history knew, the Persians had not followed that advice and had fallen drastically. So Sparta would be the best instance of a nation that looked at the prospects of world empire and stepped back to be a republic.

—J. Rufus Fears, Ph.D., David Ross Boyd Professor of Classics and G. T. and Libby Blankenship Chair in the History of Liberty at the University of Oklahoma, is the author of several books and numerous articles on ancient history and the lessons of history for our own day. He has produced for The Teaching Company a series of books on tape, including *A History of Freedom*, *Famous Greeks*, *Famous Romans*, *Winston Churchill*, and *Books That Have Made History*.