

Ancient Rome and Modern America

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Margaret Malamud

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Introduction

West Virginia Senator Robert C. Byrd takes his responsibilities with the utmost seriousness. He carries a worn copy of the United States Constitution in his breast pocket, regularly brandishing it when making a point on and off the Senate floor. Byrd has been in the Senate since 1958, making him its longest-serving senator. In an era of sound bites, Byrd orates. His speeches are laced with references to classical history, frequently quoting the great Roman orator Cicero and the Roman historian Tacitus. His allusions to Rome are nearly always warnings to his colleagues against repeating Rome's slide from republican liberty to imperial corruption under the tyranny of the emperors.

Byrd is passionate about the study of history and one of his favorite quotes from Cicero is on the importance of understanding the past. "To be ignorant of what happened before you were born is to remain always a child. For what is the worth of human life, unless it is woven into the life of our ancestors by the records of history?"¹ In 2004, when accepting the American Historical Association's inaugural Theodore Roosevelt–Woodrow Wilson Award for Civil Service, Byrd emphasized that "history has not only been my constant, close companion throughout my life, it has also been an inspiration and a guide throughout my career in public service."² And no history, Byrd believes, is more relevant to America than Roman history. In speech after speech he cites Roman precedents as warnings about the decline of the American republic. It was his understanding of Roman and American history, Byrd said, that inspired him in opposing the Reagan and both Bush administrations' efforts to grasp more and more power at the expense of the legislative branch.

Between April 19 and October 13, 1993, Senator Byrd delivered 14 one-hour orations on ancient Rome to the Senate. These were published in 1995 as *The Senate of the Roman Republic: Addresses on the History of Roman Constitutionalism*. Byrd called them his "Philippics," the name Cicero gave to his 14 speeches criticizing Mark Antony. The impetus for these speeches was his opposition to

legislation giving the president authority to veto specific line-items in a spending bill without vetoing the entire bill.

“What does Roman history have to do with the line-item veto?” Byrd asked rhetorically. “To put it simply and elementally,” he answered, “by delivering the line-item veto into the hands of the president, any president, Republican or Democrat or Independent, the United States Senate will have set its foot on the same road to decline, subservience, impotence and feebleness that the Roman Senate followed in its own descent into ignominy, cowardice and oblivion.”³

In his congressional speeches, he linked the line-item veto with the rise of Julius Caesar and the fall of the Roman Republic. The Senate, he said, “handed to the President just as the Roman Senate handed to Caesar and to Sulla the control over the purse. When the Roman Senate ceded to the dictators and later to the emperors the power over the purse, they gave away the Senate’s check on the executive power. They gave away the Senate’s check on executive tyranny, and that is what we have done.”⁴ The result in the United States, Byrd argues, is a weakening of the Senate’s authority and an expansion of the power of the executive branch.

How do his colleagues in the Senate view Senator Byrd? Some admire him as a relic of a distant American past. Illinois Senator Barack Obama described his impressions of the senator after he listened to his speech welcoming the 2004 newly elected members of the Senate:

As he spoke, his voice grew more forceful . . . the dark room seemed to close in on him, until he seemed almost a specter, the spirit of Senates past, his almost fifty years in these chambers reaching back to touch the previous fifty years . . . back to the time when Jefferson, Adams, and Madison roamed through the halls of the Capitol, and the city itself was still wilderness and farmland and swamp.⁵

But according to one senator, many are irritated by Senator Byrd’s long speeches, his classical allusions, his posturing, and his delaying tactics. He is “dragging it on and on ad infinitum, which is not necessary. Make your point. Have a vote. And move on. He’s not willing to do that. He’s from a different school. At some point you have to say, ‘Enough is enough.’”⁶ Another senator has called Byrd “the weirdest man in the Senate.”⁷

It wasn’t always so. From the early American republic until well into the twentieth century, members of Congress frequently invoked the example of ancient Rome in their speeches and writings. Senator Robert C. Byrd may seem odd to some of his fellow congressmen but he belongs to a long line of United States politicians – and reformers, political activists, writers, and artists – who have used analogies to and metaphors of the rise and fall of Rome as a way of commenting on and debating the state of the nation.

The narrative of a slide from republican virtue into imperial corruption and decline lies in the works of Roman historians, especially Sallust, Livy, and Tacitus, and it has acquired a mythic and malleable resonance. The myth, in its simplest form, is this: once there was a virtuous Republic of citizen-farmers who embodied *pietas*, a term that encompasses respect for the patriarchal family, selfless devotion to the laws and traditions of the civic order, and reverence for the gods who watched over the affairs of the family and the Republic. Simplicity, sobriety, frugality, and fortitude were all characteristics of good citizens. Republican virtues and military technology and prowess enabled conquest, and soon the Republic acquired an empire. The acquisition of wealth and imperial power brought in its wake corruption, decadence, and a loss of the qualities that had once made the Republic great. The vices of luxury, materialism, avarice, and a lust for power undermined the social and political fabric of the Republic. And so, the Republic collapsed and dictators then emperors seized power. Corrupt emperors dominated a cowed Senate, and a decadent citizenry ceased to observe and respect the old customs and traditions. Later Roman and post-Roman writers argue that this dissipation of Roman citizens and the corruption of the government enabled the success of the “barbarians” who invaded and conquered Rome in the fifth century. Permutations of this paradigmatic myth appear as explanatory devices for decline in a number of European historical narratives up through and including those Enlightenment writers whose views were so influential in shaping the thought of eighteenth-century European and American leaders and thinkers.⁸

This vision of Rome as a virtuous Republic undermined by imperial corruption haunts the American imagination. The central point of this book is that ever since republican independence in 1776 and right up to the present day, images and narratives of the rise and decline of Rome have played a vital role in how Americans have understood themselves and their history. Americans have legitimated, debated, and contested their political and cultural identities and concerns through selective references to the Roman past.

Senator Byrd’s use of Roman history exemplifies this process. When the senator criticizes American presidents for acting like Caesars, and his cohort in the Senate for failing to stop them, he is writing the Roman history he adduces. At the American Historical Association’s 2004 award ceremony he declared that he regularly warns his colleagues that “it was when the Roman Senate relinquished control of the purse to Caesar and to the emperors who followed him that Rome ceased to be a republic.”⁹ Some in the audience surely knew that Byrd’s analysis that the major reason for the loss of political independence in Rome was the Senate’s loss of economic control was not in agreement with modern historians’ views of the reasons for the decline of liberty in ancient Rome. Byrd’s view of Roman political power is filtered through the modern lens of the US Constitution’s system of checks and balances on the power of the president. Like the framers of the Constitution, Senator Byrd understands political power as a matter of assent

and acquiescence on the part of the people: “Caius Julius Caesar did not seize power in Rome. The Roman Senate thrust power upon Caesar deliberately with forethought, with surrender, with intent to escape from responsibility. The Senate gave away power; the members . . . abandoned their duty as senators, and, in doing so, created in Caesar the most powerful man in the ancient world.”¹⁰ As Senator Byrd cites Roman history and Roman authors, he creates his own history of Rome as a way of commenting on contemporary political concerns. He admires Cicero, whom he reveres as the principal defender of the Roman Senate, the institutional bulwark against a military usurper, Julius Caesar. Byrd envisions himself in this Ciceronian role, saving the United States Senate and the country from arrogant and dangerous presidents.¹¹ But, as we shall see, to be compared to Cicero is not always desirable. Senator Byrd may admire Cicero, but socialist C. Osborne Ward and Marxist Howard Fast, among others, despised Cicero for what they saw as his elitism and self-serving politics.¹² There is a long history of criticizing American political and economic elites through comparing them and their exploitative practices to the behavior of the ancient Roman elites. Rome’s history has been appropriated by diverse groups at different historical moments for varied ends – most especially, for debates, explicit and implicit, about politics and culture.

In the following chapters, we will investigate the utility and mutability of images of Rome from the Revolutionary era to the present. This book joins recent work that investigates re-creations and interpretations of ancient Rome and the variety of ways Rome has been used to articulate and address contemporary concerns.¹³ These other studies have focused on high culture or deal exclusively with film or, when they deal with other media, lack a consistent focus on one historical culture. My book focuses on the United States and shows how images and narratives of Rome have been adopted and adapted right across American culture, from high-brow to low-brow, and through the course of American history. I take as a point of departure that representations of the Roman past tell us little about the “real” Rome but a lot about the prevailing attitudes and perspectives of the times when the representations were made. We will explore rich and complex dialogues with the Roman past, their richness residing precisely in the ways the Roman past is reformulated for each present moment in time.

To this end, the book focuses on points of particularly intense identification – especially moments of political and economic turbulence. I have selected charged moments in United States history when Rome has been appropriated in order to debate the state of the nation and address internal tensions and anxieties. We will look at portrayals of Rome in different media and forms – writing, architecture, theatre, painting, World’s Fairs and Expositions, and film. Following a chronological scheme, I situate different responses to Roman antiquity within changing historical contexts and periods, revealing the ways in which diverse references to Roman history have been utilized by different classes to articulate or contest political and cultural identities.

We begin with the American Revolution. The Revolutionary generation admired the Roman Republican model of government and found exemplary models of behavior in the actions of Roman elites. Cato, Cicero, and Brutus were celebrated for their principled defense of liberty against the “tyranny” of Julius Caesar, the dictator who Americans at the time viewed as the destroyer of the Roman Republic. Then, during the 1820s and 1830s, members of the American middle and working classes extended these analogies to Rome with a new twist. American workers who felt oppressed by the beneficiaries of industrial capitalism compared them to Roman “aristocrats” who exploited the Roman plebeians. To the supporters of President Andrew Jackson’s popular democracy, the ruling political elites of Republican Rome offered a negative model of aristocratic and oligarchic domination. In newspapers, magazines, and theatre, Democrats looked into Rome’s republican past and identified with champions of the Roman plebeians, such as Caius Marius, or slaves, such as Spartacus. Whig opponents responded by denouncing Andrew Jackson as a dictator and a demagogue – a modern Caesar.

In the antebellum years, as the economic and social divide among classes widened and as the economic and ideological divisions between the North and the South increased, two controversial Roman politicians who worked on behalf of the Roman poor, Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus and his brother, Caius Sempronius Gracchus, emerged as figures for debate, praise, and criticism. In the North, working men praised the Gracchi brothers for their efforts at agrarian reform on behalf of Rome’s impoverished citizens and invoked their example in their own struggles for land reform in the United States. But in the South, in a revealing example of the way an episode from the Roman past can be used to argue vastly different positions, planter elites admired the Gracchi for their oratorical skills and their attempts to reform a corrupt Senate, even as they rejected the land reforms the Gracchi and their supporters in the North attempted to enact. Over the course of the 1840s and 1850s debates over the Gracchi’s agrarian reforms, Roman slavery, and Roman decline were linked together in support of both pro- and anti-slavery arguments.

In the wake of the Civil War, Northern industrialists acquired monopolies, increasing their profits and those of their shareholders through what appeared to be increasingly ruthless exploitation of workers. Concerned Americans worried that a plutocracy beset by civil strife would destroy the American republic just as had happened, they argued, in Rome. Analogies and allusions to the collapse of the Roman Republic and the emergence of imperial rule help to map these anxieties, as they continued to be widely invoked in America to stake out and articulate ideological positions. Labor reformers, socialists, and other political reformers and activists deployed references to Rome both to describe and to combat the new Caesars: the robber barons and corrupt politicians.

Yet in the same era we also discover in popular historical fiction a new trope for the Roman metaphor: an interest in Romans as the persecutors of virtuous Christians and Jews. Over the course of the nineteenth century, invocations of

Romans as exemplars of commendable moral and civic behavior declined and were replaced – in popular fiction – by Romans as oppressors of pious and courageous Christians and Jews. The new evangelical Protestant culture embraced a triumphal and progressive narrative of early Christian resistance to, and eventual victory over, pagan Rome. This linear narrative was more relevant to the concerns of middle-class Americans than was the eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century cyclical model of the rise and fall of empires along with the Founding Fathers' and Mothers' emulation of heroic Romans of the Republic. To this new, increasingly prosperous, generation of Americans, America was exceptional: America's embrace of evangelical Christianity meant that the country could embrace wealth and empire and yet avoid Rome's cycle of imperial decline.

Over the course of the 1890s and into the twentieth century, Rome's fabled might was translated into power and wealth in the built environment and in material culture as a positive ground of identification. Across America negative references to the decadence and imperial overreach of ancient Rome, previously common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were overshadowed by a celebratory linking of the ancient Roman and modern American empires. Analogies drawn between the ancient Roman and modern American empires now helped to articulate and legitimate America's recent acquisition of an overseas empire, whilst fabricated connections with the imperial Roman world came to undergird new cultural and class hierarchies. In mass culture, entertainment entrepreneurs played the role of populist emperors and offered the public voyeuristic access to a sumptuous and titillating realm of imperial pleasures. Imperial pleasures were no longer frowned upon but instead were increasingly to be consumed, enjoyed, and displayed by all classes.

Within a few years though, the Great Depression was calling into question such celebrations of progress and empire. The Hollywood entertainment industry responded by utilizing Roman imagery to frame the middle-class reaction to hardship and political turbulence during the crisis. Cecil B. DeMille's sword-and-sandal epics wed the popular appeal of spectacles of Roman decadence to plots glorifying conservative religious values. Reacting to the mixed messages sent by such films, Jewish studio owner Samuel Goldwyn commissioned a comic parody, *Roman Scandals*, starring Jewish film star Eddie Cantor. Absent from Goldwyn's film is any hint of the popular trope of Romans as persecutors of Christians; corrupt officials and monopoly capitalism are the evils in this Rome, and ordinary citizens are the oppressed. *Roman Scandals* entertained the Depression-era audience by exposing political corruption within the body politic, both Roman and American.

Later, during the Cold War, Roman metaphors were deployed again in mainstream Hollywood films, but now both as allegories of the global geo-politics of the times and as analogues of domestic politics and tensions. Two interrelated texts used the slave revolt of Spartacus as a way of commenting on American politics and culture: Marxist Howard Fast's 1951 historical novel, *Spartacus*, and its

1960 cinematic adaptation of the same name by Hollywood actor and producer Kirk Douglas. In Fast's subversive novel, published at the height of the witch hunts of communists in the McCarthy era, Rome stands for capitalist, class-divided America, and the slaves stand for modern wage slaves, the exploited proletariat. Fast's novel was a clarion call for revolution. Kirk Douglas's Hollywood film drew on Fast's novel and offered a critique of domestic politics, while downplaying the revolutionary impetus of Fast's tale.

The final chapter brings us into the late twentieth century, exploring the shifting uses of Rome in Las Vegas. In sharp contrast to the negative view of imperial Rome in both Fast's and Douglas's *Spartacus*, the casino-resort Caesars Palace (inaugurated 1966) deliberately exploited the cultural force of the myth of a decadent and fabulously wealthy imperial Rome to encourage patrons to indulge, consume, and spend. Since the 1960s, the merging of the entertainment, hotel, and retail industries has resulted in the incorporation of more mainstream forms of consumption and leisure in this Las Vegas resort. At the Forum Shops, a shopping mall built in 1992 next to Caesars Palace and named after the Roman Forum, images of an opulent and elegant imperial Rome promote ever-increasing consumerism and consumption in a Roman-themed civic space. By the end of the twentieth century Rome was no longer a tool for articulating working-class concerns: consumer culture had co-opted Rome for mass consumption.

What emerges powerfully throughout this book is the malleability and remarkable continuity of Rome in the American imagination. Since the founding of the nation, Americans have used images and connotations of ancient Rome to define themselves and take the measure of their own cultural, political, and material achievements. Different classes have appropriated the Roman past to legitimate, debate, or contest the pressing issues and concerns of the times they lived in. Rome's history therefore has shifted and changed its meaning depending on who is invoking it and for what purpose. When we analyze differing interpretations and uses of Roman history within a given historical context we uncover the competing attitudes and world views that resonated at those times. History moves on, "rewritten by the victors," but long-forgotten visions and alternative world views remain, buried but unaltered in the sedimented layers of history, in newspaper articles and political speeches, plays and novels, architecture, painting, and film, waiting for us to recognize them. History may be rewritten but these artifacts remain, eloquent witnesses of the thoughts and mind-sets of our forebears.

This book has been a journey of discovery. I set out to write a book that showed how Roman antiquity remains relevant for today, how its malleability keeps it alive in surprising and often overlooked forms. In part that is what I have done, but along the way I have surprised myself because what has emerged is an excavation of modern American history. This book is about cultural reception and the relevance of Rome in the United States, but it is also a book about the often forgotten, marginalized, or silenced history of modern America.

Notes

- 1 Cicero, *Orator* 120. “Nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis acciderit, id est semper esse puerum. Quid enim est aetas hominis, nisi ea memoria rerum veterum cum superiorum aetate contextitur?”
- 2 Byrd (2004a).
- 3 D. J. Saunders, “Tax dollars at work,” *New York Times* (December 31, 1993).
- 4 N. A. Lewis, “Byrd’s eloquent voice continues to fight to honor tradition in the Senate,” *New York Times* (November 29, 1997).
- 5 Obama (2006), 74–5.
- 6 The unnamed senator was annoyed at Senator Byrd’s delaying tactics for the establishment of a homeland security department. J. Tierney, “Threats and responses: The Senate; Byrd, at 85, fills the Forum with Romans and wrath,” *New York Times* (November 19, 2002).
- 7 S. Fritz, “Senator Byrd learns from, shapes history,” *St. Petersburg Times* (September 23, 2002).
- 8 Pocock (1975). Bondanella (1987) tracks and analyzes the myth of Rome from antiquity to the present.
- 9 Byrd (2004a). “In speech after speech opposing the line-item veto, I warned that it was when the Roman Senate relinquished control of the purse to Caesar and to the emperors who followed him that Rome ceased to be a republic. As long as I am in the United States Senate, I am determined this mistake will never happen here.”
- 10 Byrd (1995), 161–3; also quoted in Maddox (2006), 148.
- 11 As the title of his most recent book makes clear (2004b): *Losing America: Confronting a Reckless and Arrogant Presidency*.
- 12 Like Cicero, Senator Byrd has his critics. He has been called the “King of Pork” for his success in funneling federal funds to his West Virginia constituency. He joined the Ku Klux Klan when he was young, opposed civil rights legislation in his earlier years in the Senate, and vilified those who protested against the Vietnam War. Senator Barack Obama was aware of historical irony as he listened to Senator Byrd conjuring up “the spirits of Senates past” to warn of the “dangerous encroachment, year after year, of the Executive Branch on the Senate’s precious independence.” Senator Byrd’s presence brought Obama “back to a time when neither I nor those who looked like me could have sat within these walls. I felt with full force all the essential contradictions of me in this new place, with its marble busts, its arcane traditions, its memories and its ghosts. I pondered the fact that, according to his own autobiography, Senator Byrd had received his first taste of leadership in his early twenties, as a member of the Raleigh County Ku Klux Klan, an association that he had long disavowed, an error he attributed – no doubt correctly – to the time and place in which he’d been raised, but which continued to surface as an issue throughout his career. I thought about how he had joined other giants of the Senate, like J. William Fulbright of Arkansas and Richard Russell of Georgia, in Southern resistance to civil rights legislation.” Obama (2006), 74–5.
- 13 Bondanella (1987); Vance (1989); Galinsky (1992); Liversidge and Edwards (1996); Wyke (1997); Edwards (1999); Wyke and Biddiss (1999); Joshel, Malamud, and McGuire (2001); Winkler (2001a); Cyrino (2005); and Wyke (2006a).

I

Exemplary Romans in the Early Republic

In September 1777, the British army captured Philadelphia, defeating George Washington's Continental Army. Through the long and difficult winter that followed, the demoralized troops camped out at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. The situation was dire and the physical discomforts the men endured during the winter were exhausting, as this excerpt from the diary of Albigenice Waldo, a surgeon stationed at Valley Forge, makes vividly clear:

December 14: I am Sick – discontented – and out of humour. Poor food – hard lodging – Cold Weather – fatigue – Nasty Cloaths – nasty Cookery – Vomit half my time – smok'd out my senses – the Devil's in't – I can't Endure it – Why are we sent here to starve and Freeze – What sweet Felicities have I left at home; A charming Wife – pretty Children – Good Beds – good food – good Cookery – all agreeable – all harmonious. Here all Confusion – smoke and Cold – hunger and filthiness – A pox on my bad luck. There comes a bowl of beef soup – full of burnt leaves and dirt, sickish enough to make a Hector spue.¹

By early May of 1778, the weather finally improved. After long months of training under the Prussian Baron von Steuben and as new recruits and supplies arrived the ragged insurgent force was transformed into a disciplined fighting unit. Seeking to rally his troops for the new season of campaigns, General George Washington requested a performance of Joseph Addison's 1713 play, *Cato*, confident in the tonic effect that Cato's clarion call to fight to the death for liberty would have on the army as it prepared to regroup and engage the British:

So shall we gain still one day's liberty;
And let me perish, but in Cato's judgment,
A day, an hour, of virtuous liberty,
Is worth a whole eternity in bondage.²

Washington was not relying on novelty to invigorate his troops, nor was he an isolated commander out of touch with the tastes of his men. He was well aware that his fellow Americans defined themselves in relation not only to the British of the day, but also to the Romans of the past.

Cato was first performed in the American colonies in 1735 in Charleston, South Carolina, some twenty years after its opening performance in London.³ Within a few decades, *Cato* had become the most popular play in pre-Revolutionary America.⁴ Its theme of liberty opposing tyranny clearly struck a chord in the nascent republic. Addison had based his play on Plutarch's lives of Cato the Younger and Julius Caesar, texts well known in the American colonies.⁵ According to Plutarch, Cato committed suicide in 46 BCE, unwilling to live in a world led by Caesar and refusing to grant Caesar the power to pardon him.⁶ Addison's play focuses on the last days of Cato's life and his suicide in Utica. Part of the popular appeal of the plot lies in the intertwining of the fall of the Roman Republic with the two imaginary love stories of Cato's daughter, Marcia, with the Numidian prince Juba, and of Cato's son, Portius, with Lucia, daughter of the Roman senator Lucius. But the parallels between the desperate situation of Cato's men in the North African desert and the American army's trials during the winter of 1777 must have had special meaning for Washington and his men, who were living, not acting, the Republicans' fierce embrace of liberty (voiced below by the fervent Sempronius, unsuccessful suitor of Marcia):

When liberty is gone,
Life grows insipid, and has lost its relish.
O could my dying hand but lodge a sword
In Caesar's bosom, and revenge my country,
By heavens I could enjoy the pangs of death,
And smile in agony.⁷

Analogy with the virtuous Cato lifted the Revolutionary soldiers' struggle to a grand or mythic level, and out of the misery described by our surgeon.⁸

The exemplary qualities of the Roman tragedy were clear to Washington. Its hero, Cato, the charismatic Stoic who, almost from his death, was the very model of a patriotic hero, embodied the qualities most admired in eighteenth-century America: civic virtue, unselfish patriotism, and courage. Its antagonist, Julius Caesar, stood for their opposites: unchecked ambition and tyrannical oppression. "Dost thou love watchings, abstinence, and toil, / Laborious virtues all? Learn them from Cato; / Success and fortune must thou learn from Caesar."⁹ Caesar was emblematic of tyranny, and resistance against tyranny even when hope of victory was gone, the central theme of Addison's play, resonated with Washington's army. His soldiers packed the playhouse to the doors.

At the time of the American Revolution, Caesar was popularly represented as a tyrant whose ruthless ambition brought down the Roman Republic. Colonists