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**BARBARIAN TENACITY &
IMPERIAL HUBRIS:
THE CHALLENGE OF A
SUPERPOWER**

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**BARBARIAN TENACITY
& IMPERIAL HUBRIS:
THE CHALLENGE OF
A SUPERPOWER**

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PREFACE

The following paper is the product of my growing sense of the world over the course of my four years at Boston University. In that time, the “War on Terror” and, more specifically, the chaos emanating out from the Middle East has dominated my view of society, culture, and international relations. As I sit safely insulated from the worries of the world, I am a proud citizen of the most dominant power on the planet—the United States of America. And yet my country seems painfully incapable of shaping an increasingly interconnected world as five years of bloodshed and wasted opportunities in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, and perhaps now Iran demonstrate.

As both an admirer of history and a firm believer that the past has much to share with us, I believe that answers to these challenges exist in the past. Predictably, this led me to examine the story of the decline and fall of the paradigm of world powers: the Roman Empire. Despite its wealth and power, it was ultimately brought down by a combination of imperial hubris and the barbarians to the north. These two dynamics alone are a lesson countless powers have failed to learn—and a powerful lesson for America and its dealings in the Middle East.

While this paper is filled with technical details and stories of battle, I would like to believe it is actually about ideas (or ideals). It was the idea of *Rome* that was perhaps Rome’s best asset. However, the Roman project went astray when the *civis Romanus* vanished under the weight of a military state. America, too, is susceptible to the same sort of militarism that perverted the empire. We are the heir to Rome. Where they attempted to “Romanize” the barbarians, we now attempt to “Americanize” the planet. The benefits of liberal democracy and free markets are the hallmark of American civilization, and, as the story goes, our gift to

the world. However, instead of relying upon the intrinsic value of such gifts, we, like Rome before us, have attempted to reshape our world at the point of a sword. Today, to put it bluntly, America's ambassador to the world has become the heavily-armed marine. If this paper suggests anything, it is that there is no sustainable future in this. To use a horrid cliché, any empire that relies upon the sword will die upon the sword. For the sake of my country, I can only hope our elected leaders wake up to this fact before it is too late. I do not suggest that the United States faces either imminent collapse or the same fate as Rome. I only hope that someone looks at the fall of Rome and sees that the United States is following dangerously close in her footsteps.

I readily admit this project is perhaps a case of biting off more than one can chew, but I believe a thoughtful comparison of the United States and Rome has much merit. If what follows is too ambitious for its own good, my defense is that this is but a start to a much bigger project. Whatever the verdict, writing this paper has been a tremendously rewarding experience. It has opened my eyes to an extensive variety of knowledge new and old—and immersed me in a world of nigh endless Rome-America parallels. I owe a number of people for their assistance in putting this thing together. My faculty readers, Clifford Backman and H. Joachim Maître, had a great deal of patience in dealing with me. I am especially thankful to David Fromkin for taking me under his wing at the last moment. I would be remiss if I did not mention Keith Botsford for getting me into this mess and my friends Ali Cumber, Andrew David, and Agnes Györfi for their constant support, helpful criticism, and ability to keep the thesis-stress at bay. And, of course, my parents: thank you for everything.

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INTRODUCTION

THE CHALLENGE OF A SUPERPOWER

Even before the events of 9/11, it can be argued that the United States had long been an empire. While it might have been something of a reluctant empire, the economic, political, and, most importantly, military reach of the US around the globe made it a power of the first degree. Depending upon how one views 9/11, the terrorist attacks of that day either unleashed the power or demonstrated the limits of the American Empire. The past five years may have seen the mobilization of an imperial power, but the US has been expanding its power and influence since its inception. It faced the same conundrum any great nation faces: the need to grow and expand in order to ensure its future prosperity and security. The Cold War drove this expansion and by the end of the twentieth century the US had emerged as the much-heralded world's sole superpower. It had become, in the words of former Secretary of State Madeline Albright, the "indispensable nation." Debate was whether the globe was now under a *pax Americana*, the US having become the "New Rome."

Michael Ignatieff picked up on this theme in an article in *The New York Times Magazine* in early 2003, before the Iraq war. He noted that "to call America the new Rome is

at once to recall Rome's glory and its eventual fate at the hands of the barbarians.” In the wake of 9/11, the United States, “a confident and carefree republic,” was forced to deal with “not just an unending imperial destiny but also a remote possibility that seems to haunt the history of empire: hubris followed by defeat.”¹ Like Rome and the barbarians, the US has until very recently remained largely ignorant of the threat posed by radical Islam. The haphazard application of American policy in places as far flung as Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq has created a potent brand of anti-Americanism within the Muslim world that seeks nothing but to end the march of the American colossus about the globe.

With America in mind, the following is exploration into Rome’s fall at the hands of the barbarians. But why focus on the Roman Empire? Writing in the years after the American Revolution, Edward Gibbon suggested that the fall of the Roman Empire could be “usefully applied to the instruction of the present age.” He went on:

The savage nations of the globe are the common enemies of civilised society; and we may inquire, with anxious curiosity, whether Europe is still threatened by the repetition of those calamities which formerly oppressed the arms and institutions of Rome. Perhaps the same reflections will illustrate the fall of that mighty empire, and explain the probable causes of our actual security.²

In the post-9/11 world, Gibbon’s suggestion begs further analysis. Certainly Rome is but one of many empires that have risen and fallen in the history of the world, and its structure hardly comparable to the recent imperial giants of Russia or Britain. Nevertheless, the US is perhaps the ultimate successor to the Roman tradition. The Founding Fathers held a special affinity for the Roman Republic; they envisioned America as its rebirth, containing all the same civil virtue and discipline that the Romans ultimately lost. And as Rome became an

¹ Michael Ignatieff, “The Burden,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 5 January 2003.

² Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, XXXVIII, vol. 4, (Possneck, Everyman’s Library Edition, 1993) 123.

empire by necessity, so too has the US. The Romans created the first western superpower, and, while their empire, like all empires, was based on a degree of exploitation, it also implicitly sought to “Romanize” the world and bring civilization with it. In thought if not deed, the US continues the Roman aspiration to bring civilization to the world. “The advance of freedom is the calling of our time,” the US has declared; “it is the calling of our country.”³ As the US has emerged as the leader of the West and implicitly the leader of the world, it has emulated Rome in its attempts to “Americanize” the world. Despite the pressures of the Cold War and the resistance of much of the world, it has succeeded in this mission to a startling degree. From France to China, even the most intransigent nations of the world give the US its proper due. In any material comparison, the US simply has no real rival. Of course, the same dynamic applied to the Roman Empire. While the reach of the Roman emperor was incomparable, his empire ultimately ceased its civilizing mission on the banks of the Rhine and the Danube. There, it had faced savage, “inferior” barbarians and been turned back. From the first century AD forward, the story of the Roman Empire is one of an empire under siege and in denial, ultimately to be defeated and replaced by barbarian hordes.

The barbarians of today come in many guises, but none are more threatening than those under the umbrella of Jihadists. They represent the point where the US has been unable to “Americanize” the world. The threat of radical Islam and terrorism in general is incomparably greater than the threat of Chinese military power or European economic clout. The threat of the future comes out of failed states, which breed contempt for and hostility towards American power. Simply put, the US is up against the same social dynamic of that of Rome along the Rhine and Danube. Fortunately, the advantage of modernity affords the

³ “President Bush Discusses Freedom in Iraq and Middle East,” (White House, United States, November 2003) Avail. On-line: <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html>>.

US an opportunity to examine and learn from Rome's fate and perhaps even escape it. The War on Terror will never be won with guns, bombs, and violence. Barbarians cannot be beaten that way, and the following exploration of Rome's fall demonstrates this.



Caesar meets the Barbarians

CHAPTER 1

ROME AND THE BARBARIANS

From the beginning of the principate under Caesar Augustus in 27 BC until the age of Theodosius at the end of the fourth century, the Roman Empire was the most dominant power in the world; its relative supremacy unrivaled in the history of empires. It had absorbed the glory of Greece, defeated the power of Carthage, and withstood the challenge of Parthia. Stretching 4000 kilometers from Britain in the northwest to Palestine in the southeast, it is not an exaggeration to say that the Romans had brought peace and prosperity on an unprecedented scale to the 50 million people that lined the Mediterranean in the ancient world. The Roman military was superior to all others, and its ability to guarantee the Roman peace, the *Pax Romana*, was unquestioned by imperial citizens and outside rivals alike. In modern terms, the Roman Empire was quite literally a superpower—the world's sole superpower at that. And yet the Roman Empire ultimately succumbed to a collection of poor, ill-equipped barbarian tribes.

There is much debate about what brought about the decline of the empire—Gibbon argued that Christianity was primarily at fault while the German scholar Demandt lists 210 distinct reasons for Rome’s decline—,¹ but the strongest argument for Rome’s end is that the barbarians simply stormed its gates. The term *barbarian* was taken by the Romans from the Greeks to mean anyone “other” than themselves. It was and is an immediately exclusionary term and a pejorative classification. While the Greeks had often used the term, it was the Romans who intensified its meaning, applying it liberally to everyone outside their borders. Beyond Rome lay only the uncivilized waste of *Barbaricum*, and the Germans came to be seen as the most barbarous peoples of all. They were inferior and beyond comparison to the noble Roman. Themistius called them the greatest “disordered rabble of suppliants cast down upon the earth,”² and Roman citizens regularly enjoyed watching German captives be slaughtered in amphitheatres and coliseums.

Yet despite their disdain for the Germans, the Romans were never able to subdue any of the dozens of German tribes that populated northern Europe. Following the massacre of three Roman legions at Teutoburg Forest in AD 9, the Roman Empire decided to establish a firm defensive position along the Danube and Rhine rivers. However, by cordoning off these tribes, the Romans created the conditions that would allow an inferior mass of peoples to bring down the most powerful empire in history.

How the barbarians ultimately brought down the empire is a massive question, but a simple answer would be to suggest it was a devastating combination of German tenacity and imperial hubris. However, the actual relationship between Rome and the Germans changed greatly from the time of Augustus to the fall of Rome five centuries later. Initially, the

¹ See Demandt, *Der Fall Roms*, (Munich, 1984).

² Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 72.

scattered tribes were viewed as a minor obstacle to Rome's continued destiny to conquer the world. While Germany presented a number of technical and logistical obstacles for the Roman legions, there is no reason to believe Roman society did not envision itself as the eventual master of northern Europe. After all, as Tim Cornell adamantly reminds, "the Romans were imperialists and proud of it."³ And until AD 9, the Romans were actively involved in bringing the Germans into the empire.

While Teutoburg Forest ended Roman attempts to conquer Germany, the defeat hardly threw the empire on its heels. After all, it was quickly able to muster 60,000 men to cross the Danube in retaliation. However, the magnitude of the defeat had a significant psychological impact on the empire. Furthermore, it brought into startling clarity the expense of conquering the lands north of the Danube. While Julius Caesar, upon "discovering" the peoples of Germany during his conquest of Gaul, realized that the immense military cost of subduing these barbarians could never be recouped through the traditional spoils of war, the defeat massacre reminded "the [emperor] that the easy way to get an empire had been to acquire someone else's; the hard way to chase irreconcilable barbarians through bog and bush."⁴ It was one thing to conquer Egypt or Greece or even Gaul; it was another to attempt to conquer a people without a comparable level of civilization. The wealth that had propelled earlier Roman conquests simply did not exist in the lands of northern Europe. Even though the Germans had a number of startling successes against the Roman legions, it was not the military challenge of Germany that kept Rome from conquering the north—it was the region's extreme poverty.⁵

³ Tom Cornell, "The End of Roman Imperial Expansion," *War and Society in the Roman World*, Ed. John Rich & Graham Shipley, (New York: Routledge, 1993) 141.

⁴ Derek Williams, *Romans and Barbarians: Four Views from the Empire's Edge 1st Century AD*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998) 19.

⁵ Heather 58.

Individual emperors might take on the prospect of German conquest, but the reality is that the empire never again attempted a sustained campaign against the German tribes. This division had long-term ramifications for both the empire and, more broadly speaking, Europe itself. The events of 9 AD “established a cultural, and sometimes political, boundary of very long duration.”⁶ While there was interaction between the two cultures, Roman and German civilization was irrevocably severed from each other. It might be going too far to invoke Samuel Huntington’s thesis that the frontiers facilitated an eventual “clash of the civilizations,” but there is little doubt the severing of Germany from the Roman world had military implications.⁷

Additionally, while the disorganized barbarians posed little real threat to the empire in the first century AD, the Romans developed an almost pathological fear of barbarian invasion—Tacitus fatefully warned at the end of the first century that the Germans presented the greatest threat to the empire.⁸ Over time, this fear facilitated an arms build-up, to use a modern expression, along the Rhine and Danube frontiers—something that was absent in Africa and even in the East against the Parthians. This had the unintended consequence of militarizing the Germans, who themselves felt threatened by tens of thousands of heavily armed Romans opposing them. This fear combined with Roman diplomatic intrigues to slowly work to bring the Germans into larger and larger tribal confederations. On the surface, this made it easier for the empire to deal with the Germans, but it also created the conditions for the massive barbarian threat that the Romans had hoped to avoid.

⁶ Peter S. Wells, *The Battle that Stopped Rome: Emperor Augustus, Arminius, and the Slaughter of the Legions in the Teutoburg Forest*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003) 214.

⁷ See Turchin or Heather. Wells presents basic evidence of a long-lasting cultural divide, including the fact that the Roman borders delineate traditional wine-drinkers and beer-drinkers (Wells 214).

⁸ Tacitus, *Germany*, Chapter 37.

This reality was largely ignored throughout the first two centuries of the empire, during the *pax Romana's* golden age. The empire was able to develop in relative security while the Danube border was safely maintained, but the Roman military situation was always precarious. Despite a 300,000 man army—the largest of the ancient world—Rome could never hope to contend with the dual threat of civil war and external aggression. And with the death of Marcus Aurelius at the conclusion of the Marcomannic Wars (166-180), the empire suddenly found itself thrown into a century of internal turmoil. Combined with the ill-fated rise of an aggressive Parthia in the East, the Roman army was soon stretched to its breaking point, and the famed Roman legions proved inadequate to handle the crises of the third century. Based in specific regions, the legions were designed to maintain order within the empire while projecting its power beyond the frontier. However, they were relatively immobile, and the empire could not easily move them eastward without opening up the northern frontiers. To make matters worse, the strength of the legions made them fertile sources of rebellion for the central government. This precipitated a complete transformation of the imperial war machine by the time of Constantine at the beginning of the fourth century. “The defence of fortified positions became more important” and the army now “emphasized speed of movement and surprise;” the legions had vanished, replaced with mobile field armies and static frontier troops.⁹ The emperors began to surround themselves with the army’s elite, and the rest of the imperial army suffered as a result. The empire began to sacrifice the integrity of its outer borders, creating a *defense-in-depth* that ultimately made it easier for the barbarians to finally strike out against the empire that had so long contained them.

⁹ Adrian Goldsworthy, *The Complete Roman Army*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003) 198.

As the empire fell into decline, German tribes further narrowed the gap between Roman and barbarian culture. The empire was the chief source of “ideas, techniques, and other kinds of cultural elements” for the barbarians, and they could not help but absorb knowledge from the empire.¹⁰ Not only were the Germans forming larger and larger confederations, but their society was becoming more complex. Peter Wells presents evidence that the barbarian culture had begun to change even by the first century, and Peter Heather points out that the massive population increase, economic development, and political restructuring that occurred in Germany as a result of Roman involvement inevitably posed a threat for the empire.¹¹ And, as the fourth century passed, the increasingly crushing presence of the Huns beyond the borders of Europe only accelerated the confrontation. All of these conditions came together to give the Germans an opportunity to take advantage of an increasingly vulnerable empire.

The Roman countryside became a dangerous place, and cities soon needed walls and fortifications. The cost of the empire suddenly became far greater to the average Roman citizen. More and more Germans found their way into the empire, and Theodosius formally accepted this reality after the Roman defeat at Hadrianople in 376. While barbarians had long been brought into the empire, earning citizenship and becoming “Romanized” through the mechanism of military service, Theodosius sets a dangerous precedent of according the German Visigoths a degree of autonomy within the empire itself. Before the empire’s fall, the Visigoths, the Vandals, the Burgundians, the Alans, and the Franks became *foederati* of the Roman Empire. Once these *foederati* became “capable of providing a measure of

¹⁰ Peter Turchin, *War & Peace & War: The Life Cycles of Imperial Nations*, (New York: Pi Press, 2005) 69.

¹¹ Heather 97.

security” that the empire no longer could, the *pax Romana* and the empire lost its “last support,”¹² and the barbarians delivered the death blow to the Roman Empire.

Throughout this chain of events, the empire continued to be fueled by an ideology of superiority, and it could never afford to grant their German enemies any large degree of respect even after suffering a defeat at their hands. The mentality survived until the dying days of the empire, and, as a result, Roman policy towards their northern neighbors, if one can go so far as to say they had a consistent policy, was based on ignorance and superstition. The Romans and their military commanders simply misunderstood what they were fighting and, as a result, overestimated their control of the situation until it was too late. However, the empire—both its emperors and citizens—had created an “image of imperial invincibility” that could not be reconciled with Rome’s failures in Germany. As a result, a literary tradition appeared to explain why the empire has not absorbed Germany as it had the rest of the world. After the age of Augustus, the Romans invested little to attempt to adequately understand or confront these German barbarians, and by the time of Marcus Aurelius at the midpoint of the second century, Roman art had succeeded in thoroughly dehumanizing the Germans. The north became a land full of terrible beasts and savage men, not truly human and unable to achieve the benefits of Romanization. According to Herwig Wolfram, the result of this tradition “blocked the Romans from grasping reality and gave rise to almost ludicrous contradictions.”¹³

By the middle of the fifth century, the Romans were forced to face these contradictions, and, in the chaos that resulted, their empire was lost. In 476 Odovacar, a German chieftain of the Heruli tribe, deposed Romulus Augustus, the final Roman emperor

¹² Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century A.D. to the Third*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976) 5.

¹³ Herwig Wolfram, *The Roman Empire and Its Germanic Peoples*, Trans. Thomas Dunlap, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 36-37.

in the West, and the Roman Empire effectively ceased to exist. While the rulers of Constantinople would maintain the façade of “Roman emperor,” the Roman Empire as an historical entity had vanished from the earth, replaced by a collection of barbarian kingdoms and eastern dynasties. Yet the Roman Empire became the imperial paradigm; from Charlemagne to Napoleon, the dream of “Rome” remained—and remains to this day. There are similarities both superficial and far-reaching between the rise of Rome and that of the United States, which some commentators have gone so far as to call the “New Rome.”¹⁴ Like Rome before it, “America’s quest for security” compels it to expand throughout the world and dominate it,¹⁵ and to accomplish this it follows the path Rome laid before it. The US fought its Carthage in the form of Soviet Russia, and in the wake of 9/11 it now faces barbarians of its own making, as well. American economic and political interference in the Middle East, backed by the constant reminder of American military might in the region, has created a divide between the US and the radical Islam as very real as the physical barrier provided by the Danube between the Romans and Germans. While fifteen hundred years separate the two conflicts, the tactics and strategy remain similar.

Thus, Rome has lessons to share. Its five hundred year reign is of exceptionally long duration for an empire of such size and complexity. Its decline at the hands of an inferior civilization is a lesson in itself. More importantly, the challenges faced by the Roman Empire make it a superb model to study for any superpower in any time. As Ariel Durant writes in *The Story of Civilization*: “[Rome] made the desert blossom with civilization, and atoned for its sins with the miracle of lasting peace. Today our highest labors seek to revive the *pax Romana* for a disordered world.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Peter Bender, “The New Rome,” *The Imperial Tense*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003) 81.

¹⁵ Ibid 81.

¹⁶ Ariel & Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, vol. III, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1944), 670.

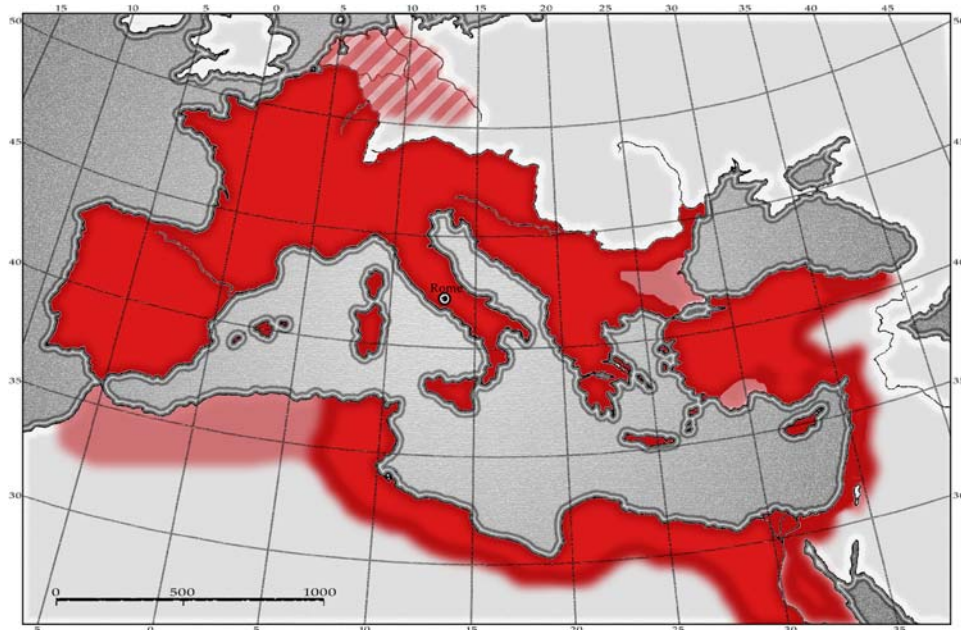


Artist's rendition of the early moment of the Battle of Teutoburg Forest

CHAPTER 2

THE VARIAN DISASTER

On a gloomy early autumn day in September AD 9, 20,000 Romans consisting of three legions and a large contingent of auxiliaries were making their way through the forests of central Germany after a long summer's campaign. Their commander, P. Quinctilius Varus, had received information from a German chieftain by the name of Arminius of a massive barbarian uprising about a day's march west of the Weser River. The legions already were moving westward towards their base along the Rhine, and Varus believed putting down this rebellion would be nothing but a slight diversion—and an excellent opportunity to demonstrate Roman power. Though he was warned of the potential for treachery, Varus, like the imperial government in Rome, believed that much of Germany had been pacified and effectively brought under Roman control.



The Roman Empire in AD 9: Augustus believed the whole of Germany to the Elbe had been conquered.

The Romans took few precautions as they trudged through the wilderness. Eager as they were to return home across the Rhine, the legions were slowed by their supply wagons and an accompaniment of women and children. The Roman column was out of formation and ineffectively organized, yet no one was concerned of an attack against Varus. He was, after all, the most powerful Roman authority in Germany. They marched along the base of what is today the Kalkriese Hill; the path they followed was dreary and unpleasant, a muddy clearing more than anything. On their left, the hill curved sharply upward and was covered by dense forest, and their right side quickly became a dark swamp. The Romans were surrounded on both sides and because the path was so narrow, their column was spread thin. It was the perfect place for an ambush.

Suddenly, a flurry of yells rang out somewhere inside the forest; before the Romans could react, thousands of spears flew out from the top of the hill. Unable to defend themselves, a number of Romans were struck instantly. Whether they were killed or not, blood began spraying everywhere. Soldiers began screaming. “The scene was one of

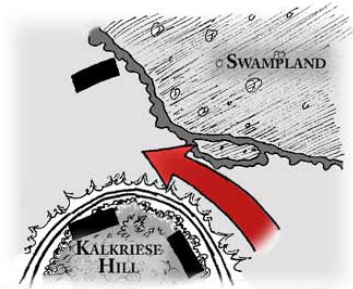
complete chaos,” Peter Wells imagines, with “spears falling like hail, men collapsing and gasping, even those not yet wounded struggling to remain on their feet, and occasionally frenzied horses and mules crashing through the swarm of troops.”¹ With the Romans in utter disarray, the Germans leapt out of the woods and attacked at close range. Up against a muddy bog, the Romans could not maneuver and were trapped.

They abandoned most of their supplies and began a three-day running battle west towards the nearest Roman outposts along the Lippe River.* They offered no resistance. Paterculus, the only contemporary Roman source, writes that the Roman army, “[h]emmed in by forests and marshes and ambushes...was exterminated almost to a man by the very enemy whom it had always slaughtered like cattle.”² After the surprise of the ambush, the legions likely attempted to regroup, and archeological finds spread over a 6 by 4.5 kilometer suggest that the Roman army was cut in two. As the battle progressed and the Roman position collapsed, Germans who had remained uncommitted to attacking the Roman forces saw an opportunity to plunder and joined in the effort. The other half of the Roman army apparently moved northwest into the marshland, where they likely were massacred by Germans who now encircled the entire battlefield.

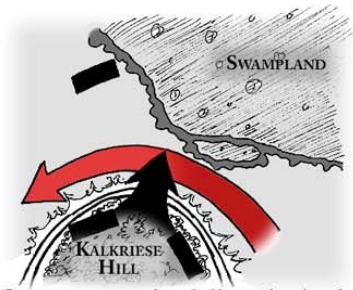
¹ For a graphic narration of the entire battle, see Peter Wells’ book, *The Battle That Stopped Rome* (171). He bases his description on uncovered archeological evidence and historical accounts. A technical account of the battle is provided by Jona Lendering at *LIVIUS.org*. The Roman authors Cassius Dio and Lucius Florus both provide similar descriptions and make no attempt to hide the reality of the disaster, though they were not contemporaries to the event. Velleius Paterculus, a Roman officer in Gaul in the late first century BC, also gives a brief description of the battle in his brief compendium of Roman history.

* The exact duration of the battle is unknown. The Roman historian, Cassius Dio states that the entire episode ended “on the fourth day”, and no Roman source disputes this. However, this does not mean that the battle lasted four full days as many authors suggest. Jona Lendering presents an alternative. Counting back chronologically, Dio’s account begins the day before the battle, when Varus allows Arminius to take leave of him. Thus, the ambush does not occur until the next day. It continues into a third day, and Roman resolve completely vanishes on the final day when Varus commits suicide. Curiously while Peter Wells gives a fantastic account of the battle, his re-imagining seems to truncate the entire conflict into a span of only a few hours.

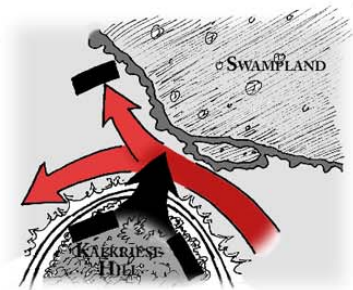
² Paterculus, *History of Rome*, Chapter CXIX. 2.



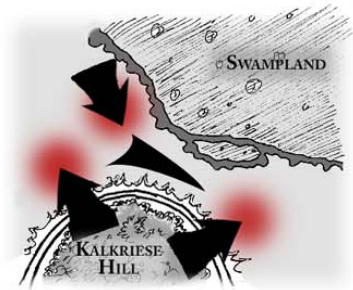
Safe behind fortifications on Kalkriese hill and waiting on the far side of the swamp, the Germans wait for Varus' coming from the southeast.



Germans on the hill ambush the center of the Roman column.



In the ensuing panic, the Roman column splits into two: half makes a mad dash westward while the other group fights right into more Germans.



The Romans are surrounded and trapped.

At some point during the massacre, Varus killed himself. By the time it was over, the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Legions of Rome were completely annihilated and never reconstituted. It was a gruesome scene. When the Roman general Germanicus arrived on the scene of battle during a retributive campaign years later in AD 15-16, Tacitus recounts how the Romans found human remains strewn about the ground. They also found human heads nailed to trees and “barbarous altars” where legionnaires had been immolated and sacrificed.³ As for Varus, his head was taken by the Germans and sent to Augustus Caesar.

The *clades Variani*, the Varian Disaster, sent an immediate message to Rome. The impact of the slaughter was likely comparable the American reaction to 9/11. The imperial government found itself completely unprepared for such slaughter and took a number of emergency measures to quickly restore order. Augustus Caesar fell into utter despair at news. Dio states that German soldiers in the emperor’s praetorian guard were ordered out of Rome, some exiled, and Augustus hastily sent his chief advisor, Tiberius,* into Gaul to assess the military

³ Tacitus, *Annals*, 1.61.

* Tiberius, it should be noted, was designated by Augustus as his successor. He had spent an extensive amount of time in Germany attempting to pacify the local tribes. He ascended to the purple in 14 AD.

situation.⁴ The loss of three of its twenty-eight legions created an immediate logistical concern for the empire. It left a gap in the empire's defense, weakening the empire's hold on its northern provinces and exposing the imperial heartland to invasion. Panic filled the city. The Romans had a long memory, and twice before barbarians had threatened the city—the Gauls in the fourth century BC and the Teutones in the second, and there was every reason to think that the massacre was the start of further German aggression. There were fears that even if Italy was safe, Gaul remained threatened. While the situation soon stabilized, it would have a profound and enduring effect on the Roman Empire. The complete annihilation of three Roman legions created more than just a logistical concern; it was a psychological blow to the way the Romans saw themselves. In a very real way, this event altered the future course of the empire—henceforth, it would remain wary of its barbarian neighbors and eager to contain them.



How was Arminius able to orchestrate such a dramatic Roman defeat? It was a stunning accomplishment: one prince of one German tribe organized a massive assault against a formidable Roman force. Imperial hubris on the part of Varus played a large

⁴ Dio, *Roman History*, Book LVI. 23.

role; he did march a disorganized Roman force into enemy lands despite warnings of a trap. However, Arminius was also a shrewd tactician and knew the weaknesses of the Romans. While his exact reasons for the assault are unknown, he was a young chieftain of the Cherusci tribe of north-central Germany and perhaps saw an attack as a way to seize leadership of the tribe or a path to creating an alliance against Rome with the Macromanni, which Rome considered the chief threat in the region at the time. He masterfully played the role of dutiful servant of the empire while carefully hiding his disdain for his imperial overlords.

While the Romans recognized that the “Germans” were made up a number of different tribes, they misunderstood how disparate these tribes really were. The Roman perception of *barbarian* as it applied to the tribes of Germany made it impossible to separate objective “reality” from how the Romans viewed the world.⁵ This created a dichotomy between the tribes immediately east of the Rhine that the Romans considered pacified and the aggressive tribes further east. Tribes in open opposition to Rome, like the Macromanni, remained uncivilized barbarians. The Cherusci tribe, to which Arminius belonged, and others along the Rhine were seen as client states and certainly not a threat to imperial control. Rome brought civilization, and logic held that no one, not even a barbarian, would reject this. This led the Romans and Varus especially to disregard and overlook evidence that suggested the magnitude of German discontent, which had only increased since Varus had been appointed governor of the region in AD 7. Roman sources are divided in their portrayal of Varus; some place much of the blame for the disaster at his feet, but it seems he was a decent military commander. Paterculus “confesses” that Varus was “a man of

⁵ Susan Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy: Imperial Strategy in the Principate*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 76.

character and good intentions.”⁶ Nevertheless, his good intentions were ill-received by the Germans. Dio writes that Varus attempted to Romanize the Germans faster than was sensible. Furthermore, his heavy-handed method for extracting taxes exacerbated tensions.⁷ He seems to have been a controversial administrator at best, and his mere presence antagonized the German tribes. Florus provides a colorful account of the situation that sets up the massacre well:

He had the temerity to hold an assembly and had issued an edict...just as though he could restrain the violence of barbarians by the rod of a lector and the proclamation of a herald. But the Germans who had long been regretting that their swords were rusted and their horses idle, as soon as they saw the toga and experienced laws more cruel than arms, snatched up their weapons under the leadership of Arminius.⁸

Arminius had served in the Roman army prior to his insurrection. The Romans supplemented their legions with auxiliaries recruited in the outer provinces and beyond the frontiers. As it does even in America today, Roman military service offered monetary rewards and social status for outsiders—likely Arminius’ motivation for joining. Serving during the Pannonian Revolt of AD 6, he distinguished himself and was granted Roman citizenship. His military service provided him excellent cover in which to portray himself as a friend to the Romans. Sources report that Varus considered Arminius a close confidant, that they often shared meals together, and that Arminius was ostensibly aiding in the pacification of Germany.

His experiences in the Roman army afforded Arminius the first-hand opportunity to learn Roman tactics and methods of warfare. Based on events in Pannonia, he would have realized the futility in attempting to engage the Romans in open combat. He witnessed a

⁶ Paterculus, CXX. 3-5.

⁷ Dio, Book LVI. 28.

⁸ Florus, Book II. XXX.

rebellion that was put down by a ruthless application of Roman force. The army's discipline generally ensured a bloody defeat for its enemies when the army was given room to execute its traditional military maneuvers. While the Roman military record was impressive, it was hardly surprising that small-scale resistance movements faltered against the empire's might. Historically, rebellions rarely contend well in the open against well-equipped militaries; their effectiveness against a stronger force requires them to use their superior mobility and knowledge of their surroundings to outwit their enemy.

In many respects, the lessons of Arminius are perfectly applicable to modern day guerrilla warfare. Writing in 1961, Che Guevara insists that the fundamental characteristic of the guerrilla fighter is "his flexibility, his ability to adapt himself to all circumstances, and to convert to his service all the accidents of the action. Against the classical methods of fighting, the guerrilla fighter invents his own tactics at every minute of the fight and constantly surprises his enemy."⁹ He continues by suggesting that the most advantageous place for a guerrilla war is either in vast mountains or dense forests and marshes—a perfect description of first century Germany. This suggestion worked as well against Rome as it did American forces in the jungles of Vietnam or the Tora Bora mountains of Afghanistan; the Varian Disaster was simply a flawless application of these lessons.

It might be going too far to suggest that the German resistance to Roman domination represented a four-century long guerrilla war, but there are some obvious similarities. Varus' defeat caught the Romans off-guard; the Germans had relied upon a well-planned strategy to ambush and decimate their enemy. Archaeological evidence shows that not only was the Kalkriese Hill an ideal spot for an ambush but that the Germans enhanced their position by creating an extensive sod-wall on top of the hill. This wall served two

⁹ Ernesto Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1961) 20.

purposes. First, it likely was created with soil from the path along the northern edge of the hill, bordering the swampland, and narrowing this path only served to further limit the Romans' maneuverability.¹⁰ The wall, which was as tall as 1.5 meters in places, was reinforced with limestone and created an excellent defensive structure that the Romans were unable to penetrate during the battle.¹¹ More importantly, this presence of this wall at the battle site suggests that the ambush was planned well in advance.

This was no simple uprising. Mobilizing a force capable of contending with three Roman legions—and willing to accept the likely reprisals—suggests that Arminius was a leader of considerable influence and renown. Because of the sparse population density of north-central Europe at the time, he would have had to gain the support of a coalition of German groups to create a force comparable in size to the Romans. This required forethought and ambition; Arminius was not what the Romans saw as a prototypical barbarian. He deftly exploited his relationship with Varus in order to lure him into his trap. After giving the Roman governor false information, the Cherusci chieftain marched out with him towards Kalkriese Hill. Then, just a day before the ambush, the German begged to be excused so that he could assemble his forces in order to come to Varus' aid only to reveal himself to be no subject of Rome. His manipulation of Varus and the Romans allowed him to unleash a devastating assault on the Roman position in Germany. His actions would forever change the Roman world, effectively ending imperial expansion and chasing the empire back into the borders that the Germans would one day overrun.

¹⁰ Wells 163.

¹¹ Jona Lendering, "The Battle in the Teutoburg Forest," *LIVIUS-Articles in Ancient History*, (1996-2006) <<http://www.livius.org/te-tg/teutoburg/teutoburg04.html#Archaeological>>.



Cartoon of violent Roman behavior during the Marcomannic War, AD 170s.

CHAPTER 3

THE ROMAN CONTAINMENT OF GERMANY

The result of the Varian Disaster, according to the Roman historian Lucius Florus, “was that the empire, which had not stopped on the shores of the Ocean, was checked on the banks of the Rhine.”¹ His assessment proved to be true: after Varus’ defeat, the Roman Empire never again engaged in any sustained effort to conquer greater Germany. It was astonishing, Theodor Mommsen writes, “the extent to which this catastrophe was perceived as a tragedy. It was, unquestionably, a bitter blow for a military nation [but] it was not an enduring loss. What is remarkable is how [the defeat] managed to alter the entire policy of the government. Such an about-turn did, however, take place.”² In one stroke, the Romans had given up their ultimate dream of world conquest and retreated from their

¹ Florus, Book II.XXX.

² Theodor Mommsen, *A History of Rome under the Emperors*, Trans. Claire Krojzl, (New York: Routledge, 1996) 113.

civilizing task. Even when later emperors began adding to the empire, they largely avoided anything northeast of the Rhine-Danube border. Trajan's conquest of Dacia was the chief exception to this policy, and it was by itself both a tremendous military achievement and a strategic addition. However, the first two centuries AD, the height of the empire and the *pax Romana*, generally saw the empire transform its northern border into a "sprawling fort" protected by a dense system of natural and man-made defenses.³ The containment of the Germans had begun.

This occurred despite the fact that the prevailing state ideology continued to emphasize the superiority of the Roman people over the *barbarian*. Heather writes that the empire still "saw itself not as just marginally better than those beyond its frontiers—but massively and absolutely superior, because its social order was divinely ordained. This ideology not only made upper-class Romans feel good about themselves, but was part and parcel of the function of Empire."⁴ What did begin to change after AD 9 was the Roman view of the world. The preceding centuries had seen the Roman Republic expand outward from Italy and into the entire Mediterranean. J.C. Mann writes that the Romans had little notion of a definite end to their empire:

There seems little doubt that Augustus saw that the security of the empire demanded above all the conquest of Germany. The Elbe would only have formed a temporary frontier. Was the further aim to envelop the lands beyond the Danube, and even beyond the Black Sea, thus securing the vulnerable left flank for an ultimate advance into Iran? Such plans need not have seemed wildly unrealistic to the Rome of Augustus.⁵

³ Antonio Santosuosso, *Storming the Heavens: Soldiers, Emperors, and Civilians in the Roman Empire*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001) 119.

⁴ Heather 70.

⁵ J.C. Mann, "Power, Force, and the Frontiers of Empire," *Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 69, (1979) 179.

Even after the defeat, Mann suggests that in general most Romans “subconsciously assumed that expansion would go on” ad infinitum.⁶ The imperial circle, however, had begun to believe differently. The defeat of Varus certainly demoralized the aging Augustus, and, in his last testament, the emperor ordered that his successor Tiberius maintain the empire’s current frontiers. According to Dio, Augustus believed additional territory “would be hard to guard...and this would lead to danger of [the empire] losing what was already theirs,”⁷ and his advice went well-heeded throughout the reigns of the Julio-Claudians and the Flavians: emperors who seemed more concerned with consolidating the entire empire than taking on the Germans.

However, if Germany was not to be conquered, it suddenly became necessary for the empire to devise not only some sort of long-term defensive strategy but also weave a legitimate story to explain the empire’s sudden stop along the Rhine-Danube line. Militarily, the barbarians remained a large and potentially threatening force along the empire’s border, which at the end of the age of Augustus was largely undefended. The empire attempted to save face by launching a series of reprisal expeditions under Germanicus between AD 14-16. In his attempt to subdue the Cherusci and apprehend Arminius, he led approximately eight legions plus an additional 50,000 auxiliaries deep into Germany.⁸ While the Romans were able to pillage a vast section of central Germany, they had limited success against the various regional tribes. The entire expedition reasserted Roman military supremacy and was perhaps a tremendous propaganda victory, but it also underscored the challenges facing Rome in occupying the territory.

⁶ Ibid 177.

⁷ Dio, Book LVI. XXX.

⁸ Santosuosso 145.

According to Antonio Santosuosso, Germany was a logistical nightmare. The country remained an uninterrupted collection of dense forest and swamp. Supply lines were difficult to maintain, and, while the German tribes had some settled agriculture, there was no way for the Romans to live off of the land. Furthermore, the Roman legions had difficulty even tracking down their enemies. The tribes' tactics thoroughly baffled the Romans, Santosuosso writes, because they "cunningly refused face-to-face confrontations and usually attacked only where the terrain suited them and where they knew the Romans were at a disadvantage."⁹ Even attacking the primitive German settlements did little for the Romans because, according to Mann, the Germans "would apparently simply disappear into the woods, presumably to reappear as guerillas" to prevent Rome from establishing themselves.¹⁰ Thus, each of Germanicus' campaigns followed a similar pattern: his armies entered Germany and were led on a wild-goose chase by their enemies before having to retreat across the Danube and Rhine in order to resupply. The end result a costly military "victory" with nothing to show for it; conquering Germany simply entailed extremely high costs and brought few tangible benefits for the Roman Empire.

This simple reality is the only thing that saved the German tribes from becoming part of the Roman Empire. The entire retributive campaign was a drain on the empire's resources. Mommsen suggests that Germany presented a situation wherein "a policy of conquest as such was not feasible under the principate, which was too weak to sustain one."¹¹ However, this is probably going too far, and it seems more likely to believe that the empire could have conquered and subjugated the whole of Germany if the imperial circle would have set its mind on it. Unlike Parthia, Rome always had the military might to

⁹ Ibid 144.

¹⁰ Mann 177.

¹¹ Mommsen 115.

physically conquer Germany, but there were no concentrated fixtures of German power—or German wealth. Hence, there was nothing worthwhile to attack or even to occupy. Furthermore, the Romans had the impossible task of attempting to control a civilization that was, at this point, far inferior to its own. The empire was unaccustomed to dealing with such a disorganized group of people. Despite the fact history refers to them as the “Germans,” these people had no homogeneous identity and Walter Goffart insists “that the disunity of the early Germans can hardly be too emphatically stressed.”¹² Tiberius ordered Germanicus to withdraw from Germany in AD 16 and immediately the German tribes began turning against themselves. With the Romans gone, any sense of unity that had developed around Arminius simply vanished; the German hero himself was eventually betrayed and murdered by his own tribesmen.*

Unfortunately for the Romans—and perhaps fortunately for the Germans, the Germans low level of social development actually insulated them from the grasp of Roman imperialism. Jürgen Kunow presents a particularly interesting explanation for Rome’s failure by adapting a model for modern imperialism to the situation.¹³ As the Romans had expanded out of Italy, they had met a variety of cultures roughly analogous to their own, and they had been able to build a “bridgehead” with the nobility of these countries. Once the native nobility had been tied to the Romans, it was easy to bring about the populace and annex the territory entirely. Germany, however, lacked any sort of institutional nobility—the rapid rise and fall of Arminius is a testament to that. According to Kunow, the failed

¹² Walter Goffart, “Rome, Constantinople, and the Barbarians,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 86, no. 2, (April 1981) 279.

* The Germans were so disorganized that even individual families were divided over their loyalties to Rome. While Arminius plotted against the empire, his brother remained loyal, losing an eye for the empire. Tacitus, in his *Annals* (Book II. 9), describes how the two barbarian brothers argued over the empire across a river—clearly, the Germans were not a united people.

¹³ Jürgen Kunow, “Relations between Roman occupation and the *Limesvorland* in the province of Germania Inferior,” *The Early Roman Empire in the West*, (Oxbow Books: Oxford, 2002) 90-93.

integration of the Germans into the empire was the “result of the poorly developed native social stratification.”¹⁴ Santosuosso explains that “factional conflict pitted aristocrat against aristocrat” and this prohibited a permanence of the German nobility “especially during peace.”¹⁵ Thus, the Germans were excluded from Rome’s empire-building; the Danube became a clear line of demarcation between the Roman world and the poverty of the north. Within the empire, adjacent lands that had once been barbarous, cities like Milan, Trier, and Sirmium, became fully Romanized.

In order to explain why the benefits of Romanization were not being spread northward, the German *barbarian* came to be seen as impenetrable to the benefits of Rome and no less than inhuman. This was a change to how the barbarians had often been viewed by Roman society; the Romans had often had romantic notions of the Germans, which were “perceived as possessing pristine virtues like that belonging to the Romans of old.”¹⁶ This idea of the German was in many respects analogous to the eighteenth century idea of the “noble savage,” but, like modern imperialism, this romantic vision vanished in the face of military and political realities. The *barbarian* stereotype intensified and Susan Mattern describes how the Germans became almost always described “as greedy for plunder, aggressive but lacking stamina, fickle, and treacherous.”¹⁷ Despite the Roman propensity to war, Roman literature portrayed the Germans as an irrational and bloodthirsty collection of half human warmongers. Even Tacitus, who regarded German culture with some favor, continues with this theme: Germans are drunks, easily beaten if only the Romans would provide them enough drink, who live solitary lives. Most pointedly, he emphasizes their uncivilized nature, stating they are not “as easily persuaded to plough the earth and to wait

¹⁴ Ibid 93.

¹⁵ Santosuosso 146.

¹⁶ Mattern 78.

¹⁷ Ibid 74.

for the year's produce as to challenge an enemy and earn the honour of wounds. Nay, they actually think it tame and stupid to acquire by the sweat of toil what they might win by their blood."¹⁸ Thus, Roman society came to see itself as duty-bound to keep these types of barbarians from entering their empire.

If the empire could not vanquish the barbarian threat, Tacitus could only advise that “fortune can furnish us nothing greater than the discord of the enemy.”¹⁹ One can almost sense the hint of worry in Tacitus’ words and the implication of what German unity might bring. The Romans for their part actively encouraged the disunity of the Germans through diplomacy. The intertribal violence was so intensive during the first century AD that when a coalition of German tribes turned on the Bructeri tribe, the victors actually “invited Roman observers to enjoy the spectacle, reportedly, of 60,000 people being massacred.”²⁰ The empire went further, however, by creating a chain of client states within Germany. According to Edward Luttwak, the Romans slowly developed an “active barrier between the perimeters of the empire and the possibly still more dangerous barbarians deeper inland.”²¹ Using what today would be called a mixture of *carrot-and-stick diplomacy*, the Romans were able to manipulate the tribes by controlling their chiefs. Friends were rewarded with subsidies and trade agreements while troublesome tribes were hunted down by Roman legions. In this way, even the Marcomanni were brought under the influence of the Roman emperor, and an entire chain of “friendly” barbarians appeared across the Danube. Of course, it may be going too far to suggest there was any coherent policy in any of this—Roman politics could only really remain consistent during the lifetime of a single emperor. Each had different

¹⁸ Tacitus, *Germany*, Chapter 45.

¹⁹ Tacitus, *Germany*, Chapter 33.

²⁰ Heather 54.

²¹ Luttwak 36.

ambitions regarding the Germans. However, the ultimate consequence of Roman actions was to become a detriment to the security of the empire as it moved into the third century.

All the while, the empire started to permanently fortify the border along the Rhine and Danube rivers. By AD 16, they had abandoned their bases within Germany and withdrawn into well-established imperial provinces. The number of legions stationed on the northern border also increased. In AD 6, the Roman legions were diffusely distributed throughout the empire; many of them were stationed internally to guard against rebellion—such as the uprising that had occurred in Pannonia that same year. Of the twenty-five legions remaining in AD 14, eight were stationed along Rhine and five along the Danube.²² The concentration of military forces along the two rivers would only increase, eventually shifting towards the Danube. By the end of the second century, there were approximately four legions along the Rhine while twelve stretched the length of the Danube.²³ While Rome remained the chief aggressor against Parthia in the East, the western half of the empire faced entirely different circumstances as the military steadily transitioned from an organ of expansion into a defensive force against the Germans.

There the Romans effectively militarized the lengths of the Danube and Rhine. Additionally, because the two rivers formed an L-shaped wedge in the empire, the empire seized additional territory between the two rivers and began building an extensive network of military outposts was created in the province of Agri Decumates to link the rivers. This man-made border was known as a *lime* and extended roughly from Bonn on the Rhine, through the Taunus Mountains, and into Regensburg on the Danube.* A network of forward

²² Brian Campbell, *War and Society in Imperial Rome: 31 BC – AD 284*, (London: Routledge, 2002) 19.

²³ Luttwak 85.

* *Limes* were man-made defensive structures, but they did not necessarily indicate the border of the empire to either the Romans or the barbarians on the other side—and so to refer to them as an imperial border

watchtowers linked by widely-patrolled roads with lightly-defended support garrisons served to fortify the interior of the empire. While a siege mentality eventually developed, early defenses against the Germans maintained a relatively fluid barrier—the Raetian *lime* hardly was comparable to the Korean DMZ or the Berlin Wall. However, for the first two centuries after Augustus, the Germans remained low-intensity threats. Disorganization prevailed amongst the barbarians as the biggest threat along the northern border were raiding parties. Luttwak suggests that the thin line of barriers were “*not* intended to provide the total defense against large-scale attack...While minor, endemic threats were countered by the fixed defenses and a minimum of manpower, more serious threats were met by concentrated mobile forces sent forward for interceptions or for ‘spoiling’ attacks.”²⁴

This sort of defensive posture combined with Rome’s diplomatic initiatives against the Germans to create what Luttwak sees as the beginnings of an imperial “Grand Strategy.” His thesis suggests that the Romans recognized the diplomacy would not be enough to counter the barbarian threat. Thus, they developed a preclusive defense in the first century as a sophisticated adaptation to the external challenge the Germans posed to the empire. While he provides an excellent analysis of the empire’s military situation, his argument—as it applies to the first two centuries of the empire—has its critics.²⁵ Nevertheless, his thesis has some merit in evaluating how the Romans dealt with their German neighbors especially as the empire moved into the third century. In the second century, however, Roman military superiority was such that it “gave the Roman armies a psychological edge, superiority in

is a modern assertion. While the *Raetian lime* effectively acted as a border (as did Hadrian’s Wall in England) and border and *lime* can effectively be used interchangeably, it is not technically correct.

²⁴ Luttwak 66.

²⁵ See Santosuosso and C.R. Whittaker.

morale, often sufficient in itself to deter hostile military action.”²⁶ As a result, there was as yet no real need for a unified strategy. Border relations, and defense, were ad hoc. During AD 69, the year of four emperors, the Rhine defenses were almost entirely depleted yet no German tribe dared invade en masse—this would not be the case a century later.

Even if the empire had stopped aggressively pursuing the conquest of Germany, Rome’s actions during the first two centuries suggest it had not abandoned the idea entirely. Santosuosso makes a good argument for the notion that Rome remained on the offensive even as it withdrew from Germany. The Romans never stopped to consider their borders “to be the limits of their sovereignty” and, as a result, any tribe that the Romans could presumably conquer they “considered subject to Rome’s supremacy.”²⁷ Hence, the Romans considered friendly tribes such as the Macromanni to be subservient to the emperor’s will, and the empire never hesitated to enforce its will over the much weaker barbarians. At this point, Roman military strength was sufficiently strong that the mere threat of military intervention usually worked to coerce tribal chiefs into acquiescing to imperial demands. The Romans also extended their direct rule some distance beyond the formal military frontier; Santosuosso points out that “the Romans made sure a wide strip of the Rhine’s right bank was kept free of German settlements” and would depopulate the region whenever German numbers became threatening.²⁸ When barbarians would dare to launch raids against the empire, the Romans would respond with force, and when the empire was sufficiently provoked—or, more importantly, when it felt the barbarians were becoming

²⁶ Author Ferrill, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: The Military Explanation*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1986) 26.

²⁷ Santosuosso 124.

²⁸ Ibid 127.

sufficiently threatening, it would not hesitate to launch massive campaigns into Germany to restore imperial superiority vis-à-vis the barbarians.

In particular, the war against the Dacians provides a fantastic example of Roman-German power relations at the height of the empire. Located in modern day Transylvania, the Romans first encountered the Dacians in the first century BC, and they were already significantly more organized than the many other tribes north of the empire. By the time of Domitian, the Dacians were under the centralized rule of Decebalus. “This man was shrewd in his understanding of warfare and shrewd also in the waging of war,” Dio writes, calling him also “a worthy antagonist of the Romans for a long time.”²⁹ In AD 87, Domitian sent a praetorian guard with the command of several legions into Dacia to reduce Decebalus’ strength. The praetorian guard, Cornelius Fuscus, was killed in the process, and the entire episode proved a tremendous embarrassment for Domitian, who granted the Dacians a number of concessions as a new Roman client kingdom. While technically this was a defeat for the empire, it was a political blunder by the emperor more than anything; he was warring with the imperial elite at the time and bought off Decebalus in order to focus on maintaining his authority. As a result, the settlement remained a sore spot within Roman society for the next decade—an oddly similar situation to that the United States face in Iraq, one must admit.

Decebalus, under the guise of a dutiful Roman client, began rapidly expanding his power and threatened Roman interests from northern Italy to the Black Sea. The Dacians’ level of political and military sophistication, along with the Roman awareness that “their power and their pride were increasing,”³⁰ provoked the empire into a massive response. When Trajan came to power in AD 98, he immediately planned an offensive to restore

²⁹ Dio LXVII. 6.

³⁰ Dio LXVIII. 6.

Roman prestige among the barbarian tribes. While the result of the campaign would be the annexation of territory north of the Danube, Adrian Goldsworthy writes that Trajan's "main aim was to achieve a far more satisfactory peace...making Rome's superiority over Dacia obvious to all" but not to actually add the territory to the empire.³¹ The campaign had enormous popular support, and Decebalus realized the threat Trajan posed to him. He quickly begged forgiveness of the emperor and the first leg of the war ended in 101 with a peace settlement, maintaining the Dacians' status as a client kingdom though on Roman terms. With Roman superiority restored, Trajan returned to Rome in triumph. Though as soon as the emperor left, Decebalus proved to be an untrustworthy ally: he ignored his new treaty and began raiding Roman territory yet again. The emperor was outraged over these actions and resolved himself to the full-scale invasion of Dacia.

The details of this second campaign into Dacia reveal the Roman Empire for what it was: the superpower of the ancient world. Trajan mobilized a massive military force for the invasion. He moved nine legions into formation to cross the Danube and created an additional two legions solely for the campaign.³² More impressive still, the Dacian War is responsible for one of the indelible images of Roman achievement: the engineering of an elaborate stone bridge built across the Danube. The conquest ended with Decabalus' suicide and the absolute annihilation of Dacian power. Trajan commanded that the area be made a new Roman province, and the empire took control of the region's goldmines. Not only did this pay for the entire conquest, but it facilitated extensive building projects and infrastructure improvements throughout the empire. While the addition of Dacia greatly extended the empire's borders, Luttwak explains how the acquisition was an important political and strategic victory:

³¹ Goldsworthy, *In the Name of Rome*, 365.

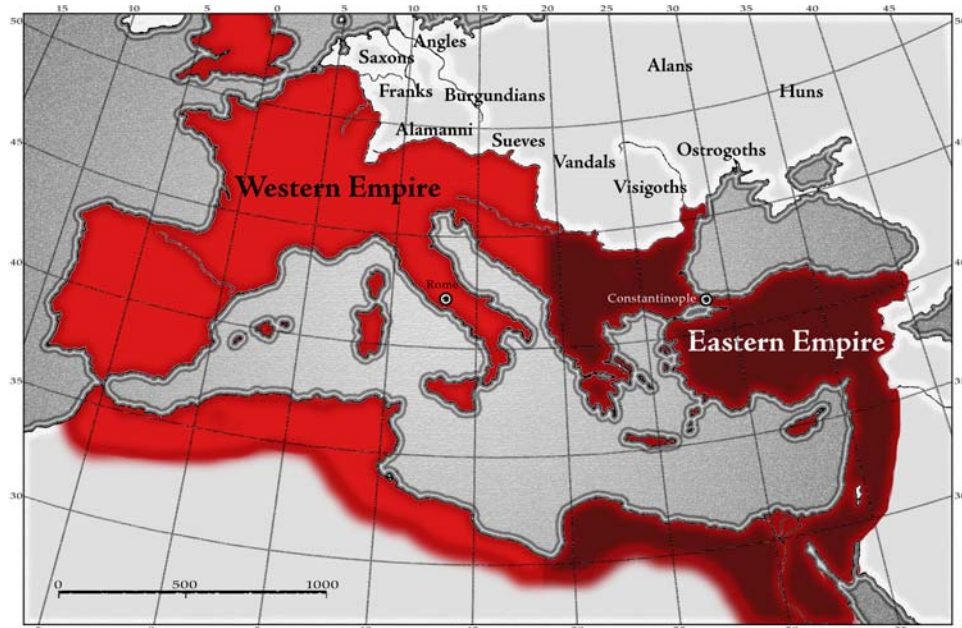
³² *Ibid* 372.

The elimination of Dacia's independent power provided the necessary conditions for a restoration of Roman diplomatic control over the Germans...of the entire region. Both deterrence and positive inducements would be needed to keep Marcomanni [and other tribes] from raiding the Danube lands; and as long as Decebalus remained in defiant independence, the deterrent arm of the policy would be fatally weakened. As a province, Dacia was not worth having, but as a strategic shield for the region as a whole, it was very valuable indeed.³³

Trajan had achieved a tremendous victory for Roman power—a fantastic model for how the Romans could have dealt with the Germans. Unfortunately, unlike the old dream of advancing the empire to the Elbe, the acquisition of Dacia did not extend the empire in a defensible way; it only created a large bulge into barbarian lands. With the barbarians effectively suppressed, the usual pattern of Roman involvement entailed a quick return to the traditionally established frontier. Clearly, what the empire needed was a more directly aggressive approach towards their unwieldy neighbors, not the policy of containment it used instead. Dacia was the chief exception to this, and because the empire ceased expanding outward from this position, even that province would eventually be abandoned. However, in the second century, Roman military superiority and the continued weakness of the German tribes maintained an equilibrium along the northern frontier.

Rome was able to patrol the Rhine-Danube and keep up a stable security balance without having to dramatically increase the size of the Roman army. Decabalus aside, the empire was aided by two centuries of internal stability and generally weak external threats—and the Roman containment of Germany always threatened to break down should either of these dynamics change. Unfortunately for the Roman Empire, change was in the air as the third century began; civil war and a rival empire were both on the horizon.

³³ Luttwak 101.



The Roman Empire in AD 378: Split in two, the empire confronted a variety of larger German tribes on the eve of Hadrianople.

CHAPTER 4

THE CHANGING NATURE OF THE EMPIRE & THE GERMAN THREAT

In the late first century AD, Pliny the Elder wrote in his *Natural History* that the “*inmensa Romanae pacis maiestate*,” that the boundless majesty of the Roman peace had made plants the world over available to the botanist. The might of the Roman Empire had brought not only people under its protective sway, but plants also! By itself, that was a remarkable accomplishment, and it is from Pliny that history has adapted the term *pax Romana* to signify this achievement. Tertullian wrote that the world under Rome had become

better cultivated and more civilized than before. Everywhere roads are traced, every district is known, every country opened to commerce. Smiling fields have invaded the forests; flocks and herds have routed the wild beasts...There are now as many cities as there were formerly cottages. Reefs and shoals have lost their terrors. Wherever there is a trace

of life there are houses, human habitations, and well-ordered governments.¹

In the poetic words of Gibbon, the empire at that time “comprehended the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilized portion of mankind.”² It was what he called a “happy period” that ended with the death of Marcus Aurelius, the last of the so-called Five Good Emperors, in 180. While perhaps a bit early to demarcate the decline of the empire, the death of Marcus Aurelius and, more importantly, the events that began immediately afterward certainly began to shatter that *pax Romana*.

Again, the Germans were at the heart of Roman troubles. For the sixty years after Trajan, the Germans caused few serious problems. This all changed dramatically during the 160s when the empire was forced to look eastward to confront the rising Parthians, stripping the Danube of a number of its legions in the process. At the same time, population pressures within Germany encouraged the development of tribal confederations. One such confederation, under the Marcomanni, began invading Roman territory in Pannonia and attacking the prized Dacian gold mines in 166. Marcus Aurelius was forced to wage a bloody war with these barbarians. He was interrupted from personally supervising the war by a variety of misfortunes assailing the empire, including a large rebellion in the east and several devastating rounds of the plague. By the time the emperor had restored some stability to the empire in 178, the situation along the Danube had broken down again. Though he was now an aged man, Marcus determined that his personal presence was necessary to restore order to the northern frontier. His second campaign was something of a success, and it seems that the emperor intended to follow in the mold of Trajan by annexing the lands of the

¹ Tertullian, *De Anima*, trans. Peter Holmes, (2001)
<<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/tertullian10.html>>.

² Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, v. I, 3.

Marcomanni into the empire.³ Unfortunately, before he was able to establish any new province, Marcus Aurelius fell ill and died—his son Commodus succeeding him.

While Marcus Aurelius was of the most able stock, his son was, in the words of Dio, “a greater curse to the Romans than any pestilence or any crime.”⁴ The new emperor had little interest in war and spent his entire reign in Rome, engaging in debauchery before being murdered in 192. Ignoring the council of his father and chief advisors, he concluded a truce with the Marcomanni in 180 and withdrew back across the Danube. He achieved such a horrible result out of what should have been a Roman success that the Marcomannic Wars are “generally regarded as marking a major turning-point for the empire, as the harbinger of what finally took place in the fifth century.”⁵ Commodus was the beginning of string of mostly ineffectual emperors that would govern the empire for the next century.

Beginning in 235, the situation began to deteriorate rapidly. In the span of fifty years, a series of usurpations and civil wars caused “acute political disarray.”⁶ To make matters worse, the rise of Sassanid dynasty in Parthia introduced a rival state that was eager to capitalize on the Roman disarray. Suddenly, an aggressive rival forced would-be emperors to juggle the threats of civil war and invasion at the same time. The empire responded by sending much of its military might into Anatolia and Syria. While the emperors reasonably thought that Parthia “posed an incomparably greater threat to Roman order than did Germania,”⁷ the transfer of Roman defenses eastward opened the door to the barbarian invasions to come. Throughout the course of the third century, they began to pose an escalating threat to the health and viability of the empire. A series of “soldier-emperors” appeared out of the military and ruthlessly attempted to restore order. Under Aurelian (270-

³ Anthony Birley, *Marcus Aurelius: A Biography*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) 208-209.

⁴ Dio, Book LXIII. 15.

⁵ Birley 249.

⁶ Luttwak 150.

⁷ Heather 48.

275), a new federation of German tribes known as the Alamanni, literally “all men,” was routed by the Roman army, and Roman superiority momentarily restored. However, in the process, the province of Agri Decumates, which held the *lime* between the Danube and Rhine, was abandoned. More significantly, Dacia, Trajan’s hard won prize, was also abandoned; the Roman frontier was actually brought back for the first time. The empire had weathered the storm of the third century, but, by the time Diocletian assumed the purple in 284, it was in the midst of a number of fundamental changes. External stresses had taken their toll; M.I. Rostovtzeff believes that the third century crises “ended in such depression of spirit that any stable conditions seemed preferable to unending anarchy. They therefore willingly accepted the stabilization brought about by Diocletian, regardless of the fact that it meant no improvement in the condition of the mass of the population of the Roman Empire.”⁸ When Diocletian voluntarily retired in 305, the empire was in the midst of a number of fundamental changes in response to the chaos of the third century.

Diocletian removed the last vestiges of Republican Rome, marginalizing the old Roman senatorial elite and the imperial capital itself. The city of Rome hampered his ability to govern the entire Mediterranean, so he set about reorganizing the structure of the empire. Trier and Milan in the West and Antioch and Constantinople in the East developed into regional headquarters due to their proximity to the most threatened frontiers. Heather points out that while Rome was too far removed from the contentious eastern frontier, Constantinople—or Rome for that matter—was too far from the Rhine and upper Danube. Administratively, it was impossible “for one emperor to exercise effective control over all three frontiers.”⁹ While Rome remained the symbolic heart of the empire, the imperial

⁸ M.I. Rostovtzeff, “The Empire during the Anarchy,” *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. Donald Kagan, (Lexington: D.C. Heath & Company, 1962) 77.

⁹ Heather 29.

center eventually became based in Milan, not Rome. Additionally, most of the imperial bureaucracy was based in the thoroughly-“Romanized” areas outside Italy. “One centre of patronage distribution was not sufficient to keep all the senior army officers and bureaucrats happy enough to prevent usurpations,” Heather writes,¹⁰ and it was true. During the third century, emperors campaigning in the East were constantly threatened by challengers rising out of Gaul or Italy. The result was the end of the principate established in the time of Augustus, and it was replaced by Diocletian’s tetrarchy. Diocletian appointed a co-emperor who was given the title of *Augustus* while two lower-ranking *Caesares* were established. This four-man arrangement did not survive Diocletian, but, from this point forward, each half of the empire came to be ruled by separate men. While strong individuals like Constantine and Theodosius occasionally reunited the empire, the empire faced too many challenges for a single leader. A divided empire became a necessary adaptation for the continuation of the *pax Romana*. Unfortunately, it also created a constant source of tension within the empire. The system only worked when one emperor was clearly subordinate to the other, and the two could work in harmony. In the tempestuous seas of Roman politics, this situation was rare. The division created an institutional rivalry between the Latin and Greek halves of the empire, which only weakened the imperial structure as a whole. It was difficult to guard against the barbarians when each emperor constantly had one eye on the other—as what will happen during the pivotal reigns of Theodosius and his son Honorius. The division also had the inherent flaw that isolated each part of the empire. As the West faced threat and threat, the eastern emperor had little incentive to rush to the rescue. Safe behind the impenetrable walls of Constantinople, the eastern emperor knew that the majority of his empire: Anatolia, Syria, and Egypt could never be threatened by Germans. While Diocletian’s tetrarchy was a

¹⁰ Ibid 29.

pragmatic solution to an empire that had simply grown too big, it ended the idea of Rome as a unitary empire—and would ultimately cut it in two.

The third century also saw a dramatic evolution in the Roman border defenses, and the empire devised something of a “Grand Strategy” to deal with the mounting security threat. Whereas before the empire held a tremendous advantage in war-making ability against the barbarians, this deteriorated over the course of the third and fourth century. The preclusive security and the elaborate system of forward-deployed legions was abandoned “since emperors in Rome could not maintain large forces in frontier districts” because of frequent civil war and the need to maintain order.¹¹ It was simply too costly to maintain such strongly guarded frontiers with wars to fight both at home and in the East. While the Romans did not simply abandon frontier defense, the idea was now to strengthen easily defensible areas at the expense of the vast frontier as a whole. Older watchtowers and barracks were reinforced and became walled fortresses. Cities were fortified and walls constructed. The idea was to create a limited front line that was supported by increasingly strong defensive positions behind the border. Based “on a combination of *self-contained* strongholds with mobile forces deployed between or behind them,”¹² this strategy has become known as a *defense-in-depth*. Instead of engaging the barbarians outside the empire, the strategy entailed allowing the invaders to penetrate further into the empire in order to ensnare them. Each successive line of defenses was ideally supposed to slow them down until the mobile army “could arrive to deliver the killing blow.”¹³

While maintaining a well-guarded frontier from the Black Sea to the English Channel had been costly, the move to a *defense-in-depth* entailed many additional costs that were not

¹¹ Ferrill 31.

¹² Luttwak 131.

¹³ Santosuosso 182.

immediately visible to any cost-benefit analysis. Instead of paying directly “through the medium of tax-collector or recruiting sergeant,” Roman citizens were forced to pay through losses inflicted on their farms and property by barbarian incursions themselves.¹⁴ While these social costs did not affect the operational status of the military, in the long term, they had the potential to be very dangerous to the very fabric of the empire. Instead of keeping the Germans contained, the imperial government had tacitly accepted a degree of disruption and damage to their own territory in order to relieve itself of the burden of a preclusive defense. According to Luttwak, this directly determined “popular and elite attitudes toward the very idea of a unitary empire, it would decisively affect the moral of autochthonous troops, and it would ultimately determine the value of the imperial structure to its inhabitants.”¹⁵

To its detriment, the Roman army had transformed by the time of Constantine into an entirely different entity than it was during the principate. While the total size of the army remains unknown, it was most likely the same size as that of Augustus—perhaps slightly larger. During the principate, most of the army save the Praetorian Guard was deployed for the defense of specific provinces. The legions came to acquire regional identifications: *Macedonica*, *Germanica*, *Gallica*, *Italica*, *Parthica*. This now changed. As the empire moved its legions away from the perimeter and transformed them into roving regional armies, the “distinction between legions and *auxilia* [auxiliaries] became very slight, and far more important was the division between field army units (*comitatenses*) and static frontier troops (*limitanei*).”¹⁶ The military began relying upon smaller specialized forces—the legions shrank in size from 5,000 to perhaps 1,200 men—and cavalry units, who were primarily consisted of

¹⁴ Luttwak 137.

¹⁵ Ibid 137.

¹⁶ Goldsworthy, *The Complete Roman Army*, 198.

German recruits. The legions blurred into *comitatenses* while the borders were manned by a limited number of provincial troops known as the *limitanei*. It is impossible to determine when exactly the military adopted such a structure, but the system became fully established under Constantine. When Constantine formed his field army during his consolidation of power, he further “weakened the provincial forces in order to augment his field forces.”¹⁷ Over time, as more of the best border troops were moved into the *comitatenses*, the *limitanei* became a substantially inferior force, “whose relative status and privileges continued to decline” throughout the fourth century.¹⁸

As the empire and its army weakened, the German tribes, once so disparate and disorganized, had evolved into much stronger entities. Many of the fragmented tribes Tacitus describes in *Germania*—the Bructeri, Tencteri, Usipi, Chatti, among others¹⁹—vanish from Roman records and likely were absorbed into the larger federations of which history is familiar: the Alamanni are first mentioned in 231, the Franks in 257, the Vandals in 270, and the Goths in 238.^{*20} The Roman Empire itself had unintentionally united the German peoples. In spite of the centuries-long attempt to contain the barbarians, the Germans had learned from Rome and adapted to its dominant cultural structure. By evaluating the appearance of weapons in German burial graves, Peter Wells suggests that the Germans had begun to develop a new attitude toward military activity upon the arrival of the Romans in

¹⁷ Luttwak 188.

¹⁸ Ibid 188.

¹⁹ Ibid 128

* The Goths were a large federation of Germans living immediately north of the lower-Danube stretching into Eurasia. There is quite a bit of confusion about their history moving into the fifth century. By the end of the fourth century, they had divided into two culturally similar groups: the Tervingi and Greuthungi. Traditionally, it is assumed that the Tervingi eventually became the Visigoths and settled south of the Danube. Settling to the east of the Tervingi were the Greuthungi who developed into the Ostrogoths, literally “East Goths.” However, by most accounts, elements of the Greuthungi were present at the Battle of Hadrianople. The precise history of this tribe after that battle is difficult to trace. They either blended with the Tervingi and became the later Visigoths or came under the dominion of Attila the Hun and fought against a combined Roman-barbarian army in the 450s. At this point, they were properly termed Ostrogoths.

²⁰ Turchin 73.

northern Europe. “Military ideals and symbols grew in importance as the indigenous peoples felt ever more threatened by the advances of Rome,” he writes.²¹ In a very real way, Wells believes that the Romans actually trained their own enemy by drafting Germans into their legions and playing the tribes off each other. “Once these more powerful coalitions had come into existence,” Heather writes, “Roman diplomatic practice tended to further the process.”²² While the empire desired disunity amongst the tribes, the creation of hierarchies within the tribes aided Rome’s ability to deal with the barbarians diplomatically. By supporting the development of kingships and aristocracies, the empire inadvertently facilitated this agglomeration as a result. More importantly, the long centuries of Roman interaction in Germany succeeded in creating the societal bridgehead that had not existed at the time of Augustus. Where, according to Kunow, Rome had failed in the first century, it had succeeded by the third albeit in a distorted fashion. Heather presents much evidence to suggest that German society had developed rapidly alongside that of Rome and its economy had increased, as well, by the end of the second century.²³ The gap between the sophisticated imperial order and the Germans tribes had narrowed. Certainly, the empire remained the superior power, but it was no longer quite in control of the situation.

This was exacerbated by the fact that Roman society remained woefully ignorant of the changing conditions of their northern barbarians. Historians might have noted different tribal names, but the Romans were conditioned to believe “that new barbarians did not and could not exist: they had always been the same.”²⁴ According to Wolfram, imperial “‘foreign policy’ experts” equated the newly emerging Goths and Vandals with other “long-extinct

²¹ Wells 122.

²² Heather 458.

²³ Ibid 84-96.

²⁴ Herwig Wolfram, *The Roman Empire and Its Germanic Peoples*, trans. Thomas Dunlap, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 37.

people.”²⁵ While they were aware that the Germans had become a larger threat, this was perceived only as the growing monstrosity of the *barbarian* in general. In I.M Ferris’ analysis of Roman art and rhetoric, he notes from Commodus onward the appearance of “a very significant trend in Roman imperial art towards the growing dehumanization of the barbarians.”²⁶ As the German threat grew, this mentality increased proportionately.

The Roman frontier had simply become indefensible since it was a barrier to “the path of secular migration flows from north to south and east to west. Hence Roman strategy could not usefully aim at total victory at any cost, for the threat was not temporary but endless.”²⁷ To make matters worse, the improving economic and social conditions in German society fueled a population explosion throughout the barbarian lands. This not only inflamed tensions among the German tribes but also between the barbarians and the empire during the third century AD. By the fourth century, the situation had become critical. When the militant Huns arrived on the scene and began pushing the Germans from beyond the Eurasian Steppe, the Roman border simply could not hold. “In one of the few genuine examples of ‘billiard-ball history,’” Ferrill states that the arrival of the Huns “set in motion a chain reaction as the Ostrogoths fled in panic westward against the Visigoths who were driven hard against Rome’s Danubian frontier.”²⁸ Rome’s containment of Germany had reached its end. In the summer of 376, the Visigoths, totaling perhaps 200,000 people, arrived on the lower Danube, seeking asylum from the eastern emperor Valens. The barbarian invasion of the Roman Empire had begun.

²⁵ Ibid 37.

²⁶ I.M Ferris, *Enemies of Rome*, (Glouchestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2000) 114.

²⁷ Luttwak 137.

²⁸ Ferrill 59.

CHAPTER 5

THE BATTLE OF HADRIANOPOLE

Not the Samnites, not the Carthaginians, not Spain or Gaul, not even the Parthians have more often given us warning: for the liberty of the Germans is a greater threat than the kingdom of Arsaces.* ...the German robbed the Roman people of five consular armies...and even stripped Augustus of Varus and his three legions; and not without loss did Gaius Marius defeat them in Italy, the Deified Julius in Gaul, Drusus and Nero and Germanicus in their own territories...Then there was peace, until, when opportunity had been offered by out internal strife and civil wars, they stormed the winter quarters of the legions and even aimed at the Gallic provinces; and when they had again been beaten, thereafter, in recent times, they appeared in triumphal processions rather than being actually conquered.¹

Writing at the turn of the first century AD, Tacitus had foreseen the threat the barbarians, left unchecked, would pose to the empire. They were an enemy seemingly unconquerable by the might of Rome. No matter how often the empire returned to Germany to crush them they would rise again like a phoenix out of the ashes, and as the fourth century AD came to close, the tide had turned decidedly against the empire. At the

* Arsaces is a reference to the Parthian Empire.

¹ Tacitus, *Germany*, Chapter 37.

Battle of Hadrianople in 378, the barbarians inflicted a devastating defeat upon the empire. When the battle was over, not only did the eastern emperor Valens lie dead on the battlefield but over 10,000 of Rome's most seasoned troops were lost, as well. While numerically no worse a defeat than the Varian Disaster, the loss of Hadrianople was a terrible moral defeat at a time when the structures of the empire could no longer afford one. While the battle was neither the end of imperial authority nor its military might, it forced the empire to deal with its barbarian neighbors on far more equal terms. Not even a century afterwards, the western half of the Roman Empire would cease to exist—the *pax Romana* destroyed.

The Battle of Hadrianople developed out of the same explosive combination of imperial hubris and German resentment that had fueled the Battle of Teutoburg Forest three centuries earlier. The two battles almost bookend each other as showcases of German resolve in the face of superior Roman arms. However, while Arminius was responsible for the earlier battle, the Battle of Hadrianople was the result of one imperial blunder after another. When the Visigoths had arrived on the Danube in 376, they were cordial enough to send an embassy to the emperor to seek his permission to cross into the empire. Valens allowed the Visigoths to enter provided they came unarmed, and the Roman historian Ammianus portrayed this Germanic “surrender” as the “good fortune of the prince” for it provided a new source of revenue and recruits for the war in the East.² There was more to the situation than Ammianus makes it seem, however.

Heather makes a good case that Valens would not have seen the arrival of the Visigoths as any sort of good fortune. While it had been common since the time of Augustus to bring barbarians into the empire, the empire “*never* admitted immigrants on trust. They *always* made sure they were military in control of proceedings, either through having defeated

² Ammianus Marcellinus, Book XXXI, 4.

the would-be immigrants first, or by having sufficient force on hand to deal with any trouble.”³ With the majority of the eastern army beyond Syria, the Romans simply were ill-prepared for the arrival of 200,000 barbarians on their borders, and the emperor had to have known this. The Romans had no way to support this influx of Germans, and by winter the starving Visigoths began raiding the Balkan countryside for food and retribution. While the barbarians had no way of laying siege to a well-fortified city like Hadrianople, they laid complete waste to surrounding area. The Romans, trapped in their cities, could do nothing but watch as barbarians demolished the entire infrastructure of the northern Balkans.

Valens quickly ended his eastern campaign and, seeking aid from the western emperor Gratian, decided to confront the barbarians in force. Valens was able to catch up to the Visigoths at Hadrianople before his colleague Gratians, and he made the fateful mistake of engaging the barbarians without the forces from the West. It is unknown why exactly he chose to do this—perhaps it was a desire for personal glory or he felt he had a tactical opening. Whatever the reason, on August 9, 378, Valens moved his forces into position without any sort of overall battle plan. It is unknown whether Valens hoped to win a decisive victory over the Visigoths or hoped to use them as a new base of recruits. What is known is that the Visigoths were not seeking a direct confrontation with the Romans.⁴ However, Valens’ indecisiveness made battle almost inevitable. Once a skirmish broke out between a Roman unit and some stray Visigoths, it cascaded into a disastrous confrontation for the Roman forces. Like the Varian Disaster, Valens had led his exhausted forces into a horrible position. The result was predictable: the emperor lost his life and upwards two-thirds of his forces were slaughtered as they fled.

³ Heather 160.

⁴ David S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay: AD 180-395*, (New York: Routledge, 2004) 531.

What made the Battle of Hadrianople such an important step towards the empire's end was that it set in motion the creation of the *foederati*. While the Varian Disaster had caused only Augustus to abandon Germany, the loss at Hadrianople had not only deprived the East of its best troops but also left a victorious, roving barbarian army in the heart of the empire. Furthermore, according to Thomas Burns, "the loss of so many field grade commanders—two *magistri*, 35 military tribunes, and numerous other officers—may have been more damaging than the losses of men."⁵ The evolution of the Roman military made the defeat all the more devastating. The Visigoths had managed to destroy both layers of the East's defenses: its most qualified force of *comitatenses* and, over the course of several years of raiding, most of its *limitanei*. Roman writers saw the loss as the beginning of the end—Themistius called it an "Illiad of evils" and Libanius writes:

These last disasters are obviously those of an ill-starred people. We have lost twenty-five provinces, and the natives who lived outside walled towns have been taken off as prisoners, while those inside eat up everything they have and then, when they die of starvation, they are not even buried but their relatives drag them up to the top of the wall and throw the poor wretches down from there, naked. Such is the carnival that the Goths have held. Up to now they used to shiver every time they heard mention of the Romans' skill of warfare, but now they are victorious, and we die, nobly and as befits brave men, but perishing all the same.⁶

The battle was a disaster that the empire simply could not afford. The eastern half of the empire suddenly needed to replace at least 10,000 of its best troops, and, as Ferrill points out, "replacements made in haste on such a scale simply cannot take the place of seasoned

⁵ Thomas Burns, *Barbarians Within the Gates of Rome: A Study of Roman Military Policy and the Barbarians, ca. 375-425 AD*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 33.

⁶ Libanius, *Orationes* 24.15-16.

veterans.”⁷ The sudden lack of security virtually required the empire to come to terms with the barbarians.

Gratian immediately appointed a western general, Theodosius, as co-emperor in the East. It was a military appointment with an immediate agenda, and he was tasked with repairing the military situation and pacifying the Visigoths. Changing legal penalties for avoiding conscription illustrate the decline of Roman military fortunes. Traditionally the penalty for cutting off one’s own thumbs to avoid military service entailed being burned alive. Desperately needing manpower, Theodosius was forced to change policies:

If any person by the disgraceful amputation of his fingers should avoid the use of arms, he shall not escape that service which he seeks to avoid...The option shall be unalterably decreed for the provincials, who because of such audacity in those who persons often suffer a shortage of the recruits whom they have to supply...they may furnish two mutilated recruits for one whole one.⁸

Clearly, the army was running out of options, and, as the crises of the fourth and fifth centuries mounted, it was never afforded enough time to reestablish itself as a formidable asset for the empire.

In the fall of 382—four years after Hadrianople, Theodosius agreed to allow the Visigoths to permanently settle in the province of Moesia, which rested along the southern bank of the Danube. On the surface, this was not unusual. The empire had granted *receptio* to barbarian tribes before, which has allowed them to formally settle within the empire, but it was always under Roman terms. Usually, they were dispersed upon entering the empire, their identity lost, becoming thoroughly “Romanized.” The Visigoths, however, were granted extraordinary concessions; according to A.H.M. Jones, “the settlement was, in fact, a grave

⁷ Ferrill 65.

⁸ *Theodosian Code*, ed. Jill Harries & Ian Wood, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) VII.

breach of precedent.”⁹ The victors at Hadrianople were formally recognized by the empire as an independent people with their own leadership under their own arms. In exchange, they pledged to fight with Theodosius as allies. The Visigoths had become the first of what would become many *foederati*. It would be the Visigoths who, under Alaric, would sack Rome in 410 AD. There were now armed barbarians safely within the walls of the empire. The *pax Romana* was crumbling rapidly—it had vanished in the Balkans and it would soon end in Gaul, in Spain, in Africa, and, finally, in Rome itself.

⁹ A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602: A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey*, vol. 1, (Normal: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1964) 157.

CHAPTER 6

THE END OF MILITARY MIGHT & THE CREATION OF THE *FOEDERATI*

The *foederati* are what ultimately ended the *pax Romana*. While Theodosius' policy was short-term success—he had succeeded in creating stable German states, he accomplished this at the expense of the territorial integrity of the empire. The inclusion of autonomous states within the empire's borders completely changed the political and social dynamic of the entire Roman state, but it was the price paid in order to compensate for its declining military strength. Unfortunately, the *foederati* destroyed any meaning behind the empire's frontiers. The empire had transferred its traditional frontier diplomacy to within the empire, and the goal of creating “tractable, orderly German quasi-states with whom to do business” had become possible, ironically, only once the German tribes were admitted inside imperial territory.¹ In the process, Rome's policy of establishing external clients and buffer territories was replaced by “states within a state.”

¹ Stephen Williams & Gerard Friell, *Theodosius: The Empire at Bay*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 101

While Theodosius' settlement with the Visigoths in 382 marks a good date to use for the creation of the *foederati*, the process had evolved over time. A *foedus* originally referred to “any contract freely entered, including marriage,” and was traditionally between two individuals.² It was not a treaty in the sense it would come to mean in the fifth century. As discussed, the empire frequently settled barbarians within its borders, and a large group of German Franks was given territory in Gaul as early as 356. However, this was considered a grant of *receptio* to a subdued people, and it was given on Roman terms. It forced the would-be immigrants to serve the Roman state in exchange for admittance. Using a modern comparison, the incorporation of the barbarians into the empire was structurally similar to the absorption of East Germany into West Germany at the conclusion of the Cold War—the German tribes who were granted *receptio* lost their identity and became “Roman.” In 382, however, the Visigoths were granted a degree of independence that was unprecedented. They were still considered subjects of the emperor, but this distinction vanished over within a half-century. Forty years later, the Visigoths were led not by Rome but by their own king. They still served to varying degrees as military allies of the empire, but the promise of these alliances had already destroyed much of the effectiveness of the Roman *comitatenses*.

The imperial army long had served as the principle method of “Romanizing” outsiders into the ideology of the empire. Peasants, slaves, barbarians alike joined the military and gained citizenship, learning the virtues of the Roman state. With the creation of the *foederati*, this process was reversed entirely. “Romanization” was replaced by “Barbarization,” and the use of Germans in the Roman military increased to such a scale that “the army became German rather than the Germans becoming Roman soldiers.”³ Though it began in the East, barbarization would spread into the West like a plague, unraveling the

² Burns 14.

³ Ferrill 84.

very mechanisms of Roman governance in the process. Within a generation, the Roman military machine, the one-time envy of the ancient world, had devolved into an ill-disciplined motley crew. At the Battle of Châlons in 451, the “feeble remnant of the once proud legions still fought in the ancient formation, but apparently without training or discipline.”⁴ Any air of superiority the Roman military once had held was gone in the sea of *foederati* armies. The army was deteriorating in many ways, as Flavius Vegetius Rhenanus, writing in 390, describes:

From the foundation of the city till the reign of the Emperor Gratian, the [infantry] wore cuirasses and helmets. But negligence and sloth having by degrees introduced a total relaxation of discipline, the soldiers began to think their armor too heavy, as they seldom put it on. They first requested leave from the Emperor to lay aside the cuirass and afterwards the helmet. In consequence of this, our troops in their engagements with the Goths were often overwhelmed with their showers of arrows...Troops, defenseless and exposed to all the weapons of the enemy, are more disposed to fly than fight.⁵

This process of deterioration accelerated rapidly as the fifth century moved on. The *limitanei*, the defenders of the frontier garrisons, simply vanished, for lack of pay. Local citizens began banding together for their common defense while wealthy land owners came to understandings with the barbarian leaders in their midst. By mid-century, it becomes difficult to speak of “Roman” army separate that of the barbarians. At Châlons, the *foederati* made up the majority of forces on the “Roman” side.⁶ This decline of the military correlated with the empire’s very ability to function. Indeed, as the empire contracted and the *foederati* absorbed more and more imperial territory, the scope of what is properly the “Roman Empire” shrank accordingly. Despite warnings, Theodosius had no way to comprehend what the logical conclusion of his policies would bring. Their short-term results were, after all, impressive.

⁴ Ibid 169

⁵ Flavius Vegetius Rhenanus, *De Re Militari*, trans. John Clarke, (e-text by Mad Brevik, 2001) Book I, <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/other/dere03.htm#00>>.

⁶ A.H.M. Jones, *The Decline of the Ancient World*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, Inc., 1966) 81.

After Theodosius had transformed the Visigoths into *foederati*, the empire, East and West, was afforded a decade of relative tranquility on its borders. The emperor consolidated his rule in Constantinople and founded what would be the last dynastic house of the Roman Empire. The West, however, soon erupted in civil war. Gratian was murdered in 383 and his still-adolescent brother Valentinian II was forced to seek refuge in Constantinople. Theodosius succeeded in restoring Valentinian to power in the West, but Valentinian promptly died under mysterious circumstances in 392. Arbogast, his military general, claimed the death was a suicide and rose to power. The Roman Senate went along with the general and appointed the pagan Eugenius as a puppet emperor. As both a devout Christian and a friend to the House of Valentinian, Theodosius was outraged at this sequence of events.*

There had been much argument in the East for Theodosius to dismantle the Visigoths settled in Moesia. Synesius, Bishop of Ptolemais, attacked the policy of federating the barbarians; he correctly warned that this “reputation of ours” would encourage more barbarians to pour forth “seeking our easy-going people, begging for their indulgence and pointing out the case of these scoundrels as a precedent for it.”⁷ However, the decimation of the eastern army all but required Theodosius to call upon the Visigoths to aid him in his battle against Arbogast. It is important to recognize that at this point in history the western *comitatenses* were significantly stronger than their eastern counterpart, and the western military, on the whole, remained intact for the defense of the West. It took the newly established *foederati* and an act of God in order for Theodosius to carry the day at the Battle

* Theodosius was given the title “The Great” primarily for his vigorous defense of Christianity. He had set an important precedent by seeking absolution from St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, who had excommunicated the emperor in 390 AD. More importantly, he made Christianity the official religion of the empire and had come into conflict with the pagan Senate in Rome by his aggressive campaign against pagan cults and state-run temples. The Battle of Frigidus was, in many respects, a massive conflict against Roman paganism and Roman Christianity. Theodosius victory assured that the empire would remain fundamentally Christian.

⁷ Synesius, “De Regno,” *The essays and hymns of Synesius of Cyrene, including the Address to the Emperor Arcadius and the political speeches*, trans. Augustine Fitzgerald, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930) 137.

of Frigidus on September 5-6, 394, but he managed to reunite the empire for what would be the last time.

For a very brief moment, it appeared as if Rome was entering the fifth century in a position to recover. Such hopes were dashed when Theodosius passed away in January 395, leaving his son Honorius as emperor of the West and Arcadius as emperor of the East. The situation was immediately complicated by the youth of both emperors. Arcadius had remained in Constantinople during the previous year's battle under the tutelage of several officers in the eastern imperial government. Honorius, only ten, was in Milan with his father at the time of his death. Theodosius had placed his son under the care of his close ally, Stilicho. With the young emperor under his care, Stilicho became the de facto ruler of the western empire. While he was to prove a capable leader, he had two key failings. He was obsessed with gaining influence over Arcadius in the East and this led him to continually struggle with the entrenched government in Constantinople—at the expense of the deteriorating conditions in the West. Additionally, despite being thoroughly Romanized, Stilicho was the son of a barbarian father. This was not the lineage to have in a Roman world increasingly paranoid of and under assault by barbarians.

The late-fifth century Byzantine historian, Zosimus marked the death of Theodosius as the point where the empire “was gradually diminished and became a domicile of barbarians.”⁸ While the same portents of the end emerged at the death of Marcus Aurelius earlier, the empire was stronger then. The string of crises that came in rapid succession in the fifth century would prove too much for the floundering empire. Several military leaders, beginning with Stilicho, attempted to stabilize the situation, but they were overwhelmed by an ever-increasing deluge of barbarian invaders. By mid-century, the military was almost

⁸ Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, 4.59.

completely gone. Theodosius' victory over Arbogast had already dramatically handicapped the empire; Frigidus had decimated both the eastern and western armies while simultaneously confirming the viability of the *foederati*. The *Notitia Dignitatum* was a comprehensive list of units under direct Roman command, and it was maintained in the West through the end of Honorius' reign in 423. The list reveals the scope of the damage incurred by barbarian invasion and civil war: nearly half of the western regiments of *comitatus* had been lost. As many as two-thirds of these regiments were replaced by ill-equipped and poorly trained *limitatenses*. While this allowed the western army to declare on paper the strength of 110,000 men, this was a deceptive number—these troops were dispersed throughout Africa, Italy, and Europe, and amassing them into one army was impossible.⁹

While the Roman military traditionally maintained itself by revitalizing “worn-out units by using their remnants as a core around which to cluster recent recruits,” Stilicho faced a crisis that was “not so much methodological as temporal. He had to have time. Time, alas, was not his to be had.”¹⁰ There was little choice but to turn to the barbarian armies to secure the empire, and, as the crises of the fifth century pounded the empire, they subsequently strengthened the hands of one or another tribe while weakening the central government. The empire was caught in a vicious cycle of having to pay more and more with less and less. As the barbarians took control of Gaul, then Spain, then Africa, the empire was left with little resources to maintain its defense—the empire was bled dry. By the middle of the fifth century, the cumulative loss of territory, population, and property to the barbarians had “relentlessly eroded the logistic base of the empire and relentlessly diminished the worth of the imperial structure to its subjects.”¹¹

⁹ Jones, *The Decline of the Ancient World*, 216.

¹⁰ Burns 149.

¹¹ Luttwak 190.



Alaric, First King of the Visigoths.

CHAPTER 7

BARBARIANS WITHIN THE GATES OF ROME

One of the most important figures to emerge in the early fifth century was Alaric, who had risen to become the leader of the Visigoths after Frigidus. The Visigoths had paid a heavy price as *foederati* in Theodosius' campaign, and Alaric appears to have sought a Roman generalship as a reward for his service. By the fifth century, it was hardly unusual for barbarians to rise to the highest ranks in the Roman military,¹ but, for some reason, Alaric was denied a command and left with his collection of Visigothic forces. Unfortunately the Rome, the would-be general was not content to return to Moesia and abide by the terms of the 382 agreement; instead, he decided to lash out against his imperial masters and began causing chaos in the Balkans. Neither Stilicho nor the officials in Constantinople “possessed the forces or will to suppress him,” and he knew “one or the

¹ Burns 94.

other, perhaps both, would have to buy him off.”² He eventually did come under the employ of Constantinople, and, when Stilicho began scheming to gain influence in the East, it was Alaric who now stood in his way. The idea of two barbarians fighting the internal disputes of the Roman Empire would have been absurd a century earlier, but it was to become commonplace.

While Stilicho held sway over Honorius, Alaric had no influence within the governing circles in Constantinople. Around the turn of the fourth century, a “nationalistic” anti-barbarian movement began growing in the East.³ This Roman party had grown increasingly concerned that barbarians had become too prominent in the Roman military and the employment of Alaric only fueled the movement. Synesius was a leading figure in the anti-barbarian movement.* Sometime around 400, he delivered an oration in Constantinople urging Arcadius to “remove the foreign cause of the disease before the festering abscess actually declares itself, before the ill-will of these dwellers in our country is exposed. For evils may be overcome in their infancy, but when they progress they gain the upper hand. The army must be purified by the emperor...”⁴ A popular uprising soon followed, massacring Goths and other barbarians within Constantinople in 400. The government was forced to abandon its dealings with Alaric, and anti-barbarian sentiment became quite virulent in many corners of the imperial government, East and West. It was a manifestation of the growing realization by the Romans of their compromised position.

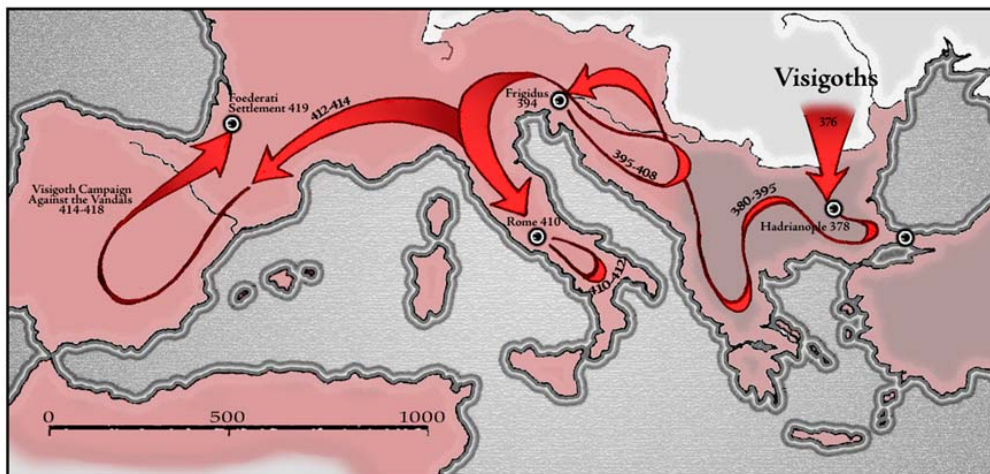
² Ibid 179.

³ Ferrill 97.

* The actual extent of these “nationalistic” politics comes under heavy criticism from Alan Cameron and Jacqueline Long, *Barbarians and Politics at the Court of Arcadius*. However, there is little debate that the influence of Germans had come into question within the highest governing circles. Combined with public fears over “barbarianism,” this led to an anti-Gothic riot in 399-400. Whatever the precise nature of this political movement, the events speak to rising concern about barbarians in the eastern empire. As will be seen, the same sort of politicking appeared in Ravenna in 408.

⁴ Synesius 137.

For their part, the meandering Visigoths were outraged by this. As the representative Roman military in the Balkans, they had been authorized to receive supplies from the imperial stores, but they suddenly found their food supplies cut off by Constantinople. Stripped of his title as *magister militum*, Alaric threw aside any allegiance to Rome and started to fashion himself as king of the Visigoths, and the new “king” turned his attention toward gaining employment from Stilicho. The two barbarian generals faced off twice in 402-403. The western military was such that, by this point, Burns suggests it is hardly appropriate to call the armies of Alaric “Gothic” or those of Stilicho “Roman.” Alaric, he writes, was nothing more than “a tough and frustrated Roman soldier” and the army of the *foederati* was no less inferior than Stilicho’s.⁵ Unfortunately for Alaric, while Stilicho has access to imperial supply stores, the Visigoths did not and, as a result, were forced back to their old haunts along the lower-Danube. However, Stilicho soon decided to seek Alaric’s aid in extending his authority in the East. His obsession with the East eventually made him blind to conditions that were rapidly developing in Germany along the Rhine.



The Visigothic Migration through the Roman Empire, 376-419. The Visigoths disrupted the entire width of the empire, before ultimately being given land as *foederati* in the area near Toulouse. By the end of the fifth century, they would expand into much of southwestern Gaul and Spain.

⁵ Burns 146.

The proverbial dam burst during the usually severe winter of 406-407. On New Year's Eve, 406, the few *limitanei* that remained along the Rhine could do nothing but watch as upwards of 200,000 starving barbarians poured across the frozen river. Roman authority disappeared as a “bewildering number of warring groups: Romans, *Bacaudae*, Britons, Saxons, Franks, Burgundians, Thuringians, Alamans, Alans, and Goths all fought for control of Gaul.”⁶ Instead of turning his attention to the barbarian invasion, Stilicho remained absurdly obsessed with his political machinations in the East. With no aid coming from the central government, the remaining Roman forces in Britain proclaimed an old soldier by the name of Constantine III emperor and crossed the channel into northern Gaul. Left undefended, Britain, too, would soon fall to a combination of Scots and Saxons, and its pleas for Roman aid would go unheeded.* The island ceased to be a factor in the western empire after 410 and was lost by 450. While Gaul still factored in the western empire's plans, it was now in utter turmoil as bands of barbarians and rebels ravaged much of the region.

Stilicho ignored both invasions and usurpations within his domain for the time being to pursue an alliance with Alaric instead. He convinced the emperor to pay Alaric to aid the western armies in conquering Constantinople and reunifying the empire. Unfortunately for Stilicho, the “Roman” movement had spread into Italy at this point, and the removal of the half-barbarian general became seen as absolutely necessary for the survival of the western empire. It was easy for Stilicho's opponents to brand him as a traitor—he had done nothing as Germans swept into Gaul, he had allowed a usurper to come to power, he was openly dealing with barbarians, and, now, or so the charge went, he was conspiring to seize the

⁶ Ward-Perkins 14.

* The Britons are known to have sent two requests for aid. The first to Honorius in Ravenna sometime after the island had abandoned its support of Constantine III. The second letter came in 446, when the Roman presence was virtually gone, as Aetius was preparing for war against the Huns. Both times the Britons received well-wishes but were informed the central government had no troops to spare. Eventually, all Roman civilization on the island vanished at the hands of Scots from the north and Saxons from the eastern mainland.

throne. He quickly lost all his power and his head, as well, on August 22, 408. While Stilicho was competent enough, the juggling act required of him was more than a man of his capabilities could bear; he needed to be able to deal, “all at the same moment, with restive emperor, Vandals, Alans and Suevi, large-scale usurpation and Gothic supergroup.”⁷

The death of Stilicho set off a great purge of anyone of barbarian origin within the cities and towns in Italy. While his army remained in the field, Roman soldiers garrisoned in the cities “set upon the wives and children of the barbarians in city after city,” wiping them “out wholesale as if by previous agreement.”⁸ “Incensed at so impious a violation on the Romans’ part,” the barbarian soldiers abandoned the Roman army and eagerly joined the ranks of Alaric’s forces.⁹ This collection of such a massive barbarian force now threatened Italy itself. Even with Stilicho gone, Alaric wanted compensation for the alliance the two had engineered and sought to negotiate with Honorius for a military command to provide for the mass of people of which he was now king. However, the prevailing “nationalist” sentiment dissuaded the emperor from talking with the barbarian king. Fortunately for the emperor, he had moved the imperial court from Milan to Ravenna during Alaric’s earlier outbursts towards the West in 401-402. While Ravenna today rests four miles from the coast of the Adriatic, in the fifth century it was easily defensible position, situated much like Venice is today. According to Ferrill, the city, surrounded by water and marshes and combined with extensive fortifications, had become “nearly as impregnable as Constantinople, a veritable bastion for the Roman emperor in the West.”¹⁰ Unfortunately for the rest of Italy, while the emperor was safe in Ravenna, the city was easily bypassed, exposing the entire Italian peninsula to the same sorts of ravages that the Balkans had felt at Alaric’s hand.

⁷ Heather 223.

⁸ Zosimus 5.35.

⁹ Zosimus 5.35.

¹⁰ Ferrill 99.

Alaric's position as king of the Visigoths remained tenuous so long as he lacked a steady source of supplies to maintain the loyalty of his men. He hoped to force the emperor to deal with him by laying siege to Rome in the fall of 408. The city was well-fortified and the barbarians lacked the tools to physically conquer the city. His siege was little more than diplomatic posturing, and he had no real desire to sack the old imperial capital. Instead, he hoped to starve the city into paying him off, which the city soon did by giving Alaric thousands of pounds of gold and silver. In addition, he sought the Roman senate's help in forcing Honorius to award him with a military command. The emperor, by virtue of his hold over the grain-producing provinces of Africa, remained the only person who could ensure Alaric's ability to provide for his people, but Honorius took a hard stance against Alaric and flatly refused to negotiate with him. Both men were in difficult positions: the emperor had neither the men nor the resources to contest Alaric in Italy, and Alaric needed supplies to bolster his own authority.¹¹ Both sides were stuck at an impasse—the empire was no too paralyzed to take action.

In the fall of 409, Alaric again attempted to force the issue by putting pressure on Rome. The political dance between Roman and barbarian escalated when Alaric forced the Senate to install a puppet emperor by the name of Attalus and made plans to invade Africa.* Honorius was on the verge of fleeing when money and 4,000 man contingent arrived in Ravenna from the East. While Alaric gave up on his own puppet, Honorius suddenly found new resolve. This drama would likely have repeated ad infinitum had not someone inside

¹¹ Ferrill 104

* Alaric was unable to raise himself up as emperor, because the fabric of Roman society could not and would not accept a "barbarian" emperor. It was a legal limitation that the German tribes easily worked around, as evidenced by their leading roles as "military advisors" East and West. Alaric thus appointed a Roman he could easily control. The Visigoth king was a good teacher; the tactic would be repeated again by the Burgundians in 411 and again multiple times in the empire's final days.

Rome opened the Salarian Gate on August 24, 410. Barbarians were now inside the gates of Rome itself.

History has viewed the sack of Rome as the climactic event in the saga of Rome's fall that had begun with Varus' defeat three centuries previous. "The brightest light on whole world was extinguished...the whole world perished in one city," St. Jerome lamented.¹² St. Augustine wrote *The City of God* in order to refute calls that Christianity had damned the empire. In reality, while the sack was devastating, it neither left Rome as a smoldering ruin nor ultimately brought down the western empire. As discussed earlier, the emperors had long abandoned Rome as their seat of government, and, while Rome remained a powerful symbol of Roman civilization, its plunder did nothing to improve Alaric's position vis-à-vis the emperor. Alaric's sieges were diplomatic failures, and Heather suggests the "sack of Rome was not so much a symbolic blow to the Roman Empire as an admission of Gothic failure."¹³ That is not to suggest that the sack of Rome was not an important event—the mere idea that a barbarian army would parade through the streets of Rome was unimaginable not twenty years earlier. That Honorius had been kept prisoner in his own fortress by a marauding barbarian army demonstrates the degree to which Roman prestige had diminished. The Visigoths simply had nothing to fear from him.

More importantly, Alaric became a model of what was to come. From serving Theodosius to terrorizing both his sons, he became an exemplar for the new leaders of the *foederati* to follow. One minute Rome's ally, the next its enemy, Alaric demonstrates the dangers inherent with the entire policy of federating the barbarian tribes. The empire had welcomed armed bands of Germans into its territory in order to augment its defenses, yet the effectiveness of men like Alaric in battle lessened the need for the emperors to maintain

¹² Jerome, preface to *Ezekial*.

¹³ Heather 229.

extensive forces of their own. Furthermore, by the fifth century, the military establishment needed to replace more men than it could find. As Jones puts it, the *foederati* “spared the manpower of the empire, and the barbarians were good fighting material ready at hand, whereas the process of training Roman recruits was slow and painful.”¹⁴ Unfortunately for the empire, though Alaric was good fighting material, he was also a king—and the new barbarian kings would soon realize that they needed neither emperor nor empire.

¹⁴ Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602*, 199.



Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire: Destruction*

CHAPTER 8

BARBARIAN VICTORY & CIVILIZATION'S END

With Alaric in Italy, the western empire spun out of control everywhere else; the political situation in Gaul and Spain crept towards complete anarchy. Roman authorities were cut off from Honorius and faced with two options: coming to terms with one of the many roving bands of barbarians or joining forces with Constantine III. Initially, it appeared as if the usurper from Britain would be more effective at restoring order than the emperor. He had managed to corner the invading barbarians in Aquitaine and had sent his son and “co-emperor” Constans to Spain in order to calm that region and keep the Vandals, Seuvi, and Alans from crossing into it. Unfortunately for the usurper and for the empire, his son proved unable to stop the barbarians from swarming into Spain in 409. This new

invasion prompted the Roman troops still in Spain to start their own rebellion, and a Spanish general by the name of Gerontius created yet another puppet emperor. Thus, at the end of the first decade of the fifth century, there were now six emperors claiming a share of power in the empire: Honorius in Ravenna, Theodosius II in Constantinople, Constantine III and his son Constans, Alaric's puppet Attalus in Rome, and now Maximus in Spain.¹ The Roman Empire had become as divided as the barbarians it was no longer adequately fighting.

Rome in the fifth century would have been barely recognizable to even Theodosius. In the shifting political sands of the era, a dizzying number of political actors appeared in the contest for power. The extreme political fragmentation fueled an economic and social collapse. The Roman Empire had long faced serious crises, either at its center or along its borders, but it suddenly found itself challenged in every corner. Civil war in Italy and barbarian invasion in Gaul never affected the Roman peasant in Spain or Africa in the earlier centuries, but over the course of the fifth century, not a single region in the West would go unmolested at the hands of the barbarians. As the proliferation of claimants to the imperial throne suggest, the structure of the empire had given way to a world where it was every man for himself. As the imperial government contracted, the frontiers simply vanished. Barbarian invasion gave way to full-scale conquests. Roman "civil wars" were no longer fought on the field of battle but within the halls of fortresses while barbarians pillaged the outside. Authority in the West slowly evaporated as the barbarian groups gained more and more real power.

Unlike the eventual fall of the eastern empire to the Mehmet the Conqueror in 1453, the western empire did not to go down in a blaze of fire; rather, after the death of Aëtius, it slowly faded into oblivion. The transition between the dying empire and its barbarian

¹ Ferrill 118.

successor states was so seamless that, while popular imagination still elicits images of brutal barbarians mauling well-groomed Roman legionnaires, historians have begun to argue that “Rome lived on, thought gradually metamorphosed into a different, but not necessarily inferior, form.”² Nothing could be further from the truth. While Roman civilization did not vanish, the replacement of a unified Mediterranean empire with a collection of disorganized states saw the end of all the benefits of the *pax Romana*. The economic sophistication of the empire was replaced by a subsistence economy, literacy declined, and “as knowledge rapidly sank, there was a pronounced rise in the power of belief and its bastard brother, superstition.”³ “Melancholy pervaded the last years of the Roman Empire,” Santosuosso writes, and, under the combined weight of these crises, it never dissipated.⁴ Christian writers spoke of the German invasions as the end of the world, and, in a very real sense, they did. Salvian, a priest in Gaul, lamented around 440:

The Romans were of old the mightiest of men, now they are without strength; of old they were feared, but now they live in fear; barbarous nations paid tribute to them, but to these same nations they are now tributary. The enemy sells us the very daylight; almost our whole safety is purchased for a price. Alas for our misfortunes! To what a pass have we come!⁵

The end of Roman authority saw “horrors and dislocation...it destroyed a complex civilization, throwing the inhabitants of the West back to a standard of living typical of prehistoric times.”⁶ Rome illustrates the worst way for an empire to come unhinged.

² Ward-Perkins 4.

³ F.W. Walbank, *The Awful Revolution: The Decline of the Roman Empire in the West*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1969) 96.

⁴ Santosuosso 225.

⁵ Salvian, *On the Government of God*, trans. Eva M. Sanford, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930) Book VI.18.

⁶ Ward-Perkins 183.

And yet the rulers in Ravenna had little comprehension that their empire was about to expire. After the siege of Rome, Honorius was able to mobilize at least some forces under Constantius, who had risen to replace Stilicho as Honorius' *magister militum*. While Gerontius with his Spanish forces began to fight Constantine from his base in Arles, the sight of an army under allegiance to the only legitimate empire caused both rebel camps to falter. Constantine and Gerontius met violent ends, and “this ‘civil war’ within *the* civil war” was ended with surprisingly little difficulty.⁷ On the surface, the empire appeared for the moment to have finally stabilized; in reality, however, only southern Gaul had been restored to the emperor's authority. The Rhine frontier was gone and with it also went Britain, northern Gaul was in barbarian hands, and Spain was facing the invasion of multiple German tribes. The empire had become so frayed that, as soon as Constantius returned to Italy, another usurper by the name of Jovinus appeared with the support of the Burgundians. The Burgundians had learned from the Visigoths in Italy, and, by 411, they had formed a kingdom, as well. In just twenty years, the Roman Empire had gone from being the superpower in the ancient Mediterranean to a middling state among more aggressive rivals. Clearly, events were moving rapidly toward the complete dismemberment of the empire.

Trapped in Italy and Alaric suddenly dead, the Visigoths decided to leave for Gaul, but, by the time they arrived in 412, the entire region was little more than a “battle-scarred land of refugees.”⁸ The Visigoths had arrived to the party too late—the spoils of Gaul were completely and utterly gone. Ataulf had little choice but to ally himself with Honorius against this new usurper. The Visigoths easily subdued Jovinus and his head found its way to Honorius in Ravenna. A settlement was reached with the Burgundians wherein they formally became uneasy *foederati* of the imperial government in Ravenna. For his part, Ataulf found

⁷ Burns 255.

⁸ Ibid 249.

the rare case of true love in the Ancient World and married the emperor's sister Galla Placidia in 414. While the marriage is significant as an example of the Germans' desire to be included within Roman civilization, it again fueled poor relations between the Visigoths and the Roman government. Despite the renewed antagonism, Ataulf moved his men into Spain and returned southern Gaul to imperial control.

Honorius and his general, Constantius, now held a stable position and believed they could pursue a strategy for restoring the empire: Italy and southern Gaul could be rebuilt, Africa still provided for the emperor's subjects, and the empire still maintained an effective navy to control the western Mediterranean. However, as part of this strategy, the West was forced to increase its reliance on its *foederati* allies still further. After Ataulf died in 415, the Visigoths returned Galla Placidia to her brother in exchange for employment. Tasked with wiping Spain clear of the Vandals, Seuvi, and Alans which has swarmed most of the peninsula, the Visigoths brutally destroyed their Germanic kin, leaving only small bands of barbarians in the south of Spain. As a reward for their efforts, Honorius formally granted the Visigoths territory within the empire, and the barbarians took over as rulers of the province of Aquitaine under their king Theodoric I. In just forty years, the Visigoths had transformed themselves from a starving tribe along the northern bank of the lower-Danube into an early-medieval kingdom in the south of France.

While this agreement addressed an immediate security concern for the empire, the creation of barbarian kingdom within the empire only sped up the pace of the western empire's ultimate destruction. Honorius had inadvertently given birth to what would become the empire's first successor state. Once the Visigoths established control in the region between modern day Bordeaux and Toulouse, they rapidly expanded their sphere of authority. By the end of the fifth century, the Visigoths would forcibly wrench all of

southern Gaul west of Marseilles and the Rhone and much of Spain from Roman control. The empire was digging its own grave, but the continued use of the *foederati* remained the empire's only real option in the short term.

While imperial subjects had suffered the consequences of escalating military costs for at least a century at this point, these successive disasters simply destroyed the empire's entire tax base at the worst possible moment. To illustrate the scope of the loss, the emperor was forced to grant tax remission to landowners in the majority Italy in 413 and again in 418.⁹ Each conflict and invasion only compounded the last, and the empire simply could not recover financially from the devastation wrought by the Germans. By 444 Valentinian III admits that “neither for newly recruited troops, nor for the old army, can sufficient supplies be raised from the exhausted taxpayers, to provide food and clothing.”¹⁰ The *foederati* were the best mechanism to maintain the empire's defenses, and the policy might not have had such a deleterious effect had not the court in Ravenna become preoccupied with palace intrigues and dynastic struggles.

With the Visigoths settled and the other barbarians momentarily quiet, Constantius was in the perfect position to restore some semblance of order in the western empire. By 421, he had been declared co-emperor with Honorius and had married Galla Placidia, producing a son, Valentinian III. There was no time to enjoy this brief reprieve. Before Valentinian III had even reached childhood, Constantius and then Honorius had died, leaving the West without a true leader. As usual, this threw the imperial government into chaos. By itself, problems of succession were not unique in the Roman world. As Heather points out, traditionally “while a new order was painfully emerging at the centre, the rest of

⁹ Ward-Perkins 43

¹⁰ Valentinian III, *The Theodosian Code And Novels, And The Sirmondian Constitutions*, trans. C. Pharr, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 15.1.

the Roman world would usually just get on with being Roman.”¹¹ With the advent of *foederati* on Roman soil, however, this dynastic struggle “gave the outside forces free rein to pursue their own agendas largely unhindered, and the overall effect was hugely detrimental to the Roman state.”¹² It took twelve years to restore order, and an uneasy alliance emerged between Galla Placidia, as regent over her son, and her *magister militum*, Flavius Aëtius. Ironically, Aëtius had used his alliance with Huns in order to intimidate Galla Placidia, who was only in power thanks to the aid of her nephew, Theodosius II, in Constantinople. Politics during the Roman end game were a truly convoluted affair.

While political disorder ruled in Ravenna, the western empire could do nothing to stop the formation of a barbarian nation out of the remnants of the Vandals, Alans, and Seuvi that the Visigoths had massacred between 415-418. Twelve years of political instability had made it impossible for the empire to fully exterminate the barbarian invaders from 406. The Vandal supergroup’s most pressing need was to escape the threat of further Roman-Gothic campaigns against them, and the Vandal king Geiseric decided the best solution was to migrate to Africa. Like Alaric before him, the Vandal king had to provide for the new kingdom of upwards of 80,000 people and a fighting force of 10,000-20,000 in order to keep it under control, and Spain was too devastated to handle such a load.

Roman North Africa was a proverbial land of milk and honey; the region had never been ravaged by barbarian invasion and the threat posed by desert nomads and Berbers was minimal. With Spain, Gaul, and Italy recovering from decades of raids, the unspoiled areas around Carthage were the breadbasket of the western empire and, in turn, its most valuable province. Unfortunately, the same insulation of Africa from barbarian attack had allowed

¹¹ Heather 262.

¹² Ibid 263.

Constantius and his predecessors to strip it of manpower that was badly needed in Europe. At Tangiers, the Count of Tingitana traditionally had between 5,000-7,000 men under his command, but these soldiers functioned as police against nomads—not fighters against barbarian armies. Furthermore, by the third decade of the fifth century, that force had been substantially weakened and the count had perhaps 1,500 well-trained troops to fight a 20,000 man Vandal army.¹³ Unfortunately for the empire, Tangiers, sitting at the head of the Strait of Gibraltar, was also the easiest gateway into Africa. It was the shortest point of crossing and the Roman navy was under the control of generals with their eyes on the situation in Ravenna. The empire had no way to defend Africa from the unexpected arrival of the Vandals, and the invasion was a deadly body blow to the reeling West.

The Vandals crossed into Africa in the summer of 429 and arrived outside the gates of Hippo a year later. Africa, long a beacon of peace and stability in the chaotic West, now faced a brutal period of conquest, as well. St. Augustine’s friend and biographer, Possidius, describes how the Vandals “gave vent to their rage by every kind of atrocity and cruelty, devastating everything they possibly could by pillage, murder, various tortures, fires, and other indescribable evil deeds. No sex or age was spared, not even God’s priests and ministers...”¹⁴ Whether an exaggeration or not, this makes clear how the Vandal invasion proved a tremendous shock to provinces unaccustomed to such chaos. The Vandals did not assimilate the Roman administration; they demolished it. Recent archaeological excavations reveal that the cities and infrastructure of Africa rapidly fell into disrepair under their new Vandal overlords.¹⁵ Ravenna attempted to come to some agreement with the Vandals in 435,

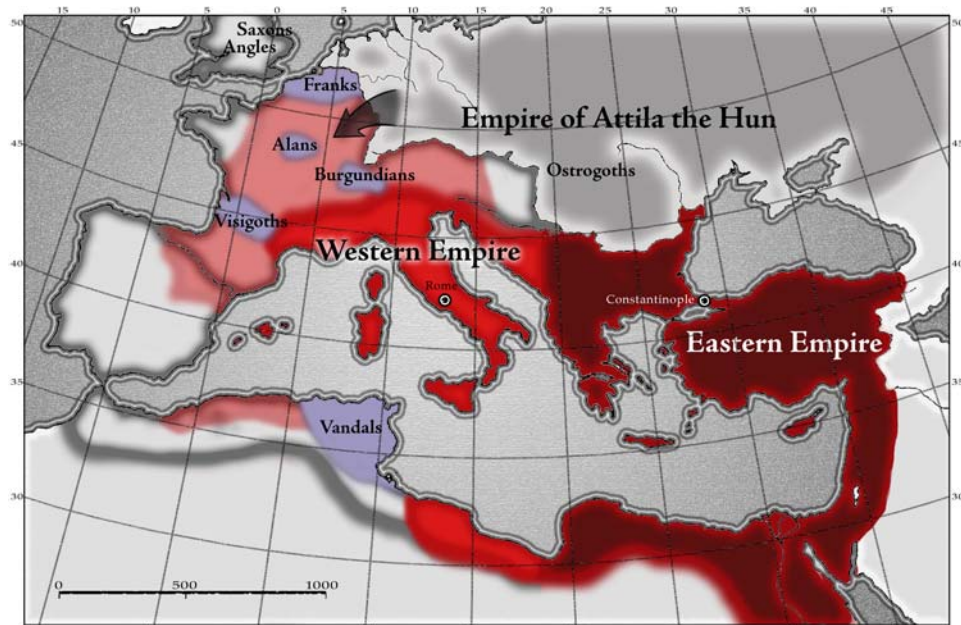
¹³ Ibid 270.

¹⁴ Possidius, *Life of Augustine*, in *Early Christian Biographies*, trans. Roy J. Ferrari, (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1952) xx.

¹⁵ Ferrill 137, see Humphrey, *Excavations at Carthage*

but by 439, the entire region of North Africa had been lost to the barbarians, though they publicly became yet another *foederati* of the Roman emperor.

Aëtius realized too late the importance of Africa to the West's survival. Without Africa, Roman naval supremacy was no longer unquestioned in the western Mediterranean, and "Sicily and Rome were now dangerously close to the barbarian spear and fleet."¹⁶ More importantly, while Geiseric still provided Rome with some grain, he was in a position to dictate terms to the empire. The loss of Africa's wealth dampened the empire's ability to support any sort of independent army. Without Africa, the empire required the goodwill of one of its *foederati* to affect much of anything; the resources for any extensive independent action on the part of empire were vanishing. Aëtius immediately sought aid from Constantinople and extensive efforts were put towards putting together a large enough force to bring Africa back under Roman control as quickly as possible. However, at the last minute, the forces provided by the East had to be recalled—Attila the Hun had invaded.



The Roman Empire in AD 450: As the *foederati* proliferated and the Huns approached, Roman authority faded.

¹⁶ Ibid 138.



Detail of Attila the Hun

The arrival of the Huns in eastern Europe from across the Eurasian Steppe had indirectly set in motion all the events that had befallen the empire since Hadrianople. While their precise origins remain clouded in a mystery, their arrival threw the German tribes into panic. Writing in the late fourth century, Ammianus describes how a “report spread widely among the other Gothic peoples that a race of men hitherto unknown had now arisen from a hidden nook of the earth...and was seizing or destroying everything in its way.”¹⁷ The Huns had propelled the Visigoths into the Balkans in 376 and had incited the barbarian

¹⁷ Marcellinus Ammianus, *Res Gestae*, trans. John Rolfe

invasion of 406, yet the Huns remained only an indirect threat to the empire. Based far to the east, receiving a modest tribute from Constantinople, they were not even a threat to the western empire at this point. They respected the Danube frontier and, aside from aiding Aëtius in his bid to gain power, they generally kept out of Roman affairs. This state of affairs could not last and the Huns suddenly became a huge threat upon Attila's rise to power sometime around 440. Overnight, the Hunnic Empire posed a gigantic threat right on the empire's weakening frontier. The Romans were forced to exert what little strength they had left against it, and, while Attila's empire would not outlive him, he indirectly handed the Roman Empire straight into the hands of the Germans.

Attila carefully exploited Roman weaknesses in his conquest of the East. Waiting until significant portions of the eastern army had amassed in Sicily to aid Aëtius in retaking Carthage, Attila capitalized on the East's vulnerabilities by first extracting more tribute from the eastern empire and then invading the Balkans in 441-442. The Hun proved to be the master of siege technology, and, having negated the empire's best defense, he forced the government in Constantinople into a panic. Defenseless, with its armies in Sicily, the eastern emperor doubled Attila's annual tribute to 1,400 pounds of gold. When the armies had returned, the emperor refused to pay Attila and this prompted a second, more massive invasion of the Balkans in 447. The Huns slaughtered the Thracian *comitatenses*, bringing the entire Balkans under their control, and allegedly captured and destroyed more than a hundred cities on their way to the gates of Constantinople.¹⁸ The Romans were terrified of Attila; they simply had no way to defeat his armies. Priscus candidly reveals that while the Romans attempted to portray their defeat as a mutual compromise, "the overwhelming fear" which gripped the Romans compelled them "to accept gladly every injunction, however

¹⁸ Heather 308-310.

harsh, in their eagerness for peace.”¹⁹ The mere presence of such fear within the empire indicates how dramatically different the empire had become by the mid-fifth century. The Huns completely pacified the East, and, when Attila offered a generous settlement to Constantinople in exchange for vacating his lands north of the Danube, the emperor happily agreed. Unfortunately for Aëtius, the agreement the East struck with Attila in 450 effectively sold out the western empire. Securing a deal with the Constantinople opened the way for Attila to pillage the West.

Ironically, until mid-century, the presence of the Huns had benefited the short-term interests of the West. While the Huns had caused the barbarian invasion of 406-407, the Huns also stabilized the Roman frontier by incorporating the German tribes unable to flee across the Rhine into the Hunnic Empire. This momentarily aided the devastated West, but the Huns had benefited themselves as well by creating “an inverse relationship between the pace of migration into the Roman Empire and the rise of Hunnic power.”²⁰ Though this saved the West from further invasion, it only added to Attila’s strength. Aëtius wisely realized an invasion was imminent, and he aggressively built a tightly-knit coalition of *foederati* to stand against Attila. The grand alliance he created between the Visigoths, Alans, Burgundians, and Franks was not so much for the defense of the empire but for the nascent barbarian kingdoms that were now developing in the West.

Attila first crossed the Rhine into Gaul in early 451 with a force of allied Germans, including a large group of Ostrogoths. Major cities like Rheims, Mainz, Strasbourg, Cologne, Worms, and Trier were looted by the invaders and “put to the torch.”²¹ The Romans and barbarians in Gaul were terrified of Attila and had either to come to terms with the

¹⁹ Priscus, trans. R.C. Blockley in *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire*, (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1983) 237.

²⁰ Heather 333.

²¹ Ferrill 148.

conqueror or fight him. Aëtius was afraid that the tenuous loyalty of the various *foederati* would break, but the threat posed by Attila to barbarian and Roman alike actually acted as a unifying factor. The Romans assembled their *foederati* to face the invaders. This “Roman” force finally caught up with Attila’s path of destruction near Châlons in the summer of 451. At the battle of Châlons, the combined forces of the barbarian tribes and what remained of the Roman forces were able to fight Attila to a stalemate. The battle was a terrible slaughter for both sides, but Aëtius had managed to attain what was the final “victory” of the western empire, but he was unable to stop Attila from pillaging Italy the following year. The *foederati* were uninterested in coming to the aid of Italy, and Attila had a free hand in the north, utterly destroying Aquileia and looting Verona and Milan. Fortunately, Attila’s death the following year limited his Italian campaign, and “the Empire of the Huns, which had no natural cohesion, was soon scattered to the winds” less than two decades after it had first menaced the empire.²²

With the Huns destroyed, the western empire seemed at peace, but, in reality, the end of the Huns signaled the end of the empire. Aëtius had spent the better part of the previous decade preparing to fight Attila, neglecting much of the empire by the process. At the death of Attila in 453, the western empire was hardly a viable entity at all. Britain was gone, as were most of Spain and the riches of Africa. The Visigoths, Burgundians, and Franks had gained control of most of Gaul. All that was left in the hands of the central government in Ravenna were the Italian peninsula, several Mediterranean islands, and bits and pieces of Gaul, Spain, and western Africa—most were still recovering from the ravages of incessant barbarian warfare. According to Heather, the lack of a tax base

²² J.B. Bury, *A History of the Later Roman Empire, from Arcadius to Irene (365 A.D. to 800 A.D.)*, (New York, Macmillan and Co., 1889) 296.

for the empire “had become overwhelming,” and the Huns, in having originally pushed virtually all of these German tribes into the empire, had indirectly done “far more harm than any damage directly inflicted by Attila.”²³

Furthermore, without the threat of Attila to maintain the need to unite under the banner of the emperor, the *foederati* turned to partitioning imperial provinces for themselves. Their success against such a great foe entitled them to rewards that Ravenna had become powerless to grant. Thus, the fall of Attila only escalated the West’s decline, which was aided further by the murder of Aëtius in 454—his reward for defeating Attila. Without the imminent threat of the Huns, Aëtius had become “positively superfluous” and Valentinian III, long under the control of his mother Galla Placidia and Aëtius, personally murdered the last effective military general in the West.²⁴ With the military now without a head, the emperor was told that he had “cut off your right hand with your left.” Valentinian himself was murdered at the hands of Aëtius’ retainers the following year, and that slaying “threw the Western Roman Empire into its own death agonies.”²⁵

The Roman army took control of the situation. Of course, by mid-century, the army had become so thoroughly barbarized that it was now little more than a mercenary force that survived by devouring every penny the Roman landowners could produce. The German general, Ricimer, who was the grandson of the Visigoth king Vallia, rose to power among these mercenaries and ruled Italy through a series of puppet emperors: Majorian, Libius Severus, Anthemius, and Olybrius. With Ricimer content to rule Italy, the rest of the western empire fell to the new barbarian kingdoms. When Ricimer died in 472, the East made a weak attempt to install Julius Nepos as the western emperor, but this decision was unacceptable to

²³ Heather 348.

²⁴ John O’Flynn, *Generalissimos of the Western Roman Empire*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1983) 100.

²⁵ Ferrill 152.

the German mercenaries in control of the Italian forces. Orestes, a man who had been Attila's ambassador to Constantinople, opposed Nepos and, instead, made his son Romulus emperor of the West in 475.

By this time the West had faded to such an extent, however, that setting up "another short-lived regime was a waste of time" because there simply was not enough money behind the emperor to pay off his "Roman" mercenaries.²⁶ A Herulian officer named Odovacar realized this and petitioned Orestes "to reward them for their services, by granting them lands and settling them permanently in Italy on the same principle on which various German peoples had been settled in other provinces."²⁷ In effect, the Roman army asked to become *foederati* within Italy itself. When Orestes denied this request, Odovacar and his men murdered him and assumed control. He forced the ancient Roman senate, in the name of Romulus, who was still emperor, to send word to Emperor Zeno in Constantinople "that they no longer needed a separate Emperor [in the West] but that his sole supremacy would be sufficient."²⁸ Zeno consented to this arrangement in the fall of 476. Odovacar then sent to Constantinople the imperial vestments of the western emperor, and Romulus was deposed and compassionately sent into exile. Odovacar and his men became de facto *foederati* of the eastern empire and were themselves overcome by the Ostrogoths, who themselves formed a barbarian kingdom in Italy, a decade later.

While an enclave of Roman authority continued in Gaul under Syagrius until Clovis, king of the Franks, destroyed it in 486, for all intents and purposes, the deposition of Romulus Augustus in 476 had marked the death of the Roman Empire in the West. Even until the very end, the emperors in Ravenna seemed unable to grasp that their empire was

²⁶ Heather 428.

²⁷ Bury 406.

²⁸ Ibid 407.

slipping away. While the emperors might have envisioned that the *foederati* symbolized a return to the policies of the early principate, with client kingdoms and autonomous provinces, where the Roman Emperor stood as the undisputed leader of a collection of states, the new barbarian kingdoms likely saw their entrance into the empire as a transitional period. While he attempts to argue that the barbarian invasion was actually a long process of accommodation, Walter Goffart is forced to admit that the *foederati* turned into “an imaginative experiment that got a little out of hand.”²⁹ By the mid fifth century, tradition and the idea of “Rome” were the only powers left to the western emperor, and Germans realized this. Later emperors like Honorius were largely puppets under the control of Romanized barbarians like Stilicho and Constantius. These generals faced a situation where they were playing against a stacked deck—and running out of cards to play. Odovacar was simply the first German to follow this take this state of affairs to its ultimate conclusion. In the end, the Roman Empire was downed by its own strategies and finally killed by its own creation—the German supergroups it has spent five centuries attempting to keep down. “Roman civilization did not die a natural death,” André Piganoil writes. “It was murdered.”³⁰ Murdered as a result of its imperial hubris and the Germans.

²⁹ Goffart, *Barbarians and Romans, A.D. 418-584: The Techniques of Accommodation*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 18.

³⁰ André Piganoil, “The Causes of the Ruin of the Roman Empire,” trans. Donald Kagan, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. Donald Kagan, (Lexington: D.C. Heath & Company, 1962) 91.



Comparisons between the United States and Rome are easy to find.

CHAPTER 9

THE NEW ROME

Roman, remember by your strength to rule
Earth's peoples—for your arts are to be these:
To pacify, to impose the rule of law,
To spare the conquered, battle down the proud.¹

Though meant to glorify the role of Rome, Virgil's words speak as clearly to the United States today as they did to Augustus Caesar himself. The US has always seen itself as somehow divinely ordained to lead the world out of chaos and into the light; as former President Bill Clinton was fond of saying, America is “on the right side of history.” The American ideology developed around terms like “the New World,” “Manifest Destiny,” “the American Century,” and “the arsenal of democracy;” is it a great leap to attribute to it now the mantle of “New Rome” as it pursues its own *pax Americana*? The Bush Administration,

¹ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, VI 1151-1154.

in its *National Security Strategy of the United States*, states that the US “will actively work to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world.”² If the United States and its people are to have any success in such an endeavor, they would be wise to keep the lessons of Rome’s fall at the hands of the barbarians well in mind.

Comparisons between Rome and the US have been done a thousand times over—it is almost a cliché at this point. A direct comparison is, of course, nonsense, but it is relevant to ask whether the US plays the same role as Rome vis-à-vis the international order. Rome’s dominance militarily, economically, and socially was, for a time, beyond reproach, and, while the empire was never invincible, at its height it could generally act and do as it pleased. All the same, this dominance never afforded the empire the opportunity to defeat the Germans—or conquer the Persians for that matter. Rome was a superior power albeit one in a limited world whereas the US exists as the world’s sole superpower. While the superpower cliché has been overdone, the overwhelming strength of the US can easily be viewed in simple material terms. The US Gross Domestic Product is roughly \$11.75 trillion dollars—40 percent larger than China’s, the next largest world economy—and it makes up over 20 percent of the world economy despite having only 4.5% of the world’s population.³ American businesses are the world’s wealthiest; *Fortune* lists 176 American companies in its list of the world’s top 500, more than twice that of Japan at number two.⁴ It has the educational infrastructure to maintain such startling dominance, as well: seventeen of the world’s twenty top universities are American—and thirty five of the top fifty, and they

² Introduction, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, (United States, White House, 2002) <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html>>.

³ “Rank Order—GDP”, *CIA—The World Factbook*, (United States, CIA, 2006) <<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/rankorder/2001rank.html>>.

⁴ “Fortune Global 500,” *CNNMoney.com*, (25 July 2005) <<http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/global500/>>.

employ fully 70 percent of the world's Nobel prize winners.⁵ Foreign students flock to its colleges and universities. Culturally, it is “far and away the number-one film and television exporter in the world.”⁶ By most visible indicators, the United States stands atop the world as an economic and social colossus.

But is the United States an empire? The country was founded as the antithesis to empire; Thomas Jefferson believed that the corruption and despotism of empire “obstructed the natural and consensual ties of affection, principle, and common interest that were bound to draw Americans into ever closer union. Jefferson's federalism proceeded from this fundamental, hopeful premise.”⁷ The US originated as a beacon of republican virtue, hearkening back ironically not to Athenian democracy but rather republican Rome, and history has shown that Americans continue to cling to this view. However, that has not stopped the American people from pursuing a policy of empire building—Jefferson himself calling the country an “empire of liberty.” As Max Boot explores in his work *The Savage Wars of Peace*, an argument can be made that the US has been an empire-builder since its founding. Manifest destiny carried the American flag across the entirety of North America, and it has evolved from a commercial republic into a great power and, finally and most importantly, the globe's sole superpower.

While the very notion of an American Empire continues to be anathema in the American public sphere, Thomas Donnelly writes that “the fact of American empire is hardly debated these days.”⁸ Though cloaked in “euphemisms such as hegemony,

⁵ “Secrets of Success,” *The Economist*, (10-16 September 2005) Survey of Higher Education 6.

⁶ Joseph Nye, “The new Rome meets the new barbarians,” *The Economist*, (24-30 March 2002) Avail. On-line: <http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=E1_TDQVTRT>.

⁷ Peter S. Onuf, “Thomas Jefferson, Federalist,” *Essays in History* #35 (University of Virginia: 1993) 31.

⁸ Thomas Donnelly, “The Past as Prologue: An Imperial Manual,” *Foreign Affairs*, (July/August 2002) Avail. On-line: <<http://fullaccess.foreignaffairs.org/20020701fareviewessay8529/thomas-donnelly/the-past-as-prologue-an-imperial-manual.html>>.

preeminence, primacy, sole superpower, or, a la the French, hyperpuissance,” he makes the point that the entire world defines international politics in relation to US power.⁹ Analysts left and right continue to debate the issue, but the very frequency of the discourse suggests, as an article in *The Guardian* puts it, that empire has become “the word of the hour.”¹⁰ It may be out of question to suggest the US is an empire in the same way as that of Rome,^{*} but, while the US remains a democracy at home, it is pursuing policies abroad that clearly mark it as an empire—perhaps not a territorial empire, but certainly an economic one.

It is hard to argue otherwise in the aftermath of the Cold War and de facto success of American-led capitalism. Exporting American economic policy has become the cornerstone of the nation’s foreign policy; the *National Security Strategy* explicitly states that a “strong world economy enhances our national security by advancing prosperity and freedom in the rest of the world.”¹¹ If the *pax Romana* ensured peace and stability through military force, then the *pax Americana* is based on economics. To that end, Jim Garrison of the *State of the World Forum*, suggests that it has been “America’s great fortune and veritable genius that it staked its destiny and built its empire on the two most fundamental megatrends of the modern era—free trade and democratic governance—and intertwined its self-interest in the promulgation and establishment of both.”¹² The Roman Empire succeeded by “Romanizing” its neighbors, and America, too, has endeavored with much success to

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jonathan Freedland, “Rome, AD...Rome, DC?” *The Guardian Unlimited*, (18 September 2002), <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/usa/story/0,12271,794163,00.html>>.

^{*} Nonetheless, the argument can and has been made the US looks more and more like an empire in the traditional sense. While Andrew Bacevich makes the astute observation that “ours is an empire without an emperor” (Bacevich, “New Rome, New Jerusalem,” *The Imperial Tense*, 99), cynical appraisals of American domestic politics can make for easy comparisons with the elite social structure of the Roman Empire. Peter Bender, for instance, surmises that “Democratic America has transformed civil war into election campaigns; along the way, foreign policy is simply forgotten during certain periods” (Bender, “New Rome,” *The Imperial Tense* 88). The argument goes that American institutions have become tools of empire.

¹¹ “Ignite a New Era of Global Economic Growth through Free Markets and Free Trade,” *National Security Strategy of the United States*, (United States, White House, 2002) <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html>>.

¹² Jim Garrison, *America as Empire: Global Leader or Rogue Power?* 85.

“Americanize” the world: it brought its own institutions to the western hemisphere, liberal democracy to imperial Germany and Japan, and its culture to communist China.

Beyond even this, however, the American Empire runs with the help of the same mechanism that fueled Rome’s march across the Mediterranean. Writing for the *New York Times Magazine* in March 1999, Thomas Friedman put it best when he states:

The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist—McDonald’s cannot flourish without a McDonnell Douglas, the builder of the F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley’s technologies is called the United States Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps...Without America on duty, there will be no America Online.¹³

Like the Roman Empire before it, the United States and its economic empire is fueled by a massive military machine. The combined strength of the US Armed Forces far outpaces even its closest rival, and the gap is staggering. Aircraft carriers, considered essentially to the America’s ability to project its power throughout the world, are one measure of American dominance—the U.S. Navy maintains a fleet of carriers roughly equal to that of all other military powers on the globe.¹⁴ More remarkable still is the relative strength of American air power compared to other world powers. The U.S. Marine Corps possess more aircraft than the entire British Royal Air Force—and this is despite the fact the US has also a dedicated air force and a formidable “air force” as part of its navy.¹⁵

By comparison, while the Roman military was a tremendous financial burden for the empire, the amount spent by the Romans is miniscule compared to the monetary resources poured into the U.S. Armed Forces even when one uses a method of direct comparison.

¹³ Thomas Friedman, “A Manifesto for the Fast World,” *New York Times Magazine*, 28 March 1999. It is also worth noting that McDonnell Douglas was acquired by Boeing, an even larger American defense contractor.

¹⁴ Andrew Toppan, “World Aircraft Carrier Lists,” (2003)
<<http://www.hazegray.org/navhist/carriers>>.

¹⁵ Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism*, (Oxford: Oxford, 2005) 16.

The annual military budget for Rome in the second century has been estimated at somewhere between 300,000,000 and 500,000,000 sesterces.¹⁶ However to illustrate the relative low cost of the Roman military, Arther Ferrill presents evidence that private citizens in the first century BC such as Pompey or Caesar had private fortunes approaching this amount; he points out that a collection of the wealthiest Americans could not come close to supporting the U.S. Armed Forces for a single year.¹⁷ The US defense budget is staggering in real terms vis-à-vis the rest of the world. Signed into law by President Bush on January 6, 2006, the U.S. defense budget was set at \$441.6 billion dollars for FY 2006, and this figure excludes continued expenses for fighting in Iraq. As a percentage of the top twenty-five defense-spending countries, the US accounted for 44.7 percent of total military expenditures in 2002.¹⁸ By one estimate, US defense spending in 2002 was twenty-three times that of the combined military budgets of the Bush Administration's "axis of evil": Iran, Iraq, and North Korea.¹⁹ Indeed, a persuasive argument can be made that the US spends more in defense related areas than the rest of the world combined.²⁰ Whatever the actual number, the United States has created a dominating military machine. The result is an army that while not invincible is the envy of the world.

Rome was seduced by the power such a massive military force afforded, and there is every reason to believe that the United States, too, has become thoroughly militarized. For the Roman Empire, the Germans became reason enough to support an extensive military, but, as Peter Heather writes, this created an attitude throughout the empire wherein "conflict

¹⁶ A sesterce was a bronze coin used throughout the imperial period. It was worth approximately a fourth of a Roman denarius, the most common unit of currency in the empire. While it is impossible to make a direct comparison between Roman currency values and twenty-first century wealth, the average Roman laborer earned one denarius daily.

¹⁷ Arther Ferrill, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: The Military Explanation*, 26.

¹⁸ Jeffrey Chamberlin, "Comparison of U.S. and Foreign Military Spending: Data From Selected Public Sources," *Congressional Research Service*, (28 January 2004) <<http://www.fas.org/man/crs/RL32209.pdf>>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ See Bruce Berkowitz, *The New Face of War*, for one.

should be the normal state of relations between Roman and non-Roman” and that “the Roman Empire should be victorious in whatever it aspired to.”²¹ Despite rhetoric, the same sort of mentality is at work in the US since the end of the Cold War. While the country has a long military tradition, the demise of the Soviet counterweight has allowed the full breadth of American power to be unleashed on the world. To extend the Roman analogy, the Soviet Union played a valiant Carthage to America’s Rome, and like Rome’s archrival it has been summarily displaced by American power. In the ten years after the Soviet Union’s collapse, the US engaged in significant military engagements in Bosnia, Haiti, Iraq, Somalia, and Yugoslavia. Anthony Zinni, former commander of US CENTCOM suggested that he “had become a modern day pro-consul, descendant of the warrior-statesman who ruled the Roman Empire’s outlying territory, bringing order and ideals from a legalistic Rome.”²² With the military at the forefront, the US has been able to pursue its interests abroad without much organized resistance since 1999—the conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer suggesting America had entered a “unipolar era.” It is not a large step to call this the establishment of a *pax Americana*, an American peace, guaranteed by US Armed Forces acting as the police force of the world.

If anything, 9/11 has accelerated the call for empire. It was not until that date the US government and its citizenry ultimately realized that there was opposition to its rule. Within the Bush Administration, the only solution to such a threat “is to be more expansive in our goals and more assertive in their implementation.”²³ No *state* seems capable of challenging America’s new ambition. China likely will remain a regional power for the foreseeable future and the European Union lacks the competency to directly challenge the United States for

²¹ Heather 70.

²² Ferguson 6.

²³ Emily Eakin, “All Roads Lead to D.C.,” *New York Times*, (31 March 2002).

custodianship of the globe. Nevertheless, the US exists in a world of far stronger and more able rivals than that of Rome, and the implications of its foreign policy choices are much more complex than those of a Roman emperor who has decided to cross the Rhine. Still, it seems the world's great powers, whether allied or antagonistic, have lined up behind the benefits of an American enforced *pax*. Thus, while the United States may have been founded in the image of Republican Rome, it sits astride the world as the heir apparent to Imperial Rome. Rome was not brought down by another empire, and it is unlikely that another state will bring about the end of the United States. Instead, the real threat to the American Empire is, like Rome, “death of a thousands cuts from various barbarian groups.”²⁴

²⁴ Nye, “The new Rome...”

CHAPTER 10
THE NEW BARBARIANS

The barbarians of modernity are hardly the unsophisticated brutes of Roman times, but they nonetheless still represent a people who refuse the benefits of “civilization.” For the Romans, this civilization was roughly defined as the benefits of Roman law and order; for the United States, the spread of civilization has become intertwined as the spread of liberal democracy and the market economy across the globe. In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the United States was able to momentarily celebrate the victory of its particular brand of civilization. With communism in retreat, the US could proceed with “Americanizing” the world. Free markets and free trade dominated America’s vision for the post-Cold War world throughout the 1990s.¹ Despite the civilized community of nation-states that had emerged, the collapse of the Soviet Union had not meant that the end of *barbaricum*. With a tone of impatience, Donald and Frederick Kagan wrote in 2000 that the

¹ Corey Robin, Remembrance of Empires Past: 9/11 and the End of the Cold War,” *Cold War Triumphalism: The Misuse of History after the Fall of Communism*, Ed. Ellen Schrecker, (New York: The New Press, 2004) 277.

“happy international situation,” which had seen “the spread of democracy, free trade, and peace, so congenial to America,” remained threatened.²

The rise of the *pax Americana* was certain to face some sort of opposition, but, 9/11 revealed with stunning clarity that the US’s next foe was not to appear in the form of a recognizable state. Instead, a shrinking global community unleashed the full power of the scourge of terrorism. Joseph Nye writes:

September 11th was a terrible symptom of the deeper changes that were already occurring in the world. Technology has been diffusing power away from governments, and empowering individuals and groups to play roles in world politics—including wreaking massive destruction—which were once reserved to governments. Privatisation has been increasing, and terrorism is the privatisation of war.³

Loosely defined, terrorism can—and does—mean anything: it can apply to separatist movements, “freedom fighters,” activists, dissidents. Aside from the global reach of the US, Niall Ferguson goes so far as to suggest that international relations have evolved to such a point that only non-state actors really hold any power in the world of today; he calls them “the monks and Vikings of our time.”⁴ Sadly, with its reliance on violence and religious zeal, it is radical Islam that perhaps best fits into this framework. Thus, on the surface, one can remark that America’s enemies have the same make-up as those of Rome: Osama Bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi are the modern day equivalents of Arminius or Alaric. However, Rome was fortunate in that its enemies “were not ideologically opposed to Rome—they wanted to enjoy a slice of the empire rather than destroy the whole thing.”⁵ The United

² Donald & Frederick Kagan, *While America Sleeps*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000) 1-2.

³ Joseph Nye, “The new Rome meets the new barbarians,” *The Economist*, (21 March 2002) Avail. Online: <http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=E1_TDQVTRT>.

⁴ Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*, (Penguin: New York, 2004), Preface xxvii.

⁵ Ward-Perkins 52.

States, on the other hand, is facing an ideologically-charged foe: the ultimate goal is to see the US and all it stands for crumble to dust.

While the five hundred years of Roman conflict on the Danube is hardly analogous to the five year history of the United States' "War on Terror," the violent reaction within the Islamic world—and Islamist current in general—to American intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq especially is a greater manifestation of a situation that has been fomenting for centuries. America's troubles in the Middle East are fundamentally religious in nature. Christianity and Islam had been at odds with each other since Islam's explosion onto the world scene in the seventh century; the empires of Europe and the Middle East have struggled back and forth ever since. The Caliphate, which ultimately saw in itself the heir to Rome, viewed Europe "as an outer darkness of barbarism and unbelief from which there was nothing to learn and little even to be imported, except slaves and raw materials."⁶ After the failed siege of Vienna in 1683, however, Islam began to retreat from the western powers. The irony of their worldview was that by twentieth century it was the western powers that were dominating and exploiting the Middle East and its resources. According to Bernard Lewis, "the primacy and therefore the dominance of the West was clear for all to see, invading the Muslim in every aspect of his public and—more painfully—even his private life."⁷ In a very real sense, the Muslims had become the European's barbarians.

The conclusion of the First World War promised to Islam an end to this humiliating state of affairs. The rhetoric of Woodrow Wilson's fourteen-point peace plan suggested the creation of a world of relative equality and national self-determination; specifically, the Middle East was to "be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested

⁶ Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 4.

⁷ *Ibid* 151.

opportunity of autonomous development.”⁸ The politics of the time made Wilson appear an idealistic fool at the conclusion of Paris Peace Conference, but his ideals reemerged after the end of the Second World War. The Allied victory was portrayed as a victory for liberal democracy. However, the looming Cold War again saw to a quick death to these ideals, and the Middle East was again denied the opportunity to develop as it saw fit. As the British and the rest of the European empires vanished, the European’s “role as villains was taken over by the United States.”⁹ Security and economic concerns drove the United States to abandon its quest to spread its ideals into the Middle East. Instead, in the face of the Soviet threat, it made alliances with despots in Iran and, more importantly, Saudi Arabia. On February 8, 1943, Franklin Roosevelt directed assistance to the king of Saudi Arabia, declaring “that the defense of Saudi Arabia is vital to the defense of the United States.”¹⁰ Henceforth, the US pursued a policy of maintaining pro-American leaders throughout the Middle East. These regimes were supported largely at the expense of local populations, who looked on at American involvement in Israel with utter contempt. In its efforts to contain communism and maintain American preeminence, the US had begun to create an enemy of its own making, just as the Romans had done with the Germans, and, in the long term, American policy “created a pervasive antipathy against its power” within the Islamic world.¹¹ By the end of the twentieth century, the National Intelligence Council could report that growing numbers of people “in the Middle East and the broader Muslim world, believe the US is bent on regional domination—or direct political and economic domination of other states

⁸ Woodrow Wilson, “The Fourteen Points,” (8 January 1918) Avail. On-line: <<http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/1918/14points.html>>.

⁹ Lewis 153.

¹⁰ Thomas W. Lippman, *Inside the Mirage: America's Fragile Partnership with Saudi Arabia*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004) 99.

¹¹ Garrison 155.

and their resources.”¹² While this sentiment could be effectively channeled towards the threat of atheistic communism, the fall of the Soviet Union changed everything, and, suddenly, the US emerged as the sole center of geopolitical affairs. So too had the world’s newest barbarian emerged: the Jihadist.

Jihadist and the practitioners of radical Islam are a religious current that emerged after the collapse of the Ottoman Sultan and the Caliphate at the end of the First World War.¹³ While there are currently many terms applied to this branch of Islam: Muslim extremists, Islamic fundamentalists, and Islamists, Walid Phares identifies a Jihadist (*Al-Jihadiyun*) specifically as a Muslim who believes “that the concept of jihad is historically legitimate and that they are pursuing the orders of Allah in following this call for mobilization.”¹⁴ The concept of an Islamic holy war, or jihad, has long existed within Islam, but the abolishment of the Caliphate in 1923, and the subsequent domination of the Middle East by western powers, has created a powerful ideology within Islam that had transformed this doctrine. Islam is based on the assumption that the house of Islam, the *dar-il Islam*, will one day overwhelm and absorb the chaos outside of it. The *dar-il Harb* is literally understood as a war zone that the *dar-il Islam* is charged with subduing. Yet the past two centuries have witnessed Islam’s retreat from this aim. Combined with the Jihadist sees as the perversion of the Islamic community by western immorality, this has created the conditions for the terrorist campaigns of today.

¹² “Rising Powers: The Changing Geopolitical Landscape,” (United States. Central Intelligence Agency: National Intelligence Council, December 2004)
<http://www.cia.gov/nic/NIC_globaltrend2020_s2.html>.

¹³ Walid Phares, *Future Jihad*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 45.

¹⁴ Ibid. 48.

Jihadists seek the violent destruction of the United States and the conversion of the world to Islam. In Osama Bin Laden's call for jihad, it is evident that he desires to do the US what the Germans did to Rome:

If the Americans refuse to heed our advice and the goodness, guidance and righteousness to which we have invited them, then be assured that they lose this Crusade...fleeing back to your homes in silence and disgrace. If the Americans do not respond, their fate will be...to face military defeat, political breakup, ideological downfall, and economic bankruptcy.¹⁵

While this in itself is alarming to the designers of the American Empire, the threat posed by Bin Laden's movement extends far beyond the fate of the United States. "Jihadists all confirm with clarity that the League of Nations, United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, democracy, secularism, freedom of religions, freedom of speech are to them all 'products of infidels,'"¹⁶ Phares writes. The Jihadist movement threatens the whole of global society, and the ideological battle extends far beyond the Cold War struggle between the western constructs of capitalism and communism.

Not only has 9/11 been the ultimate catalyst for the American empire, but it has served also as "wake-up call" that the United States should actively oppose what Christopher Hitchens calls "theocratic barbarism."¹⁷ At that crucial juncture, the Bush Administration made a choice that will have serious consequences for the fate of the American Empire. In true imperial fashion, George Bush announced he would take the fight to the barbarians, and the US was plunged into the War on Terror. Mary Robinson, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, argued that defining 9/11 as an act of terrorism and not a

¹⁵ Osama Bin Laden, "Statement to America, October 26, 2002," trans. Randall B. Hamud, 103.

¹⁶ Phares 162.

¹⁷ Christopher Hitchens, "Images in a Rearview Mirror," *The Nation*, (3 December 2001) Avail. On-line: <<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20011203/hitchens>>.

crime against humanity created the conditions “an ‘endless war’ with no peace in sight.”¹⁸ Her legitimate fear was that an endless fight could “tend to inflate the terrorists, because being at war is attractive to some angry, unemployed, disaffected youth.”¹⁹ Michael Radu of the *Foreign Policy Research Institute* reveals what the US is numerically up against: “German, British, Jordanian, and Pakistani intelligence organizations and governments all conservatively estimate that 2-5 percent of their Muslim populations support or participate in terrorism. With 1.2 billion Muslims in world, even the low-end estimate, 2 percent, would make for 24 million supporters of terrorism.”²⁰ As the Roman Empire did before it, the United States suddenly found itself committing to an offensive struggle it could never hope to win. Unlike conventional warfare, there was no enemy to defeat—just an ideology to conquer. Not only had the US pledged to fight “until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated,”²¹ but it had also launched a de facto crusade. Writing in Pan-Islamic London newspaper, Abdel Rahman al-Rashed laments, “It is a certain fact that not all Muslims are terrorists, but it is equally certain, and exceptionally painful, that almost all terrorists are Muslims... terrorism has become an Islamic enterprise; an almost exclusive monopoly, implemented by Muslim men and women.”²² The American War on Terror is a war on Islam, no matter how governments attempt to spin it.

While associating the Muslim world with a new *barbaricum* may be something of a misnomer, in the eyes of most citizens of the American empire, it is far too accurate. There is a rampant notion in the West that Islam is somehow incompatible with democracy—the

¹⁸ Mary Robinson, “Making ‘global’ and ‘ethnic’ rhyme, an interview with Mary Robinson,” 9 Dec. 2003, <<http://www.opendemocracy.net/content/articles/PDF/1627.pdf>>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Trudy Kuehner, “Teaching 9/11 and the War on Terrorism,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, vol. 11, no. 1 (March 2006) <<http://www.fpri.org/footnotes/111.200603.kuehner.teaching911.html>>.

²¹ George Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People,” 20 September 2001, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>>.

²² Abdel Rahman al-Rashed, “A Wake-up Call: Almost all terrorists are Muslims...” *Arab News*, (9 September 2004) <<http://www.arabnews.com/9-11/print.asp?artid=32&d=9&m=9&y=2004>>.

Arab world has, in the words of former CIA Director James Woolsey, “reacted angrily against intrusions from the outside” to replace tyranny with “freedom.”²³ The truth is that the Muslim world has been the victim of western machinations for so long that it has never had the chance to embrace democracy. Nevertheless, the fact that the Middle East and Jihadists in particular seem so far removed from American-styled liberal democracy makes their culture stand out. As a result, it is not going too far to suggest that the Middle East fulfills the same role of the “inferior other” than the Germans played for Rome. Nearly half of all Americans, 46 percent, have a negative perception of Islam according to *The Washington Post*, and that is an increase of seven percentage points since 9/11. A third of Americans believe Islam is a violent religion that encourages violence against non-Muslims.²⁴ Edward Said devotes an entire volume to detail how the American media conspires to create an unfavorable opinion about Islam;²⁵ the end result is the stereotype of the Muslim as the veil-covered fanatic. Americans may not watch their barbarians be slaughtered in the Coliseum like the Romans but they insist on them wearing turbans and speaking of jihad. If the United States believes it is on the right side of history, then the question must be asked: does American believe Islam is on the wrong?

In this ideologically-charged atmosphere, any misstep by the United States has the potential to result in a very expensive disaster for the *pax Americana*. Reforming the Middle East has been a project in American political circles for some decades, but the impetus given to the process by 9/11 and the subsequent invasion of Iraq have enflamed the entire region. The Jihadists are fundamentally a creation of western mishandling of the Muslim world, and

²³ Richard W. Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) 118-119.

²⁴ Claudia Deane & Darryl Fears, “Negative Perception of Islam Increasing,” *The Washington Post*, (9 March 2006) < http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/03/08/AR2006030802221_pf.html>.

²⁵ See Edward Said, *Covering Islam*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

the US has done little to diffuse the situation. Unfortunately, the current international climate seems to dictate that the United States is the only country with the means and ability to finally bring a measure of peace and prosperity to the Middle East; even Osama Bin Laden accords the United States the place of “a great power with unbelievable military strength and a vibrant economy.”²⁶ However, should the United States choose to withdraw from this region so vital to its interests, it will have made the same mistake as Rome did in leaving *barbaricum* to simmer and boil: it will be forced to eventually confront jihad, but on the Jihadists terms. 9/11 proved to Jihadists like Osama Bin Laden that a “small group of Muslims...proved that it is possible to fight militarily against this superpower;”²⁷ 9/11 was only a glimpse of what the future may have in store should America not persevere over its barbarians. For better or worse, Iraq has become the front line in this fight.

²⁶ Osama Bin Laden, “Sermon for the Feast of the Sacrifice, February 26, 2003,” trans. Randall B. Hamud, 121.

²⁷ Ibid 121.

CHAPTER 11

IRAQ, TERROR, & AMERICA'S ENTRANCE INTO *BARBARICUM*

If 9/11 awoke the slumbering American empire, then the invasion of Iraq in 20 March 2003 was a dramatic show of power for the United States. For the neoconservative imperialists within the Bush Administration, 9/11 was an opportunity for the US to expand its influence while making a statement to the Islamic world. Ironically, like Rome's response to the Varian Disaster, the United States has responded in an uncoordinated, overblown, and as yet inconclusive fashion. Five years later, the US has embroiled itself in a financially ruinous war in Iraq that has cost over \$300 billion according to the Congressional Budget Office.¹ Like Rome, America's overconfidence in its military might has produced "a vortex of unintended consequences" in its actions against Jihadists:

Militancy is on the rise. Terrorists are using Iraq as a training base and potential launch pad for attacks elsewhere, according to U.S. officials and documents. Democratic reform remains largely stymied. The U.S. Army and Marine Corps, and especially the reserves and National Guard, are

¹ Jen DiMascio and Jason Sherman, "Pentagon details added spending," *Military.com*, 24 Feb. 2006, <<http://www.military.com/features/0,15240,88824,00.html>>.

feeling the strain of repeated deployments. Public support for the war is declining in America and almost non-existent elsewhere.²

More importantly, as part of a response to the actions taken towards Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda, the invasion of Iraq “made no sense at all and was probably counterproductive.”³ However, in the aftermath of 9/11, Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor explain that Iraq was part of a bigger agenda. The country, they write, was hardly “an immediate threat” but “[f]or an administration that was determined to change the strategic equation in the Middle East and make Saddam an object lesson...Iraq was not a danger to avoid but a strategic opportunity.”⁴ With the administrations *National Security Strategy for the United States* now in play, the transformation of Iraq could be a showcase for American military might and establish a beachhead of liberal democracy in a region hostile to American interests. The Bush Administration viewed men like Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden as the designers of Islamic totalitarianism. Conquering Iraq would send a message that “the United States was on the side of liberal-minded Arabs...against the totalitarians and their ideas.”⁵ It would also, it must be said, have the practical benefit of giving the United States immediate access to a region pivotal to America’s energy needs.

While the Iraq invasion was envisioned as a response to the events of 9/11, it also makes for an eerie analogy to Roman imperialism. Like the Dacian Wars fought by Domitian and Trajan, Iraq found itself locked into a mutually hostile relationship with the United States. The limits of the international coalition established for the First Gulf War had stopped the US from overthrowing Saddam Hussein. Despite a humiliating defeat, Saddam

² Warren P. Strobel, Hannah Allam, and Knight Ridder, “America in Iraq: Three Years Later,” *The Mercury News*, 19 March 2006, <<http://www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/news/14136750.htm>>.

³ Bacevich, *The New American Militarism*, 201.

⁴ Michael Gordon & Bernard Trainor. *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006) 64.

⁵ George Packer, *The Assassins’ Gate: America in Iraq*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005) 50.

Hussein has successfully stood up to the world's superpower, just after its Soviet rival had given way, and had been able to declare a moral victory.⁶ Iraq largely vanished from the minds of the American public, but, 9/11 or no, Saddam Hussein and the United States had unfinished business: the Second Gulf War was likely inevitable. Like the emperor Trajan, the Bush Administration was committed to resolving the deficiencies of the previous settlement. In Trajan's case, his predecessor had negotiated with a barbarian to the empire's detriment. With the public clamoring for revenge, Trajan was able to provide a set piece battle—complete with an engineering marvel—and a triumphant victory for the citizens of Rome. Despite the costs of the war and the dramatic extension of the imperial frontier into the wilds of *barbaricum*, its subjugation sent a powerful message to the surrounding German tribes. In another historical parallel, much as the US believed Iraqi oil could help that country recuperate, the conquest of Dacia and Trajan's war were financed by the wealth of the Dacian gold mines. While the conquest of Dacia was a medium-term success for the empire, Trajan ultimately met his end through efforts at achieving further renown against the Parthians, which ended as a tremendous waste of resources and manpower.⁷

In the case of Iraq, the United States would have been wise to check its imperial hubris. From the start, the Iraq invasion has been a tremendous example of imperial ideology triumphing over pragmatic reality. Even as its war on terror achieved near-global support, the callous way the United States pursued the Iraq question transformed the issue “into a referendum on American power and leadership.”⁸ Despite billions of dollars in bribes to wavering allies like Turkey and strenuous efforts to achieve support in the United

⁶ Ibid 11.

⁷ Goldsworthy, *In the Name of Rome*, 375.

⁸ Thomas Donnelly, “An Enduring Pax Americana,” *National Security Outlook*, (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 1 April 2003) Avail. On-line: <http://www.aei.org/publications/pubID.16710/pub_detail.asp>.

Nations, the United States lost the referendum. It decided to invade and occupy Iraq virtually alone. Furthermore, according to Paul Rillar, the American intelligence community, while clearly clueless as to ultimate threat level of Iraq, concluded that “war and occupation would boost political Islam and increase sympathy for terrorists’ objectives—and Iraq would become a magnet for extremists from elsewhere in the Middle East.”⁹ However, the Bush Administration blinded themselves to any objections to the war. This single-minded determination has resulted in a dire situation for both the United States and its war on terror.

The actual invasion of Iraq was a startling success—the efficacy of American technological and military might shocked and awed the Iraqi forces into quick submission. Nonetheless, the three years since the successful conquest of Iraq, one message is clear: it is far easier to conquer than it is to subdue. Clearly, the US possesses a superior ability to attack and conquer, but, as Jim Garrison eloquently puts it, “what is what is really needed is nation building and peacekeeping in failed and failing states. The US military is primed for war against aggressive nations, but the real security crises are in nations that are disintegrating from within.”¹⁰ Sounding like a twenty-first century P. Quinctilius Varus, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said he felt “it was ludicrous to think that it would take more forces to secure the peace than win the war.”¹¹ Instead of swamping Iraq with the half million soldiers the military felt it necessary to keep the peace, the United States currently fields only 136,000 troops in Iraq. Three years later Iraq is, depending upon the source, either on the verge or in the midst of a violent civil war—the poor planning of the Bush Administration is almost entirely too blame.

⁹ Paul R. Pillar, “Intelligence, Policy, and War in Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs*, (March/April 2006) 19.

¹⁰ Garrison 177.

¹¹ Gordon & Trainor 103.

While the post Cold War world saw both George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton work within international frameworks, their efforts at “nation-building” were viewed with intense suspicion by members of the current Bush Administration. America’s adventures in Africa and in the Balkans were seen as tremendous drains on the resources of the American Empire. The administration had proudly proclaimed its apprehension about nation building and blindly assumed other countries and organizations could handle the task. Flush with the recent success in ousting the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Bush Administration decided to use the subsequent occupation of that country as a template for Iraq. With their disdain for previous peacekeeping operations under the Clinton Administration, they paid little attention to the fact that Iraq, with a heavily urbanized population of 24 million, was more like the Balkans than Afghanistan. They subsequently disregarded the National Security Council’s suggestion that occupying Iraq would likely be similar to American operations in Bosnia and Kosovo and, thus, require a higher soldier to civilian ratio.¹² Already by the summer of 2003, senior British officer Major General Albert Whitley was concerned that Iraq had become a disaster: “We may have been seduced into something we might be inclined to regret. Is strategic failure a possibility? The answer has to be ‘yes.’”¹³

With American fatalities now over 2,300, the United States has turned Iraq into a classic imperial blunder. According to Gordon and Trainor, the United States simply “failed to understand the welter of ethnic groups and tribes that is Iraq.”¹⁴ Had they had any foresight, they could have at least gained some insight from Britain’s disastrous occupation of “Iraq” as a mandate after the First World War. Attempting to rule a collection of diverse Ottoman provinces ultimately proved too much for even imperial Britain. Britain was

¹² Ibid 104.

¹³ Ewen MacAskill, “US postwar Iraq strategy a mess, Blair was told,” *The Guardian On-line*, 16 March 2006, < <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/iraq/story/0,,1730429,00.html>>.

¹⁴ Gordon & Trainor 497.

eventually chased out of the country by the exact same combination of problems faced by the United States today, and, unfortunately for the British, they were forced to return to the country to restore some semblance of order during the Second World War. Truly, the US has stumbled into the twenty-first century version of Rome's Germany, and the weaknesses of the American Empire have become vividly exposed. Corey Robin provides one particularly illuminating example of what the administration has presided over, writing that "Bush fiddles in the White House or Texas, playing Nero as the Mideast burns."¹⁵ As a result of this disaster, *The Economist* poignantly concludes that "the awful irony is that specious link which the administration claimed existed between Iraq and al-Qaeda in order to justify going to war now exists."¹⁶ Iraq has become the front line in the War on Terror, and it has taken this dubious honor at Afghanistan's expense.

There, despite strong international involvement and support, the lack of American muscle is evident. In the face of a resurgent Taliban and still-active al-Qaeda network, the United States contingent of forces in Afghanistan has dwindled to only 2,500—and those are scheduled to be replaced by NATO troops.¹⁷ "The net result," Jim Garrison says,

has been that other nations have been equally parsimonious with their resources and troops. Not surprisingly, Afghanistan, despairing on long-term US involvement, is increasingly falling back into the hands of the warlords. During 2003, many humanitarian agencies closed their Afghan operations because of civil violence. President Karzai has been relegated by the growing power of the warlords to little more than mayor of Kabul.¹⁸

¹⁵ Corey Robin, "Remembrance of Empires Past: 9/11 and the End of the Cold War," *Cold War Triumphalism: The Misuse of History after the Fall of Communism*, ed. Ellen Schrecker, (New York: The New Press, 2004) 289.

¹⁶ "Why America must say," *The Economist*, (26 November 2005) 11.

¹⁷ Chris Van Hollen, "Off Course in Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, (21 March 2006).

¹⁸ Garrison 180.

The American occupation of Afghanistan thus appears to have gone only slightly better than the Soviet invasion two decades ago. While the United Nations and Europe have emerged as the principal agents of change in Afghanistan, American hubris and the bitter circumstances of Iraq have hampered international involvement there. Only five years into the War on Terror, it appears as if the United States, despite its military victories, is losing the fight on two fronts.

Nevertheless, despite the setbacks in Iraq up until the present, retreat should not be an option. Retreating, acquiescing to the challenges of facing this barbarian threat, cannot achieve any noble ends. Unfortunately, electoral pressures are mounting, but any reduction in American forces in Iraq will end any accomplishments the American occupation has made. Leaving Iraq would leave the country in civil war and hand a bloody victory to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, and it would send a devastating message to Jihadists around the world that the United States can be beaten. More importantly, a failure in Iraq could irreparably damage American interests in the region. It will deny US access to the world's second largest proven oil reserve. It will deprive the US over an outpost with which to engage the Muslim world. Leaving the country in such chaos will create an embittered Iraq for generations. "Arabs who want to modernise their region would know that they could not count on America to stand by its friends," *The Economist* warns. Despite the cost, the best short-term option for the US would be to send more troops, not withdraw the ones they have. More troops would allow US forces to secure more and more territory and slowly cordon off the al-Zarqawi's insurgency. Unfortunately, there simply are no other immediate alternatives. Encouraging international support could be recommended, but, after the bluntness of America's unilateralism in this case, few nations are anything more than

ambivalent towards the situation. Stabilizing the country is key before any real progress can be made towards instituting liberal democracy.

In the long-term, Phares believes Islam itself is the solution. Assuming a relative degree of security can be provided to the Iraqi people, then “shepherding humanist Muslims internationally and supporting them in their own quest for peace is the appropriate response to future jihads.”¹⁹ Establishing a dialogue with these people is the only way to avert the downfall of the American economic empire. If the United States does not succeed, the instability that will result will eventually require the United States—or someone else—to return to clean up the mess. The United States can neither ignore the firestorm it has created nor the Jihadists that fan the flames, or it risks not simply barbarians at its gates but jihad, as well.

¹⁹ Phares 251.

CHAPTER 12

THE END OF EMPIRE

The place of both the Roman Empire and the United States in history is unique in that both nations stand as preeminent powers in their respective worlds. By most measurable standards, the two nations are unrivaled, affording them the singular opportunity to bring order and prosperity to a chaotic planet. For centuries, the Roman world presented a glimpse at a level of political and economic development not seen again in Europe for a millennium. Within its borders were “flourishing cities, an orderly administration, an economy with highly divided labor, lively traffic in the entire region between the North Sea and the Red Sea... Cities stood in the countryside unfortified; barely 1 percent of the empire’s population was under arms,” and the Ancient World had never seen anything like it ever before.¹ The dream embodied by Rome continued after the empire’s death, but the degree of domestic prosperity it had attained would not be found again until the birth of the United States, what George Washington called “an infant empire.” At that time, the territory of the US constituted only 8 percent of its eventual size, and, as the country rapidly

¹ Wolfram 1.

expanded, it gave its citizens a previously unimaginable amount of freedom.² The new empire was the first in history to declare that all men were created equal, which in itself was a remarkable foundation for an empire.

The United States always envisioned a place for itself in history. Writing in the 1890s, Indiana senator Albert Beveridge saw a world where “American law, American order, American civilization, and the American flag will plant themselves on shores hitherto bloody and benighted” only to “be made beautiful and bright.”³ A century later, the senator’s vision is reality and his sentiment echoed in all levels of American society. It is the very same sort of divinely ordained mission that Rome, too, saw as its own. However, both empires faced threats to their well being. The march of empire is not infinite and all empires, as creations of a flawed being, eventually wither and die. It happened to Rome, the darling of the Ancient World, and it will happen to the United States. How America will decline has yet to be determined, but it would be wise to look at the model Rome provides to avoid the mistakes of America’s imperial predecessor.

“Romans before the fall were as certain as we are today that their world would continue for ever substantially unchanged,” Ward-Perkins writes.⁴ They remained largely complacent as their society fell around them. A legacy of Roman invincibility shielded emperors and citizens alike from the simple reality that *barbaricum* was neither as inferior nor weak as they believed it to be. Despite the occasional setback at the hands of the Germans, the Roman people never doubted the capacity of their tremendous military to force the barbarians back into line. While this remained basically accurate until the reign of Theodosius, the Varian Disaster proved to be a fateful moment in Roman history. In AD 9,

² Ferguson 34.

³ Ibid 43-44.

⁴ Ward-Perkins 183.

like countless empires after it, the Roman Empire found itself unable to defeat and subdue a savage and primitive enemy. Guerilla tactics and unorthodox strategy succeeded in upsetting the superior power. This early loss and the policies that arose because of it ultimately set the empire on its path to the end. As Chapters 2-3 detailed, the defeat so traumatized Augustus and his successors that they abandoned their campaign to conquer Germany. Instead, they attempted to contain the Germans behind a chain of sprawling defenses along the Rhine-Danube line. Roman diplomatic prowess and the constant threat posed by the legions allowed the empire to manipulate the Germans and keep them in quiet acquiescence.

This changed with the conclusion of the Marcomannic Wars in 180. The prosperity of the Roman Empire was wasted on a century of endless civil war and political chaos. By the time the empire had regained its swagger, the *pax Romana* had been replaced by a thoroughly militarized and divided empire. The reorganization of the empire had altered the make-up of the imperial court, the military, and, most importantly, the empire's relations with the Germans. The frontier had transformed into a dangerous no-man's land, "[eroding] the principle that peace reigned throughout the Roman Empire."⁵ When Theodosius came to power in 379, the empire still contained vestiges of its old strength and vigor, yet the wealth of the empire had largely evaporated. The emperor bought off the victors of Hadrianople, the German Visigoths, not with money but with the empire's land itself. As land became the only treasure left to the empire, Burns ominously concludes, "[the barbarians] sank their roots ever more deeply into the soil. For that reason, the settlement of barbarian farmer-soldiers within the Empire, once begun, was nearly impossible to reverse."⁶ Once concessions to the barbarians were made and the *foederati* appeared, the empire was doomed.

⁵ Santosuosso 229.

⁶ Burns 281.

Millions of Roman citizens watched passively as a tiny number of barbarians laid waste to their once proud empire, but the Roman spirit awakened only once it was too late. While large numbers of Germans poured into the empire during its dying days, the total figure of armed invaders was perhaps no more than 110-120,000.⁷ Compared to an empire that was 50 million strong, it is difficult to imagine that these small German tribes could invade—and supplant—the imperial government, but it nonetheless happened. The Romans had made a fatal error: they had overestimated their strength while underestimating the threat of the barbarians. It was an easy mistake to make—the Germans were divided and poor. So, too, are the Jihadists of today.

The challenge to the United States is neither a rival superpower nor the threat of traditional military conquest, but rather a single terrorist with a bomb. In a single moment, 9/11 had the capacity to shatter the illusion of a *pax Americana* far more than did the threat of nuclear war or military aggression. And the entire plot was done for the relatively low cost of \$400-500,000.⁸ Hundreds of billions of dollars and thousands of American lives later, the United States has yet to adequately respond to this new threat. For better or for worse, whatever Iraq once was, the actions of the Bush Administration have made Iraq the front line in the greater War on Terror. Leaving Iraq will only ensure that the conflict will be fought somewhere else, and the United States, by virtue of its preeminence, will have to confront the issue yet again. As the Roman model so clearly shows, there is no running from the barbarians—not when the empire’s security is at stake.

The real test for the United States is whether it can lead the West to a lasting peace with the Islamic world. To do that, the United States must embrace the strengths and ideals

⁷ Heather 446.

⁸ “Monograph on Terrorist Financing,” *9/11 Commission Report*, 24 Aug. 2004, < http://www.9-11commission.gov/staff_statements/911_TerrFin_Ch1.pdf>.

that make it an imperial power of the first order without relying upon its military might to reshape the world. The vast majority of Muslims aspire to the same peace, prosperity, and freedom from tyranny that the West enjoys, but, as Ferguson points out, freedom cannot be spread at the point of a sword. “There is something fishy about those who would democratize Fallujah with the Abrams tank,” he quips.⁹ The United States can promote and encourage the development of moderate strains of Islam in the Middle East, but that is all it can do. The final step will ultimately be done by Muslims themselves.

Rome, for all its military greatness, functioned best when it assimilated other societies into its own. Kunow’s suggestion that Rome was able to establish societal bridgeheads around the Mediterranean bears repeating. Their inability to handle the military situation in Germany was the result of short-sighted imperial vision befitting an empire in Antiquity. As the Varian Disaster and the subsequent centuries illustrate, the Roman army was ultimately unable to win the peace simply by itself. The United States would be wise to note this. Nevertheless, now that the US is in Iraq, it cannot afford to leave. Retreating into its frontiers and playing the role of empire from afar did not work for Rome, and it will certainly not work for the United States.

Thus, as it engages the world, the United States faces a decision of Machiavellian dimensions: it can either lay the whole of the Middle East to waste or it can bring the benefits of the *pax Americana* to that region of the world. Both are obviously costly and require the full mobilization of society to succeed. The United States has the power to single-handedly take down every regime in the Middle East, but the costs, in both material and human terms, would be unimaginable. While it remains a powerful temptation for the United States, expanding American power through the continual use of force will ultimately

⁹ Ferguson, Preface x.

exhaust every resource the country has. More importantly, as the invasion of Iraq demonstrates, “the Jacksonian response” of the United States the events of 9/11 has isolated the superpower from the world.¹⁰ A military solution is a simplistic and naïve response to the complex problem of terrorism. The more idealistic approach—and perhaps even more powerful method—is to use the material and political might of the United States to improve the crumbling societies in which the Jihadists draw strength.

Garrison writes that the war on terror can “only be truly won if a war is also declared on the roots of terrorism: poverty, illiteracy, exploitation, and disease.”¹¹ This option requires a firm resolve and a lengthy commitment, extending far beyond a tour of duty in Iraq. F.W. Walbank suggests that the United States has the choice “to plan the resources of modern society for the whole of its people...to press forward towards a more equitable distribution of wealth, both nationally and on an international scale; and to give full scope for the employment of the new technical forces man already controls.”¹² Only then can the United States hope to export liberal democracy to illiberal and undemocratic regions of the world. The Roman Empire was not afforded the luxury of choosing such an idealistic agenda. That empire was an extraordinary achievement in Antiquity, but one that was inherently limited by the political and social sophistication of the era. The glory of Roman society was crushed under the weight of the barbarians and the military establishment needed to fend them off. Unlike Rome, the United States has the opportunity to choose how it will lead the world.

If the United States wishes to militarize, to take over the planet, it could do that, but such an empire could never survive. Alternatively, the country could turn inward, as the

¹⁰ Garrison 154.

¹¹ Ibid 163.

¹² Walbank 125.

Romans did after their disaster in Germany, and spend its energies haplessly maintaining the status quo. But the best chance for the United States to maintain its preeminence into perpetuity is quite simply to abandon its empire. Despite the best efforts of the Bush Administration, the US remains a reluctant empire. The virtues of Rome were such that they “remained the ideal of order and power long after its government had disintegrated.”¹³ The power of American ideals like liberal democracy and free economies has thus far worked to knit the world into an ever tighter collection of peoples. The US can use its overwhelming influence to shape the foundations for a new world government—a global empire that is American in its ideals and foundation, but legitimate in the eyes of people around the world. This, too, is an idealistic vision, but it is the only way to escape the model of empire that Rome was. That is the challenge of the superpower, to live on, and it appears that the crossroads of modernity has granted the United States the “consciousness to choose its imperial pathway.”¹⁴

Instead, the five years since 9/11 have seen the United States succumb to the pressures of imperial hubris and the barbarian threat. If one takes the Varian Disaster to be Roman 9/11, the overall shift in Roman policy after that date can be blamed for the eventual decay of the empire. A lesson to be derived from this simplistic argument is that the United States should be cautious of dramatically altering their world vision based on that single tragic day. The world has gotten neither safer nor freer since the War on Terror began, and friends and enemies alike have been alienated. That does not mean that the US can give up its empire; on the contrary, it need to use its imperial power for the benefit of the world. Ignatieff's conclusion sums up the situation well:

¹³ Jedediah Purdy, “Universal Nation,” *The Imperial Tense*, 104.

¹⁴ Garrison 202.

Those who want America to remain a republic rather than become an empire imagine rightly, but they have not factored in what tyranny or chaos can do to vital American interests. The case for empire is that it has become, in a place like Iraq, the last hope for democracy and stability alike. Even so, empires survive only by understanding their limits. America can help repress and contain the struggle [of jihad], but even though its own security depends on the outcome, it cannot ultimately control it.¹⁵

The United States should end its war and pursue peace, using force when necessary but humanity always. The Roman Empire is ultimately a model of what can—and will—happen should the American people give in to their baser instincts. Rome survived so long because the idea of its empire appealed to the peoples of the Mediterranean; it died when its leaders lost sight of that and the Germans exploited that. If the United States can mobilize the world, then the world will rid itself of barbarians near and far—and the *pax Americana* will simply be a global peace.

¹⁵ Ignatieff, “The Burden.”

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