

7 of 8 DOCUMENTS

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I'm reading the most fascinating book about the end of the Roman Republic. The book is called "Rubicon: The Last Years of the Roman Republic." The author is a Cambridge-educated Brit, Tom Holland, who is blurbed as "an accomplished radio personality in Britain."

It's a book I automatically picked up somewhere - because I spent many years studying Greek and Roman literature, during my own classical period (it's all rococo now!), and because I am for some reason fascinated with last things, last performances, and endings of eras. In the hectic pace of my life, sometime during the last year I bought the book, and made the mistake of putting it down at random in my house, where it was promptly swallowed up. The other day I tripped over it, picked it up, and decided to read a chapter or two. Now I'm hooked.

"Rubicon" is an intelligent, witty and insightful book written for the general public. Every school child learns that Julius Caesar led his legions across the tiny Rubicon River in the north of Italy on Jan. 10, 49 BCE, thus precipitating the civil war that led to the collapse of the Roman Republic. The ancient historian Suetonius reported that on that fateful day Caesar said, "The die is cast" - in other words, that he was staking everything, his future and perhaps even his existence, on this extra-constitutional invasion of the Roman homeland.

Caesar (100-44 BCE) is one of the most fascinating figures in human history - it would be hard to nominate anyone more fascinating. We know an enormous amount about him because the Romans were remarkable record keepers. He wrote about himself in the famous war Commentaries (almost every young Latinist's first sustained Latin text). His correspondence was vast: he is said to have dictated letters from horseback to three secretaries simultaneously. He intrigued and troubled everyone, including the greatest letter writer of the ancient world, Cicero.

Caesar was a dissolute and deeply indebted dandy (we'd say, metrosexual) from one of the handful of leading families in Rome. Though he represented the highest Roman nobility - in a country where nobility was everything - he came to champion the poor urban masses (and partied with them too). He sought power with unscrupulous ambition - bribery, seduction, acts of political theater, demagoguery, and of course outright force - but there was something so graceful and admirable in his personal style that even his enemies found it hard to hate him utterly. When he got supreme power, he displayed clemency and an administrative mastery seldom equaled in history.

And then, the last true "republicans" assassinated him on March 15, 44 BCE, the Ides of March. Enter Shakespeare (stage left) with every student's first (somewhat unfortunate) encounter with the greatest writer in the English language.

Even so, "Rubicon" is not really about Julius Caesar. It is about the forces that pulled the ancient Roman republican "constitution" apart in the last century before Christ. The Roman Republic consisted of Spartan hardscrabble farmers who were cantankerous about their self-reliance and committed to a concept of craggy "virtue" that is wholly alien to our Barcalounger Nation. Rome's wars, which were localized, were fought between harvests by farmer-citizen-soldiers. Luxury was regarded as un-Roman. Honor and a homespun independence meant more than anything else. You get the picture.

Then Rome began to acquire a Mediterranean empire and guess what happened? The citizen soldier came to be replaced by a standing army of the poor and the immigrant who fought for upward mobility rather than the principles of the republic. Illegal immigrants flooded Rome. Their desperate poverty and restlessness were bought off with state welfare. Luxury and self-indulgence shouldered austere simplicity off the stage. Rome created and then demonized its enemies. Because the "barbarians" did not fight according to "civilized codes of warfare," Rome learned to hold its empire by way of grotesque exhibits of power and terror. This created as many enemies as it quieted. The empire became so far-flung, so chaotic, so expensive, so complex, that the venerable old republican constitution was stretched to the breaking point.

And then it broke.

I'm not enamored of Cato Institute analogies between the fall of Rome and the coming "fall" of America. The differences between us and Rome are considerable, maybe fundamental. I don't fancy those leather chair debates about whether it was lead paint or the welfare state or Christianity (as Edward Gibbon had it) that destroyed Rome. But I do think books like "Rubicon" and Cullen Murphy's "Are We Rome: The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America" should be read by the Obamas and the Gingrichs of America, as well as by the Dorgans, Conrads and Pomeroy's.

Here's the essence of it. Rome became a world empire without really "trying" to, and world empire proved to be fatally corrosive of Roman values. Instead of facing this transformation, Rome continued for more than a century to pretend it was still a republic. Because the Romans preferred to live in nostalgic illusion rather than face the world they had created, the strain on the ancient constitution was so great that when it finally broke, the result was chaos, civil war and dictatorship.

But, as Sinclair Lewis said, it cannot happen here.

Yesterday, I ordered a dozen copies to give away as Christmas gifts.

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