

Rome and the Barbarians, America and the Terrorists



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A small band of ragtag insurgents attack a military base of the world's lone superpower; soon after the attack, they melt back into the surroundings, the land of the insurgents themselves, and are difficult to track. Good intelligence is crucial to tracking down these insurgents, and the local military commander knows that just the right approach is required in order to keep the delicate balance of occupier and occupied living in relative peace in place. Sure, some torture might be used, some skulls may need cracking, but the idea is to make the people of this place our friends and allies, and incapable of threatening us, he thinks. Attacks by groups like these have etched a haunting memory in the mind of his people, far advanced and more powerful than those whose land in which he and his troops are based. Whether these specific people have had anything to do with those who attacked his own people in the past... well, to him, they all seemed alike, or at least close enough; teaching one group a lesson should make the others think twice about attacking a superpower.

Yet his leaders and his commander-in-chief seem totally out of touch with reality, have not themselves spent any real hard time with men out in the field of battle, and spend most of their time in a bubble-world at a capital far removed from anything that he has to deal with on the front. The commander worries that whatever actions are ordered as a response in this area might have political ambitions or poor information, not sound strategy, behind them. For all their power, for all the appeal of his people's comfortable living-standards and culture, he still has to wonder: would *these* people *here* ever join the civilized world? Or would he be here ten years from now fighting the same people, in the same miserable conditions, missing his wife, his children, and his home, which, at this point, he has not seen for a very, very long time?

This could certainly be an American officer today in Iraq or Afghanistan, but it could also have been a Roman centurion stationed on or near the Danube, or in Britain, or

in any number of locations. I came to this realization over half a year ago as I was reading *Rome and the Barbarians, 100 B.C. – A.D. 400*, by Thomas S. Burns, an academic at Emory University. I have included the publisher's synopsis below to provide a good summary of the book:

Rome and the Barbarians, 100 B. C. - A. D. 400

SYNOPSIS

The barbarians of antiquity, so long fixed in Western imaginations as the savages who sacked and destroyed Rome, now emerge in this colorful, richly textured history as a much more complex—and far more interesting—factor in the expansion, and eventual unmaking, of the Roman Empire. Thomas S. Burns marshals an abundance of archeological and literary evidence, as well as three decades of study and experience, to bring forth a perceptive and wide-ranging account of the relations between Romans and non-Romans along the frontiers of Western Europe from the last years of the Republic into late antiquity. Surveying a 500-year time span beginning with early encounters between barbarians and Romans around 100 B.C. and ending with the spread of barbarian settlement within the western Empire around A.D. 400, Burns removes the barbarians from their former narrow niche as invaders and conquerors and places them in the broader context of neighbors, (sometimes bitter) friends, and ultimately settlers and prospective Romans, themselves.

This nuanced history shows how Rome's relations with the barbarians—and vice versa—slowly but inexorably evolved from general ignorance, hostility, and suspicion toward tolerance, synergy, and integration. What he describes is, in fact, a drawn-out period of acculturation, characterized more by continuity than by change and conflict, leading to the creation of a new Romano-barbarian hybrid society and culture that anticipated the values and traditions of medieval civilization:

"Burns brings thirty years of extensive study of the literary and archaeological evidence to bear on the nature of the impact not only that the Romans had on the barbarians but also that the barbarians had on the Romans. Fortified with a thorough exposition of the source material, meticulous analysis, and provocative suggestions, Rome and the Barbarians will take the dialogue to another level." Ralph W. Mathisen, University of South Carolina

At first glance it may seem obscure, but for most of the past year and then some, it was one of the top three bestselling books in the ancient history category at bn.com, Barnes & Noble's website. It is still in the top three. Its bargain price and its brilliance are just too much of a powerful combination. The book is all about the interaction and mutual influence between Rome and the "barbarian" cultures (mostly Germanic, Celtic, and the Steppe peoples; the Jews and Greeks, among others, could hardly have been considered barbarians at the time, they were too advanced). What is truly mind-blowing is how similar Rome's early expansion and then imperial dominance is to our own American history, and how similar it was as a superpower to us as a superpower. I would not have thought so at first, but the author simply marshals too much evidence, cited from a wide variety of good sources. And he does not usually make the connection to us: it is just obvious.

Anyway, even at its height the Roman Empire often relied on familial client-patron relationships: there were hardly organized governments among the barbarians, so foreign policy often relied on Rome dealing with a warlord who was powerful enough to guarantee adherence to Rome's treaties and interests; if candidates were not powerful

enough to guarantee this adherence, then Rome propped them up so that they could, and it is terribly ironic that it was the Romans doing this that caused the different barbarian peoples to coalesce around a single leader and become the Franks, the Goths, the Alamanni... The "barbarian nations" would have likely stayed just simple and chaotic, disparate tribes, or stayed so much longer, without the patronage of Rome and the Roman desire to see a strong man in charge of a designated area, or group of people. Think about all our actions in South America during the Cold War, from Somoza to Pinochet to the killing of Ché, and before that, supporting Batista in Cuba. Think of the Saudi Royal Family (really, what kind of a "nation" is Saudi Arabia?) Think today about Musharraf: a perfect example. He is a warlord, we have no real relationship with Pakistan and its many different tribes, we operate wholly through Gen. Musharraf, and we help to keep his regime in power to ensure stability.

Despite the popular image of Rome, it was largely peaceful after its early centuries of expansion; after Augustus and his immediate successors in the first century AD, the borders of the Empire stayed pretty much the same, much like America's borders after Manifest Destiny had placated the "barbarian" native American tribes, after we had taken half of Mexico by force, stayed pretty much the same. Think of Spain and North Africa for Rome as America's early expansion past the Appalachians to the Mississippi; Greece and eastern Turkey as Texas/Mexico, the rest of Turkey, Syria/Palestine/Judea, and Gaul as the rest of the Great Plains up to the Rockies and the older settlements on the West Coast, and Egypt and Pannonia [the Balkans] as the far West, the rest of West Coast and the Southwest. Sure, there was some late expansion (Britain, Dacia [above the Danube], parts of the German frontier, some parts of the Middle-East like Mesopotamia/Iraq for Rome, and Puerto Rico, the Philippines and Cuba, Hawaii and Alaska and all the Pacific territories retained after World War II for us) but even Rome withdrew from many areas it had expanded into like Dacia, Armenia, Mesopotamia, and the Black sea at its height, just as we pulled back from Cuba, Okinawa, the Philippines, Panama, and, seemingly, Afghanistan/Iraq...

The cultural and societal similarities are what really blow your mind, though, in the book, but the point is this: that while it had its expansionist phases like we did, Rome was largely peaceful after it reached its peak, and usually only ended up fighting wars (with the exception of on-and-off Parthia/Persia, ironically West vs. East) when a new generation of barbarian leaders in one particular area no longer decided to play by the rules set up in past generations between Rome and the affected area. This was usually in the Germanic areas but also in the Balkans and in Britain. Rome often found it had to renegotiate new treaties when new leaders emerged, and war would come about if the leader was not willing to give Rome what it wanted. Going back to Musharraf, when he is gone in Pakistan, we will have to do much the same thing: renegotiate a new relationship when a new warlord emerges, and war may or may not ensue depending on the interests of both. Like our future and current wars, (think Saddam and Iraq too, actually) these were not wars of expansion for Rome, nor will they be wars of expansion for us: once a friendly, dependable government was set up, Rome almost always withdrew its troops, occasionally maintaining a few forts or outposts deep in enemy territory; think of our Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan today. There really was no Afghan nation, nor is there now, the difference is that we placed a leader in charge that we believe will be strong enough to ensure our interests are maintained, and already most of our troops are out of

there. It was similar for Marcus Aurelius fighting the Germanic Marcomanni(as depicted in the opening of the movie *Gladiator*).

Rome gave so much power to these local rulers compared to what they had before interaction with Rome that the borders of the direct Empire were often meaningless: Rome virtually never imposed its culture or way of life on people, it was just that both were so attractive that people all over Rome's orbit were voluntarily drawn into it. Our border with Mexico and our relationship with Japan are very similar cases to Rome's frontiers: American and Roman culture mixed with the local culture so that direct annexation was no longer necessary to maintain power and influence. And much like our relationships with our allies, Roman frontier neighbors and client states received much, much more aid and stimulus coming from Rome than they paid in tribute to Rome; it was enough for Rome, like us, to reap the economic and status rewards.

To relate things to today's era and the Middle-East, in the Palestinian Territories, Arafat was a petty tribal chieftain in many ways, operating in the same manner that many of the petty Germanic warlords did with Rome: he, like the Germanics of Rome's time, took the money, aid, and newfound position of status that Rome/America had elevated him/them to, and distributed the wealth and power among his/their followers and, to a lesser degree, to his/their people. The patron-client relationships between Israel/the EU/Russia/America/the UN and Arafat on one level, and the personal network that he set up which became known as Fatah, were very powerful, but only as powerful as the leader, Arafat. When he died, and even before then, the US saw a need to reassess the situation and put up a new ruler, which we may find more difficult now with Hamas in charge. So to be fair to Arafat, he was the latest in a long line of patron-client relationships. The "Palestinian people" much like the "Marcomanni" or the "Germans" didn't really exist as political entity until Rome or America propped up a leader and said "you are in charge of your people." In Rome's case it could take centuries or decades for this group of people to think of themselves as what it was called by Rome. In other words, the labels "Marcomanni" and "German" for the Romans, and the names "Palestinian" and "Saudi" and dare I say "Iraqi" for us Americans, had much more meaning for us and the Romans as a convenient way to label and organize people we and Romans deal/dealt with than for the people so being labeled.

Where Arafat can be judged, and judged harshly, is that he may have started in that old patron-client era, but now in the age of mass media, he could have risen to the task, was aware of what could have been done, and could have put his people first. But he never did: Fatah served to empower him and itself. Just like in Roman times, such leaders may have been popular(if they were too oppressive they were often deposed)but at their passing, the real problems would surface and turmoil would ensue. If Rome did not intervene directly, it had one of its clients intervene or it found a new leader who could guarantee stability. We are now doing the same thing in the Palestinian Territories. Later in the Roman Empire, select allies occasionally had Roman arms and equipment, much like Israel does from us. And though the client would intervene, it was an extension of Rome's arm intervening for mutual interests. How different is Israel, intervening with M16's, F-16's, and Abrams tanks?

Now to Hamas: what inspires(in comparison to Fatah)and abhors about the group, this group that could, 50/50, be better or worse than Fatah, is interesting. The election for the Palestinians was a referendum on the status quo: continue the old, ridiculously corrupt

patron-client networks of Fatah or reject that way of governance in lieu of an alternative with the people's interests at heart. Hamas has two faces: the Islamic charity started decades ago by students in Egypt to care for their Palestinian Arab brothers, which has done a better job providing for the Palestinian people than Arafat's Fatah ever did, even while Fatah was in charge, and the terror group that sends suicide bombers into Israeli discos. What is reassuring is that Hamas has dramatically reigned in its militant arm in the past two years: attacks against Israelis are way down from the beginning of the *Intifada*. Since it took over the Palestinian government, it has certainly avoided sending suicide bombers into Israel, and this can only be a positive development. There is too much chaos and anger and legitimate gripes in the Palestinian/Occupied Territories for all attacks to halt completely, but if Hamas can continue to prevent attacks from its own organization, which, for the most part it has, there is hope.

Rome, here, again, offers guidance. Even with a Germanic chieftain "in charge" of a region bordering Roman territory, total control over all armed men in the area was rare. Armed bands of Germans, in the late Empire or during early expansion (in the middle of the Empire's history, there was a truly remarkable level of peace) might cross the border and raid Roman territory, killing villagers, pillaging, burning crops. They had no technical ability to lay siege or the numbers to lay siege, so much like a suicide bomber, their impact was far more psychological than material. A few dozen might be killed, but not more. Rome had several options, all of which were exercised at different times by different emperors and military governors, yielding different results. Rome could blame the ruler they had set up, and depose him or set up a punitive expedition to punish the whole region. A full scale minor war could ensue (as has happened recently with Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon), or Rome could encourage one of its allies to attack. Often, Rome had living within its empire the greatest rivals of these said leaders, so Rome could send them in with Roman support and have a Roman led coup (think the Shah of Iran or numerous examples in Latin America) if that leader did not play by the rules.

More often than not, these events were isolated, and Rome recognized that it was silly for it to ask a relatively weak ruler who had no strong central government to be able to reign in every militant band. So Rome would sometimes send in a force to punish just the band of raiders, or might destroy the village that harbored them or from which the band originated, but would keep the violence localized; Rome would make its example and then withdraw, and the existing relationship between the local ruler, empowered by Rome, and between the people of the whole region and Rome, would not be changed or adversely affected. Always, the number of Germans dying in the punitive raid was far more than the Romans who died in the first incursion, just like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: far more Palestinians are dead or wounded in this recent *Intifada* than Israelis. The same can also be said of the recent Israeli-Hezbollah conflict. When Rome decided not to blame the weak government for the actions of every person living there and localized its response, the best results came about: stability and peace; even if another raid came about, a similar response would still occur. But when regional governors or Emperors seeking glory wanted to inflate the situation, they often sought a larger retribution than was required. If the entire local population was antagonized, full scale wars might erupt, and if a barbarian leader felt he was being treated unfairly, he might have occasionally, though rarely, found support from neighboring peoples or rulers,

especially if they had suffered similar treatment(at least part of the reason Hezbollah killed and captured a few Israeli soldiers was to show solidarity with their Arab Palestinian “brothers,” under siege in Gaza at the time). Especially in the late Empire, this caused many problems as the emperors of Late Antiquity became more despotic and removed from reality.

Sometimes, a rival group in a barbarian area might want to embarrass or destabilize the Roman-empowered local ruler: this group may even hope that by raiding Roman territory Rome, rather than punish just their small group, would attack the entire area, that way these troublemakers could rally support around themselves against Rome's puppet. Such examples are abound on the Palestinians side of today's situation, and more often than not, especially under Sharon, Hamas and others have succeeded in drawing Israel into destabilizing Fatah and the Palestinian Authority (PA) through which Fatah governs to Hamas's gain. Al-Qaeda, a group much worse than Fatah or Hamas by far, has succeeded all too well in doing this with us and our allies in Afghanistan and especially in Iraq, and with Pakistanis against Musharraf acting as our client; why else would he hold back from the tribal regions in the search for bin Laden?

Unfortunately, the recent fighting in Lebanon shows far too much of what I have mentioned in the preceding paragraphs. Ehud Olmert, new to power in Israel, was most probably seeking to assure Israelis that he could be just as tough, and protective, as Ariel Sharon, in addition to his legitimate reason of wanting to weaken Hezbollah and rescue captured Israeli soldiers. The disproportionate response, then, can be seen as an attempt not to go after glory, but an attempt to gain stature, a mold that would fit more than just a few emperors of Rome and their client-state leaders. By putting psychological domestic considerations over the real-world results of his actions, or at best misjudging the potential political fallout, Olmert succeeded not in destroying Hezbollah but in destroying, or at least crippling, the nascent Lebanese democracy and in sidelining Lebanese moderates. He antagonized a population that had been willing to begin to put the past aside, so much so that now they support Hezbollah far, far more than they would have without Olmert's blunder. Nasrallah, Hezbollah's Leader, has climbed to unprecedented stature in the mind of the Arab/Muslim world, and the Israeli government's actions were seen as terribly unfair to Lebanon and the Lebanese people, even after initial support. Israel's regional neighbors, in a mix of action ranging from actual governmental aide, both official and unofficial, to non-governmental, grassroots spontaneity, supported Hezbollah eagerly and enthusiastically. This may have happened anyway, but the scale and enthusiasm were surely increased by the disproportionate response. Like Israel(and America in Iraq), Rome, too, could be oblivious to how its actions would make the situation worse, and what could start as a minor war could end up draining the Imperial Treasury and costing many Roman lives, though, as mentioned before, the barbarians would always suffer more, just as Lebanon(and Iraq)is now devastated. To Israel's credit, its response, while still an overreaction, was much less destabilizing and short-term than the invasion and occupation of 1982, but such an operation would only have made the situation that much worse.

Conversely, just as barbarian warlords tried to provoke Rome into helping them destabilize rival barbarian leaders and to rally support around themselves, Hezbollah has humiliated Israel and increased its own stature at the expense of secular Lebanese democrats. In a worst case scenario, Hezbollah might succeed as Hamas did when it

made Fatah's people look weak enough that it was able to wrest control of the government from them. Thankfully, the Lebanese democracy is deeper and far better organized than Fatah and the PA ever were, and is thus far more popular. Still, the extent of Hezbollah's gain and the Lebanese government's loss remains to be seen.

What can give us hope is that, until the late, late Empire, these groups, after destabilizing and bringing war and usually defeat to their people, if these leaders were still alive, almost always succeeded in renegotiating a new treaty and relationship with Rome, to be followed by a long period of peace and stability. Romans soldiers, just like American soldiers, wanted to be at home with their families and on their farms more than anything else, and once a level of violence was achieved that could enable both sides to achieve their goals (the new chieftain being empowered, Rome reestablishing trade and peace), *everyone* just wanted to go home. If Hamas can do this—and I believe there is a good chance, because unlike Fatah, the Palestinian people's interests are actually somewhat at the heart of what Hamas is doing, especially compared to the self-serving, grotesquely corrupt Fatah—peace could ensue. But Hamas must abolish its extremist actions, positions and rhetoric, and the burden of governance might help it to understand even more than it has already begun to in the past year the value of practicality. The Germanic groups, with Rome, were able to abandon their war rhetoric in favor of peace, so hopefully Hamas can too.

Another dilemma Romans faced was how powerful to make their clients: if they were too weak, like today's Palestinian Authority, the government of Lebanon or, in their case, many German chieftains, peace, security, and stability could hardly be expected to be enforced by the weak ruler; yet if they were too strong, they could pose a threat (Pakistan in the future, the Germanic confederacies in the late Empire) to Rome/America itself. Another dimension of this problem involves allies. Israel, traditionally one of America's strongest allies, has in recent years shown itself to be fully capable of disregarding its American patron's concerns or advice regarding its actions, sometimes flouting them entirely. A sign of Rome's waning power was when its allies started listening less and less to its counsel, and America needs to be careful that it does not lose too much power and influence with its allies, or it risks finding it far, far more difficult to achieve its international aspirations and policies. The UN and Europe with America are other obvious current examples.

Yet even with strong and loyal allies, it was usually only Rome's, or Rome's allies, mistreatment of its clients that led to major problems in their relations. What we must be worried about is America and Israel being true to their commitments. As Chuck Hagel said on the Senate floor this July:

The United States will remain committed to defending Israel. Our relationship with Israel is a special and historic one. But, it need not and cannot be at the expense of our Arab and Muslim relationships. That is an irresponsible and dangerous false choice. Achieving a lasting resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict is as much in Israel's interest as any other country in the world.

Especially with Mahmoud Abbas, but even before with Ahmed Qurei and Arafat, Sharon's government did little to indicate it was going to follow through with its commitments: right up until the Gaza disengagement plan, settlement activity was still expanding. When Roman rulers flouted previous agreements and neglected its patron role

in its client-patron relationship, disaster ensued. Ironically, it was such despotic leadership from a local Roman governor which encouraged the first Jewish rebellion against Rome in 66 A.D. In the cases of the barbarians, when a group had a legitimate gripe, it might unite with other similarly slighted groups. Such instances were rare (Vercingetorix in Gaul, the Marcomanni, the Alammanic confederation), but they were disastrous for Rome (today, we are facing a unifying of Islamic extremists that could be a disaster for us, but like Rome, this is symptomatic of a long term policy problem, in this case, supporting despots). Towards the end of the Empire, it was such neglect and abuse from Roman rulers towards barbarians and Rome's own civil wars that brought about its downfall. Rather than civil war, we are threatened by a bi-polar internal political struggle that makes our dependability in the view of our allies weak. What the Democrats may support in one agreement (Kyoto, for example) may be flouted by a new administration under a new party, in this case, the Republicans. Much like Rome looked at the barbarians as unreliable but in reality, its fickle emperor-system made *the Romans themselves* the more unreliable partner later in its history, America thinks its allies are unreliable, but the dictatorships and parliamentary democracies have often proved more stable in terms of consistency of policy than our fickle presidential political system. When America or Rome became unreliable in the eyes of their allies, disaster and war followed. Yet just like the barbarians rarely gave up hope in Rome, our allies today will not totally quit on us even as our actions worry them. The Visigoths that sacked Rome in 410 A.D. only did so after years of seeking peaceful settlement in Rome's empire and when instead they were forced into concentration camps, being denied food and sustenance; food was in short supply because of Roman civil wars. It was not the Barbarians who brought Rome down, but Rome's own deceitful and barbarous conduct towards its clients.

When Rome failed as patron, the clients eventually rose up, but for the centuries that Rome honored its clients and did not fight too much amongst itself, peace and prosperity were the norm. We have much to learn from this. So do groups like Hamas. Our double standard of freedom and democracy for whites and Europeans and oftentimes despotic enslavement for Arabs and Africans have empowered the Islamic fundamentalists more than any other factor, and this goes far back into the history of colonialism; before Western intervention, religious extremists were on the fringe of Muslim society, but when their criticisms of their governments for allowing Western intervention rang true, their followings grew by leaps and bound. What started in Islam as Wahhabism in colonial times is now seeing its most extreme manifestation in al-Qaeda. I want to remind everyone that when Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points were translated into Arabic, Palestinians and other Arabs in the Ottoman and European colonial worlds were dancing in the streets, feeling America would make good on its promises of freedom, democracy, and self-determination. What they got was colonial enslavement at hands of the West; our neglect of them in our client-patron relationships since colonial times has brought about our current problems in dealing with these people.

In the late Empire, when people in the frontier provinces felt that the Roman client-patron relationship no longer provided them security and peace, they looked to their own defense. The difference for us today is that Osama bin Laden, in this age of mass media, has emerged as the new patron. The Romans, even though they had mass publications, had a state monopoly on such publications; there was no barbarian press.

Yet modern technology has empowered people like bin Laden in a way the Romans would not recognize. While parts of the imperial system broke down all over the Empire and in Rome's international dealings, starting a domino effect of lawlessness, disorder, and civil war for Rome to deal with, each movement that threatened Roman control and order was its own, a product of its own conditions; there were no mass movements even though Rome, ironically, tried to portray all barbarians as part of one large movement in official Imperial propaganda. So while America and Rome are seeing the same breakdown in their system, the response of the people being abandoned today is more unified, under al-Qaeda and other groups, than could ever have been in Roman times. Thus we see al-Qaeda spreading very quickly into Africa along with radical Islam. But even going back to 19th century colonialism, the Arabs and Muslims have always used mass media as a way to coalesce around particular movements. And while both Rome and America effectively used/use media to oversimplify their enemies, with the unintended consequence that few Romans or Americans understood/understand much at all about the people with whom they dealt/deal, the media/unity factor on the barbarians' end versus those terrorists fighting America today is the largest difference between what we are facing and what Rome was facing; and yet, if the barbarian peoples had access to mass media, it is not inconceivable that they, too, could have had a bin Laden and a mass movement in their day. This would have been like many of the extremists in much Muslim/Arab world today with America: different and disparate barbarian peoples had many similar and shared grievances with Rome and could realistically have united against Rome with such technology. Despite this major difference, there are, as stated, still many valuable lessons to be gleaned from Rome for us.

Going back to Hamas: al-Qaeda exists to bring about this type of conflict, Hamas sees conflict as a means to an end for its people (in a very basic sense the same way we see conflict), and Fatah could care less what was happening as long as it got its money and power. Hamas, Israel, and America must reject their extreme tendencies in favor of practicality, something all three are capable of doing. Israel has abandoned (hopefully) its settler, *Eretz-Yisrael* policy, Hamas has, for the time being, moved away from terrorism and violence, and America is actually trying to redress its past failings as a patron by trying to promote democracy in the Middle-East, even though Bush's miserable execution has actually made matters worse, at least for the time being.

Yet if Hamas resorts to terrorism again, and if Israel abandons its plan to withdraw from the West Bank, reoccupies Gaza, or empowers Netanyahu; if Hezbollah comes to power in Lebanon; if America abandons the Palestinians, or the Iraqis by withdrawing prematurely, we all stand to suffer greatly. Rome valued peace, prosperity, and honor above all else: when it lost sight of these, it lost its dignity and lost its City and Empire. We must hope to not do the same. Do we, like the late emperors and late Romans, become so detached that we no longer understand the repercussions of our actions? We are definitely in danger of doing so. While today we can look back and say that the Roman Empire fell in such-and-such a year, those living at the time had no concept of the "end" of their system. Well after we would say the Roman Empire ceased to exist, for decades if not centuries after, those people considered themselves Roman and drew their legitimacy from Rome and her traditions. Yet being Roman no longer meant what it once did. We need to ask what it means to be an American, and maintain our

greatness or go the way of the Romans: existing as great in our minds only because of our failings to our networks of families at home and nations and peoples abroad

So while Bush may have the rhetoric of greatness down, he may be presiding over such a period of domestic and political decline that it may cease to matter what he or any politician says. Rome came back from several great periods of decline before eventually withering away, but it was not pretty: can we admit and confront the fact that we are in decline and do the same? Only time, and our own efforts, will tell.