

The Fall of Rome

Document 1: Evidence of decay in the Roman Empire

“Hatred and envy reigned everywhere: the peasants hated the landowners and the officials, the city proletariat hated the city bourgeoisie, and the army was hated by everybody, even by the peasants. The Christians were abhorred and persecuted by the heathens, who regarded them as a gang of criminals bent on undermining the state. Work was disorganized and productivity was declining; commerce was ruined by the insecurity of the sea and the roads; industry could not prosper, since the market for industrial products was steadily contracting and the purchasing power of the population diminishing; agriculture passed through a terrible crisis, for the decay of commerce and industry deprived it of the capital which it needed, and the heavy demands of the state robbed it of labor and of the largest part of its products. Prices constantly rose, and the value of the currency depreciated at an unprecedented rate. The ancient system of taxation had been shattered and no new system was devised. The relations between the state and the taxpayer were based on more or less organized robbery: forced work, forced deliveries, forced loans or gifts were the order of the day. The administration was corrupt and demoralized. A chaotic mass of new government officials was growing up.”

From M. Rostovtzeff, “the Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire” in Jonathan F. Scott et.al; Readings in Medieval History, Appleton, Century, Crofts, 1933.

1. What were some of the signs indicating the fall of the Roman Empire?

Document 2: The Failing Roman Economy

Historians have suggested that civilizations live, mature, decline, and die just as humans do. They have studied the rise and fall of civilizations in hopes of avoiding past mistakes. The Roman Empire has been analyzed frequently, especially for the causes of its decline. These historians agree that a major factor that led to the decline of the Roman Empire was the poor health of the Roman economy.

The following passage was written by A.E. Boak, it takes a closer look at the Roman economy in its final years. “A state of chronic bankruptcy prevailed in many of the [Roman communities]. In certain areas, agricultural production had fallen off and the government was forced to take measures to keep abandoned lands under cultivation. A plague spread by soldiers returning in A.D 166 ravaged...the whole empire for many years. The resultant decline in population affected industry as well agriculture.

The chief cause of the economic troubles, however, lay in the great increase in the cost of government. This was due to the expansion of the army, the growth of the imperial government service, the erection of great public works, and the royal mail system...Any serious war or extravagance on the part of the emperor brought the state into bankruptcy...Clearest proof of the desperate state of imperial affairs comes in the deliberate devaluation of the currency. By the opening of the third century, the standard silver coin had been reduced to one-tenth its original worth. Soon after, it was issued as a copper coin with a thin wash of silver.

Unable to meet its expenditures, the government was forced to resort to demands of grain, cattle, draft animals and labor, which often proved ruinous to the agricultural population...Since the government had forced the well-to-do townsmen to be responsible for collecting municipal taxes, these had to make up from their private resources what they could no longer collect from their neighbors.”

1. What does the author say was the chief cause of the economic troubles?
2. What were some factors that contributed to the drains on the Roman budget?

Document 3: The Fall of Rome

Many aspects of Roman life were affected by the political disorder. Travel became unsafe, and merchants hesitated to send goods by land or sea. The rural population grew even poorer than before. Since farmers had no money to buy goods, city industries suffered and unemployment increased. Population decreased throughout the empire, partly because of a great plague that spread through the provinces and caused several million deaths.

The great Roman emperors Diocletian and Constantine restored the empire by creating a new governmental structure, a rigid economic system, and a new state religion, Christianity. Diocletian believed the empire was too large for one ruler so he divided it into four parts, each with its own ruler. Diocletian kept ultimate authority over all areas. After his death Constantine ruled and continued Diocletian's policies. He also expanded the army to more than five-hundred thousand men and he also was responsible for the building of the city of Constantinople in the east. The rule of both Diocletian and Constantine kept the Roman Empire stable and it survived for more than a century.

After Constantine, the empire was divided into eastern and western parts. The capital in the West was Rome and in the East was Constantinople. That, however, was only one problem. The Germanic tribes to the north were a huge threat to the Western Roman Empire. The empire along the Rhine and Danube Rivers was strong fortified against the Germans. As early as the reign of Augustus, however, many Germans began crossing the frontier peacefully. Some Germans enlisted the Roman army, and many Roman soldiers married German women. This began to weaken the Roman boundaries.

The Western empire had a problem with invaders. The Visigoths, a Germanic people, crossed the Danube and settled in Roman territory. In 410, they sacked Rome taking three days to plunder the city. They then moved further south toward Sicily. Another group, the Vandals, crossed into Italy from Northern Africa. In 455, they too sacked Rome.

In the mid-400's, a strong leader of the Huns named Attila came to power. He was so ferocious that he was known as the "Scourge of God." Attila led his Huns in an attack on Gaul. The western emperor was powerless but eventually an army was raised to stop the Huns. In 451, the Huns were defeated by the Roman army and they were no longer a threat to Rome. But it was too late for the Western Roman Empire. It had been weakened beyond repair.

In 476, the Germanic head of the army overthrew the western emperor, Romulus Augustulus. This is considered the end of the Western Roman Empire. A series of Germanic kingdoms replaced the Western Roman Empire. The Eastern Roman Empire continued to thrive, it became known as the Byzantine Empire.

1. What were some of the changes made by Diocletian and Constantine?
2. Describe some of the events of the 400's.
3. What is considered the end of the Western Roman Empire?

## ROME, AD ..... ROME, DC?

They came, they saw, they conquered, and now the Americans dominate the world like no nation before. But is the US really the Roman Empire of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? And if so, is it on the rise or is it heading for a fall?

Historians are saying that The United States is the 21<sup>st</sup> century Rome. The New York Review of Books illustrated a drawing of George Bush togged up as a Roman soldier with a shield and spears. A Boston Radio station described the US as going through “Pax Americana.” Tom Wolfe has written that America today is “the mightiest power on earth, as powerful as Rome under Julius Caesar”. The question still remains: Are the Americans the new Romans?

Let’s examine the similarities. The most obvious is the military strength. Rome was the superpower of its day, boasting an army with the best training, biggest budgets and finest equipment the world had ever seen. No one else came close. The United States is just as dominant. Its defense budget will soon be the biggest in the world. They have a technological lead that will destroy its rivals. Although they do not have colonies, like Rome, some say that the US has done its share of colonizing. It is just that many Americans do not see it that way. For example, during the founding of the US, the country pushed to keep moving westward and adding territories. Julius Caesar bragged that he conquered Gaul and slaughtered a million people. The American pioneers battled the Cherokee and Iroquois Indians. “From the time the first settlers arrived in Virginia, and started moving westward, this was a conquering nation” according to Paul Kennedy, author of *The Rise and Fall of Great Empires*.

The US has military bases in some 40 countries across the world. This gives it the same global muscle as if it ruled these countries direct. There is a military presence in 132 of the 190 members of the United Nations. So America may be more Roman than we realize with garrisons in every corner of the world.

The similarities do not stop there. The US has learned the importance of technology. The Romans were famous for their straight roads that allowed the army to move at rapid speeds. These roads also helped increase trade and boosted Rome economically. The US has invented our superhighway: the internet. It began as a military tool created by the defense department and now stands as the heart of American commerce. In the process, it is making English the Latin of its day, a language spoken across the globe. The US is proving what the Romans already knew, once an empire is a world leader in one sphere, it soon dominates in every other.

Rebellions occurred in the Roman Empire because they allowed barbarians in through their borders. Some were actually trained by the Romans to be spies. Need no one mention former US protégé Saddam Hussein or one-time CIA trainee Osama bin Laden?

America shares Rome’s conviction that they are on a mission sanctioned from up high. Augustus declared himself son of a god and would raise statues of himself along Mars and Venus while on a podium. The US dollar bill bears the words “In God We Trust” and politicians always end their speeches with “God Bless America”.

The Romans would feel comfortable around the ethnic diversity of the US. After all Rome was filled with diverse groups from along the world. The Romans were entertained by violence. The gladiator games made Romans blood thirsty. What type of violence-based leisure activities do Americans participate in and or support?

There are some major differences between the US and Rome. Romans bragged about being masters of the world, but few Americans would be so quick to say that, in fact they deny it. One last factor scares Americans from making a parallel to Rome. The Roman Empire declined and fell. The historians say that this happens to all empires. This is making historians ask questions like... Is the US on the verge of decline? Is the Invasion of Iraq proof that the US is succumbing to the temptation that ate away at Rome? Will this cause the US to overstretch and decline? Are we on the brink of collapse? Only the historians of the future can tell us that.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

After Reading the article, fill in the chart with similarities based on the article.

US	ROME
Military:	
Expansion:	
Technology:	
Population:	
Values of Society:	

After completing the chart: Answer the following:

1. How are we different than the Romans?
2. Are we on the verge of collapse? Why or Why not? Give specific reasons.....