

How Empires Die

By Alan Caruba

I recently read an interesting book by Christopher Kelly, "The End of Empire: Attila the Hun and The Fall of Rome." Our popular image of Attila is that of a barbaric pagan, but Priscus of Panium set off to meet Attila in 449 AD and, as Kelly relates, "Attila turned out to be surprisingly civilized and a dangerously shrewd player of international politics."

It's always a good idea to review one's assumptions about the world in which one lives, such as the current politically correct view that Islam is "a religion of peace" and that the barbarity of Al Qaeda, the Taliban and other Arab groups is an anomaly, the result of their incorrect interpretation of the Koran. Their interpretation, however, is quite accurate and the Koran is a call to arms and battle plan for the conquest of the world.

From America's earliest years, it has had to deal with marauding Arabs and in modern times we have put our troops in harm's way in the Middle East in Beirut in the 1980s and to drive Iraq out of Kuwait in August 1990.

Following 9/11 we returned in 2001 to drive Al Qaeda and the Taliban out of Afghanistan. They took refuge in the frontier provinces of Pakistan and have since returned to the killing fields of our choosing...if killing one's sworn enemies can be called a choice.

On March 20, 2003, the Second Gulf War was launched against Iraq and we are now beginning to withdraw troops from Iraq's cities. A large contingent of U.S. military will remain in Iraq. At the same time, there has been a buildup of troops in Afghanistan. Historically, no empire has ever successfully conquered or subdued the Afghani tribes and, in modern times, the most recent effort brought about the collapse of the Soviet Union.

It is generally agreed that the real threat to Mideast stability is Iran and that the shakiest nation in the region is Pakistan.

History teaches us that the emperors of the Roman Empire had to make choices about where they too would place their troops throughout the vast expanse under their control; it surrounded the Mediterranean which they called Mare Nostrum, our sea.

At the end of his book, Kelly asks "What makes great empires endure or collapse? How do governments defend their actions? What causes the breakup of a leviathan superstate? When is it right to go to war, or purchase peace, or pay off an enemy? These are issues of enduring importance."

When an empire gets too large for its military and financially resources to maintain, it becomes highly vulnerable. An empire, too, depends on its alliances. When they go bad, the empire—any empire—is in trouble.

The Roman Empire fell for many reasons, but chief among them was the relentless arithmetic of demography, the movement of populations of people.

The Romans regarded the Goths and Vandals as "barbarians", but the Goth tribes were people who were just as challenged by the Huns as the Romans and they were on the

move to find more land for their growing population. In doing so, they crossed the Danube to trespass on Roman lands in France, in Spain, and down into Northern Africa.

By contrast, “the Huns seemingly offered no moral or religious justification, however thin or unconvincing. They sought neither to find a new homeland on Roman territory nor to glorify themselves as heroic freedom fighters warring down a harsh imperial regime.”

“The Huns appear more brutal precisely because they had no known motive for their raids beyond the acquisition of booty and captives.” This last observation is particularly important because the rise of Islam can be traced directly to the same purpose. It was, however, masked by Mohammed’s promise of paradise for anyone who fell in battle and servitude for those conquered.

Here’s where the similarities between America and the ancient Romans get really interesting. At the same time the nation engages Islamic terrorism, our national sovereignty—the integrity of our borders—is being challenged as not just thousands, but millions have invaded to take up residence among us. This repeats the pattern that brought down the Roman Empire.

Having forsaken universal conscription, the U.S. depends on an all-voluntary military to project our power. The Romans, toward the end, often allied with the Goths to fight the Huns and, on occasion, allied with the Huns as well. With the exception of the British, Canadians and Australians, our military allies are mostly for show.

Not only is our financial stability at risk, but since the 1960s, the level of decadence in our society has risen, reflected in popular culture and media. Our primary and secondary educational system has become an abject failure.

Recently, while in Russia, President Obama said, “The future does not belong to those who gather armies on a field of battle or bury missiles in the ground.”

This ignores the entire history of civilization. It is criminally naïve. The future, just as in the past, will belong to whoever has the greatest military with the financial power and the willingness to use it.

Ronald Reagan said, “Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn’t pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same, or one day we will spend our sunset years telling our children and our children’s children what it was once like in the United States where men were free.”

And as John Adams warned, “Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts and murders itself. There was never a democracy that did not commit suicide.”

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