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Fact and Comment

"With all thy getting get understanding."



Book Review

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When things go badly in the U.S. commentators can't resist asking if we're going the way of the Roman Empire. When Washington is assertive in its foreign policy, critics--especially in Europe--accuse us of Roman Empire-like arrogance and overreach. In this well-written book author Smil robustly attacks the whole concept of such comparisons.

To begin with the U.S. is still something of a young pup on the world scene. When the city of Rome and its western empire fell in the late 5th century, it had already existed for some 1,000 years. And the eastern portion of the empire, with its capital in Constantinople, went on for another 1,000 years.

Contrary to myth, Rome was hardly the biggest empire in history. The British Empire in its heyday, among others, was significantly larger. When Rome was waxing there were still other sizable contemporary empires, including China's Han dynasty, the Sasanid Empire and the Parthian Empire. Only between A.D. 220 and A.D. 370 was Rome the world's most extensive imperial entity.

Another fly in the U.S.-is-another-Rome ointment is the fact that the U.S. is not an empire. Only in the late 1890s, during the Spanish-American War, did we play the imperialist game, and that was very short-lived. "No permanent colonial regime followed the [Spanish-American War]; by 1902 the U.S. Supreme Court made the U.S. Constitution applicable to the [Philippines, which] became independent in July 1946."

Even at the height of its relative power following World War II, Smil notes, "the U.S. did not behave like an imperial power: It did not annex any foreign territories or impose any direct permanent military rule in the defeated countries."

And when it comes to imposing its will on others, the U.S. often looks like a wimp compared with Rome. "The U.S. does not rule and it does not command. It leads; it has allies, not subjects; and a leader, unlike an absolute sovereign, cannot demand submission." China, for instance, has no hesitation in thumbing its nose at the U.S. on the subject of revaluing its currency.

Empires such as Rome have their conquered territories pay for the empire's upkeep. In contrast, the U.S. ends up paying for the defense of such allied countries as Germany, France, Japan and South Korea. In that sense "the U.S. is the *exact opposite* of the Roman Empire."

When it comes to innovation, the U.S. is light-years ahead of Rome. "America's unrivaled position in today's global technoscientific universe had no analogue in Roman achievements. Despite its long duration and no shortage of acute minds, the Roman Empire had . . . a truly minimal record in advancing

scientific understanding, and its overall contributions to technical and engineering innovations were fairly limited." Even in comparison with contemporary states, "the Romans were neither impressive inventors nor the leading technical innovators of their time." Smil's book details how the Han dynasty, as well as the Greek culture that emanated from Alexandria, Egypt from about 330 B.C. to 200 B.C., far surpassed the achievements of Rome.

Looking at TV shows and Hollywood movies, one would conclude that Rome was a marbled, fairly clean place in which to live. Not true. "It was a squalid, fetid, unsanitary, noisy, and dangerous amalgam of people, animals, wastes, germs, diseases and suffering." Infant mortality was horrific, and life for most was short and brutal. Poverty was rampant. "Workers in late medieval London or Amsterdam were better off [than Roman laborers] by more than a factor of four."

We cannot begin to fathom how rich our everyday standard of living is in contrast with that of the Roman Empire. "An average American is now served by machines whose capacity is about 1 million times greater than that of inanimately energized machines serving an average Roman."

Finally, when it comes to global influence, compared with the U.S. Rome was in the Little League. Outside of Europe and the Mediterranean region the fall of Rome in A.D. 476 meant little or nothing to the rest of the world. A U.S. collapse, however, would have profound, tsunamilike repercussions everywhere.

Smil doesn't say there's nothing to be learned from looking at Rome, but the lessons of corruption, hubris, misjudgments and decay are universal. Human nature has not changed. The bottom line is that, when it comes to individual liberty and opportunity, wealth creation, scientific breakthroughs and global influence, the two entities are vastly different.

One fundamental facet of the U.S. not examined in this book is the unique sense of individualism Americans have. They would never tolerate the centralized power of a Roman emperor or the ever more severe restrictions on individual freedoms that would be imposed. Look at the profound political reaction to the overreach of our current President, a reaction that many mark as the beginning of a historic shift from the growth of government that's been in play here since the New Deal.

Thankfully for civilization, the decline and fall of the U.S. is not yet at hand.

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