# America as a new Rome?

By Steven E. Levingston | April 15, 2010

It's an easy comparison – and one bandied about without much thought: the United States of today is a lot like the Roman Empire of antiquity. Only problem is, as **Vaclav Smil** shows in his new book, it's a misleading even irrelevant analogy. In "Why America Is Not a New Rome," Smil, a professor at the University of Manitoba, delves into the meaning of empire, the real extent of Roman and American power and a variety of other social, economic and political aspects. His conclusion: "Superficial (albeit often clever) comparisons may make for provocative remarks on talk shows and intriguing essays or interesting books, but a systematic deconstruction of these recently fashionable preoccupations shows them to be wide of the mark."

*By Vaclav Smil*

Comparisons of modern America and imperial Roman have been flippantly common during the past two decades, based overwhelmingly on selecting specific displays of universal human behavior and then parading Roman quotes and stories in contrast with relevant American situations.

But such an approach does not give us any special insights into Roman or American affairs. For a self-centered, secretive and dishonest behavior of capital elites we can look just as well at the Byzantine Empire or its Ottoman successors. Those endlessly highlighted similarities of the "imperial overstretch" tell us nothing specific either about the Roman or the American military power.

Individual armies and major powers projecting their might far beyond their borders found themselves overextended long before the Romans embarked on their conquests -– and ever since (think Mongols, Qing China, Napoleon, Hitler).

As far as corruption goes, we could draw very similar parallels with any number of modern or ancient states. Myopic views of the world were surely no Roman preserve and today they are not America's prerogative. An anti-imperial European Union has borders no less porous than the supposedly imperial America or those that the Romans tried to maintain along the Rhine and Danube. And the complexity argument –- making decisions that create, rather than solve, many problems –- is about as universal a phenomenon as one can imagine and it is also applicable to just about every large-scale business decision or to every fundamental technical choice.

That is why I decided to take a critical look at the Roman-U.S. comparisons, examining it as if words and realities mattered –- and had to conclude that the most notable commonality between ancient Rome and modern America is the vastly exaggerated perception of their respective powers. In all other aspects my inquiry found two fundamentally different worlds.

America has never been an empire, it has never pursued an overtly imperial policy, and even its global hegemony is of a very peculiar kind, much less effective and much more fragile than commonly thought.

In technical terms, the Romans were curiously incurious, particularly in contrast with the Hellenistic world and China's innovative Han dynasty –- while American inventiveness dominated the 20th century. Rome's energy use was no different from Parthia's, India's or China's -– while America consumes more than twice as much energy per capita as even Japan or the EU, and five times the global mean.

Could a Roman citizen conceive living in a society where every person is attended by an equivalent of 50 strong and continuously hard-working slaves? Could an average American imagine family life where average life expectancy would be only 20-25 years? Could a young American family contemplate with equanimity the prospect of life whose physical quality would be inferior to that in the most desperate countries of today's sub-Saharan Africa? Negative answers, in every case, are all too obvious.

The conclusion is clear: comparisons of imperial Rome and modern America uncover some fascinating parallels derived from shared imperatives of human behavior and from recurrent modes of social dynamics but, above all, they illuminate two incomparable worlds.

http://voices.washingtonpost.com/political-bookworm/2010/04/america_as_a_new_rome.html