

Edward Gibbon's
History of the Decline and Fall of the
Roman Empire*

The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. By Edward Gibbon. 3 vols. (New York: The Modern Library, n.d.). Page references in the text are to these volumes.

Published in several installments from 1776 to 1788, Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* ranks as a towering masterpiece of eighteenth-century literary beauty and historiography. Although two centuries after its publication contemporary historians can find numerous shortcomings in the work, Gibbon's achievement has hardly lost its significance. Among his historical insights, some have withstood the test of both time and modern scholarship.¹ Moreover, the *Decline and Fall*, though intended as a history of Rome's decay, also conveys a series of ideas about human nature and politics that illuminate our understanding of eighteenth-century political philosophy.

For modern Americans, it is a happy coincidence that the first volume of Gibbon's work appeared in 1776 and the final one in 1788, both years of pivotal importance in the founding of the American polity. There is rich symbolism in this coincidence. A skeptical observer of the American Revolution, Gibbon nevertheless agreed with America's Founding Fathers on the necessity for private virtue to uphold public virtue, and for both of these to support and guide the

¹The research and preparation of this essay were made possible by a generous F. Leroy Hill Fellowship from the Institute for Humane Studies.

1. Among the many valuable contemporary assessments of Gibbon's scholarship and of the broader problem of the decline and fall of Rome are *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, G.W. Bowersock, John Clive, and Stephen R. Graubard, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977); Bryce Lyon, *The Origins of the Middle Ages* (New York: Norton, 1972); *The Transformation of the Roman World*, Lynn White, Jr., ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966). For a well-rounded view of Gibbon's thinking and the ideas that shaped it, see *Gibbon's Autobiography*, M.M. Reese, ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971); *The English Essays of Edward Gibbon*, Patricia B. Craddock, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972); David P. Jordan, *Gibbon and his Roman Empire* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971); Lionel Gossman, *The Empire Unpossessed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

political life of society. As the bicentenary of the Constitution approaches, one may ponder whether such a fusion is still present in the American polity, and whether the processes of decline and fall described so perceptively by Gibbon are a remote possibility or a present danger for the United States.

Gibbon's scope was ambitious. The first three volumes, which Gibbon himself considered the most significant part of his work, record the history of the Roman Empire from the middle of the second century A.D. to the dissolution of the western empire late in the fifth century. The remaining three take the reader on a long journey through the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages in Western Europe, while tracing the history of the eastern empire and Byzantium for a thousand years to the fall of Constantinople in 1453. While the thematic richness is bewildering and there is no single, overpowering theme dominating the 2,800 pages of this work, it repeatedly poses, especially in the first three volumes, an all-important question: how did the greatest empire in the history of western civilization decline and collapse? In searching for an answer, Gibbon pointed to several causes, foremost among which was the loss of virtue and liberty.

Gibbon considered himself a philosopher-historian,¹ which meant two things. First, a philosopher-historian was capable of sifting "the critical facts" out of "the vast chaos of events and drawing them forth pure and unalloyed."³ He could perceive, in the vast panorama of war, politics, religion, and manners, the operation of these critical facts as they gradually, and most often imperceptibly, transformed society in the form of long-term trends and causes. Second, a philosopher-historian would attempt to draw some valid generalizations or conclusions about the nature of political life from the study of broad periods of history. When studied with meticulous attention to detail and careful weighing of the veracity of sources, history could be a valuable repository of lessons about politics—lessons that could transcend the particular time and setting from which they derived.

For his own philosophy of politics, Gibbon was deeply indebted to the tradition of civic humanism and republicanism of Machiavelli, Harrington, and Montesquieu.⁴ He prized liberty as one of the

2. Frank E. Manuel, "Edward Gibbon: Historien-Philosophe," *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 167-81.

3. *Ibid.*, 167, 169.

4. J.G.A. Pocock, "Between Machiavelli and Hume: Gibbon as Civic Humanist and Philosophical Historian," *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 103-19.

highest political values, and its preservation was for him integral to human happiness and the ultimate protection of civilization against internal despotism and decay. He saw in the decline and fall of the Roman Empire a series of timeless lessons about political liberty and the consequences of its loss.

Like the great Roman historian Tacitus, whose *Annals* served him as an indispensable guide in his own work, Gibbon believed that one of the "critical facts" in a society's life was the relationship of personal to public virtue and the effect which these two kinds of virtue had on that society's political climate. He believed that without ample reserves of private and public virtue to sustain such a relationship, liberty could not exist indefinitely. A free society required a great deal of private virtue and a creative union of private with public virtue in the service of the ideals and institutions of liberty.

Gibbon has been accused of defining private virtue according to the supposedly narrow standards of an eighteenth-century British gentleman-scholar, but such criticism *is* not very illuminating. His definition of private virtue was not dissimilar, for example, from that of such contemporaries as John Adams, George Washington, and his friends Adam Smith and David Hume. For *him*, one of the key elements of private virtue was a proper balance among the different virtues of character. Whenever one of these became excessive or prevailed unduly over the others, it became a vice. Thus, writing of Constantine, Gibbon remarked that his virtues also explain his defects, a theme that Gibbon pursued more closely in the life of that noble and most famous of emperors, the philosopher Marcus Aurelius. Unlike his predecessor and adopted father, Antoninus *Pius*, "the virtue of Marcus Aurelius was of a severer and more laborious kind. . . . He was severe to himself, indulgent to the imperfections of others." (Ch. 3: 69) Such indulgence, while praiseworthy *as* a form of humility, turned out to have fatal consequences for the Roman Empire when Marcus extended it to his morally weak son, Commodus, whom he named his successor. A virtue unrestrained or not balanced by other virtues became a defect, and Marcus "sacrificed the happiness of millions to a fond partiality for a worthless boy." The accession of Commodus to the throne in 180 A.D., it must be remembered, brought to an end that era of imperial greatness known as the Antonine age and ushered in a series of domestic and foreign calamities that contributed heavily to Rome's decline.

As for those traits of character which, when rightly balanced constituted virtue, Gibbon's long list throughout the *Decline and Fall* echoes that of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Some of the most

outstanding were courage, temperance, industriousness, justice and equity, good sense, generosity, a measured capacity to forgive, friendship, love of intellectual wisdom, and prudence or practical wisdom. Such virtues were essential in the leaders and governing elites of a free society.

Gibbon recognized the complexities of the relationship between private and public virtue. Generally, wise government required that individual character be shaped by the different virtues in balance with one another. While even a bad man like Constantine was capable of politically sound actions, he was incapable of good government in a consistent, comprehensive way because his character flaws inevitably translated themselves into public vices. Yet, the achievement of public virtue required more than private virtue; being a good man was not enough to be a good ruler, as the tragic fate of various emperors demonstrated. To achieve public virtue, a good man had to put his private virtues to the service of the state and society, sometimes even subordinating them to the latter. If paternal kindness came into conflict with the public good, the former had to give way. Moreover, the good man had to supplement his virtues of character with certain abilities indispensable in political life if he hoped to translate his private virtue into public virtue. He could not be too trusting of others; he had to be aware of the perpetual struggle for power; and as a leader he had to appeal not only to the virtue of others but, more important, to their pride, their sense of honor, and their interests.

If the private virtue of the elites was important, so was that of the common man. While the common man's life afforded him a narrower scope for moral excellence—especially with regard to the love of intellectual wisdom, which required leisure, and prudence, which required the responsibilities of power—there was nevertheless ample room. Like Tacitus, Gibbon commented on the plebeians of the early Roman republic who, in the midst of what he called their "honourable poverty," demonstrated courage against the republic's foreign enemies, industriousness in their small farms and businesses, and a fierce independence of mind and spirit toward the aristocracy. Sexual restraint, marital fidelity, and the nurture of children were also politically significant private virtues of the common man, and Gibbon wrote approvingly of the efforts, ultimately futile, of the Emperor Marjorian in the closing days of the Empire to strengthen the institutions of marriage and the family. (Ch. 36; 315)

Historians began debating the causes for the decline and fall of the Roman Empire even before it actually fell, and they have continued

to do so to this day. What makes Gibbon's work so outstanding is his literary eloquence and his prodigious erudition. The question of what causes a state or civilization to decline is highly problematical. Since all human institutions are vulnerable to decay and disintegration over the long term, it is always possible for a historian with the benefit of hindsight to point to a particular event or trend as a cause of decline. Perhaps for this reason, modern political science, with its penchant for accurate scientific explanations, has generally avoided the subject. Yet, unwieldiness does not make a topic, especially this one, less important or relevant. Every thinking person must consider whether the state and civilization to which he belongs is growing stronger or weaker with the passage of time, and, if signs of decline appear, whether steps can be taken to reverse the decline. Although specific causes of general decline may be open to debate, such debate is essential to creating the consensus necessary to undertake regenerative action. Similarly, although historians may disagree among themselves, their probing can help their readers decide which of the causes suggested for Rome's decline and fall contributed most to it. Thus, Gibbon's work serves three purposes. First, it is an indispensable voice in the historical debate on the forces behind Rome's collapse. Second, it is a major contribution to the literature on decline of which contemporary political theory and political science in general should take note. Third, it poses the provocative question of whether there may be parallels between the decay of Roman civilization and some of the prevailing trends in contemporary American and Western society.

II

When, and how, did Rome's decline begin? Gibbon's thesis is that it occurred in several stages. The seeds were planted in the last century and a half of the republic and were a combination of foreign conquests, the prevalence of slavery as an economic institution, and civil wars. Rome's imperial expansion increased the size of the armies and the power of military commanders, giving them opportunities to seize political power from the civil authorities. The enormous wealth brought in from foreign wars helped to corrupt the aristocracy by diverting it from its civic duties and social responsibilities toward the pursuit of wealth and sensual gratification. Meanwhile, the growth of slavery, propelled by the large number of war captives, served to enlarge the size and number of landed estates, to the ruin of small landholders. The latter were forced to join the legions as mercenaries or to move to the cities where, bereft of their roots and their

dignity, they became part of the indigent, dependent masses. The large gap between the very rich and the poor, coupled with the aristocracy's neglect of its military and civic duties, provided opportunities for ambitious generals willing to enlist the support of the armies and the discontented urban masses to gain power. The republic's last century was convulsed by a cycle of factionalism and civil strife intermittently punctuated by military dictatorships. In 27 B.C., at the end of yet another civil war, Julius Caesar's nephew Octavianus (later honored by the Senate with the name of Augustus) gained control of the state. Although he artfully respected the forms of the ancient republic, his long rule is generally recognized as marking the end of the republic and the beginning of the imperial era. He is also significant because of his decision not to expand the empire's boundaries further, a policy generally followed by his successors.

The two centuries from Augustus's accession to the death of Marcus Aurelius constituted, from Gibbon's perspective, the second stage of Rome's decline. Although marked by economic prosperity and relative domestic tranquility, these years were the prelude to inevitable decline because of the extinction of political liberty and the gradual enervation of individual initiative that characterized them. Outwardly the Empire was an imposing edifice, but inwardly its lack of political liberty was corroding the public and private virtue of its leaders and citizens. The enlightened despotism of the great emperors of the second century A.D. gave way to the growing political arbitrariness and centralization of the third century, which began in earnest under the rule of Septimius Severus (d. 211 A.D.). Surveying Rome's history from the vantage point of the year 248 A.D., Gibbon wrote:

Since Romulus, with a small band of shepherds and outlaws, fortified himself on the hills near the Tiber, ten centuries had already elapsed. During the first four ages, the Romans, in the laborious school of poverty, had acquired the virtues of war and government; by the vigorous exertion of those virtues, and by the assistance of fortune, they had obtained, in the course of the three succeeding centuries, an absolute empire over many countries of Europe, Asia, and Africa. The last three hundred years had been consumed *in apparent prosperity and internal decline*. [emphasis mine] The nation of soldiers, magistrates, and legislators, who composed the thirty-five tribes of the Roman people, was dissolved into the common mass of mankind and confounded with the millions of servile provincials, who had received the name without adopting the spirit of

the Romans. A mercenary army, levied among the subjects and barbarians of the frontier, was the only order of men who preserved and abused their independence. By their tumultuary election, a Syrian, a Goth, or an Arab, was exalted to the throne of Rome, and invested with despotic power over the conquests and over the country of the Scipios.

The limits of the Roman empire still extended from the Western Ocean to the Tigris, and from Mount Atlas to the Rhine and the Danube. To the undiscerning eye of the vulgar, Philip appeared a monarch no less powerful than Hadrian or Augustus had formerly been. The form was still the same, but the animating health and vigor were fled. The industry of the people was discouraged and exhausted by a long series of oppression. The discipline of the legions, which alone, after the extinction of every other virtue, had propped the greatness of the state, was corrupted by the ambition, or relaxed by the weakness, of the emperors. The strength of the frontiers, which had always consisted in arms rather than in fortifications, was insensibly undermined; and the fairest provinces were left exposed to the rapaciousness or ambition of the barbarians, who soon discovered the decline of the Roman empire. (Ch. 7; 168)

The second half of the third century was marked by civil strife, famine, and the beginning of the barbarian invasions. The Empire rallied temporarily during the fourth century under the leadership of the great Illyrian soldier-emperors, the most notable of which were Diocletian and Constantine. They averted total collapse at the high price of further centralization, greater bureaucratic control over all aspects of life, and higher taxes-remedies which, whatever their temporary effectiveness, weakened the Empire over the long-run and deprived it of any possibilities--of-future-economic-or-political regeneration. At the last stage of its decline, the western empire found itself gradually impoverished, depopulated, and stripped of its territories by the encompassing barbarians whose military skills and dynamism were now superior to the Romans'. After being sacked several times by different barbarian tribes, Rome itself came under the rule of the barbarian King Odoacer in approximately 479 A.D., a date generally recognized as the symbolic "fall" of Rome. The eastern part of the empire survived for another thousand years as the Byzantine Empire.

Rome's decline and fall occurred over the course of centuries, and Gibbon liked to point out to his readers those quiet, long-term trends, imperceptible to most observers, which gradually weakened the Em-

pire and caused its dissolution. The most important of these was the disappearance of liberty and the decline of private and public virtue that accompanied it. The loss of political liberty in the early imperial era was followed by the progressive contraction of personal freedoms and the imposition of feudalism in the last stages of imperial decline. The loss of virtue in some ways preceded the disappearance of liberty. The civil wars that brought the republic to an end were partly the result of the deterioration of the private and public virtue of the nobility. Their greed, factionalism, and lack of magnanimity had made the Romans of the late republic, in Gibbon's words, "incapable of a rational freedom." At the same time, the disappearance of liberty further accelerated the decline of virtue itself. Without the risks, responsibilities, and challenges of freedom, public and private virtue gradually withered, facilitating the Empire's general decline.

For Gibbon, the best soil for freedom was a society in which the power of the prince was checked by that of an aristocracy, and both of them by a class of vigorous, free commoners who, as farmers, artisans, or small traders, were economically independent even if relatively poor. In a passage reminiscent of Machiavelli's *Discourses*, he explained:

[U]nless public liberty is protected by intrepid and vigilant guardians, the authority of [the prince] will soon degenerate into despotism. The influence of the clergy, in an age of superstition, might be usefully employed to assert the rights of mankind; but so intimate is the connection between the throne and the altar, that the banner of the church has very seldom been seen on the side of the people. A martial nobility and stubborn commons, possessed of arms, tenacious of property, and collected into constitutional assemblies, form the only balance capable of preserving a free constitution. (Ch. 3; 52-53)

While liberty could co-exist with a wealthy aristocracy, it suffered if the concentration of wealth was such that the rest of society was composed of dependents. The important issue was not whether the majority of the people were poor, but whether they had to rely for their survival on the largesse of a despot or the rich, a largesse which had as its price the surrender of all dignity and freedom. Indeed, like Machiavelli, Gibbon believed that poverty, by which he meant a high degree of material simplicity, was conducive to virtue so long as the poor man was independent in the sense of owning some property or at least relying on his own skills and ingenuity to support himself economically.

Following Montesquieu's lead, Gibbon drew a connection between Rome's imperial expansion and its loss of liberty and virtue.⁵ The early republic had defended itself against its foreign enemies with citizen armies recruited among free farmers and artisans and led by aristocratic officers. Gradually, the success of these defensive efforts and the growth of Roman commerce throughout the Mediterranean drew Rome into an active diplomacy of alliances and a vigorous policy of imperialism. In a process memorably recounted by the ancient Greek historian Polybius, as trade and the number and scope of alliances broadened, so did Rome's definition of its vital interests.

Imperial expansion weakened liberty in several respects. The large imports of slaves that accompanied the numerous conquests had the deleterious economic and social consequences already described. With the growth of the Empire came also much wealth, which often had a morally debilitating effect on its recipients, and which conferred on a relatively small number of people an unprecedented amount of economic and political power. Worse yet, the incessant wars required ever-larger armies. Insofar as the wars became more distant geographically and less connected with the republic's genuine defensive needs, it became increasingly difficult to raise armies by the appeal to patriotism, and the citizen armies were replaced by highly trained forces of paid military professionals:

In the purer ages of the commonwealth, the use of arms was reserved for those ranks of citizens who had a country to love, a property to defend, and some share in enacting those laws, which it was their interest, as well as duty, to maintain. But in proportion as the public freedom was lost in extent of conquest, war was gradually improved into an art, and degraded into a trade. (Ch. 1; 9)

As civic virtue was separated from military virtue, both were corrupted.⁶ The former, languishing in inactivity and the absence of military or political responsibilities, withered, while the latter grew so powerful and commanding that it became devoted to limitless ambition and weakened the state from within. The professional soldiers lacked the organic social roots and restraints of their predecessors. Their full-time martial vocation meant that they were always on the move, and they fixed all their hopes for personal success and

5. Montesquieu, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline* (1743).

6. Pocock, *op. cit.*, 109.

advancement on their military commander, whom they revered as the center of their lives. Successful generals such as Marius, Sulla, Pompey, and Caesar found that they had at their disposal a formidable power before which the republic had to submit. The authoritarian rule of military leaders became paramount over the freer civilian institutions of the consuls, the tribunes, and the Senate. With Augustus's accession to power, the military dictatorships that had effectively supplanted the republic decades earlier became permanent through the institution of the emperors.

Rome's expansion had a further insidious consequence for domestic liberty. The large extent of the Empire and the continuous foreign pressure to which it was inevitably subject meant that even the most enlightened emperors found it impossible to reduce the size of the military establishment.⁷ The best they could do was to keep the legions in the barracks and periodically maintain their favor with large donatives or pay increases. But a return to civilian rule and less authoritarian political institutions were out of the question; they had ceased to be options by the time Octavianus was proclaimed Emperor.

The armies that held the Empire together could not be motivated by the highest of public virtues, patriotism:

[P]atriotism is derived from a strong sense of our own interest in the preservation and prosperity of the free government of which we are members. Such a sentiment, which had rendered the legions of the republic almost invincible, could make but a very feeble impression on the mercenary servants of a despotic prince; and it became necessary to supply that defect by other motives, of a different, but not less forcible nature; honour and religion. (Ch. 1; 9)

By honor Gibbon meant the love of martial glory, the brave pursuit of conquest, not for the sake of defending one's soil and family, but as an end in itself. Religion was the mystical fervor with which the legions were inspired in their tasks, a combination of symbolism, ritual, and warm devotion illustrated by the exalted place of the standard and the golden eagle: "The attachment of the Roman troops to their standards was inspired by the united influence of religion and of honour. The golden eagle, which glittered in front of the legion,

7. In this connection, James Madison's words come to mind: "Perhaps it is a universal truth that the loss of liberty at home is to be charged to the provisions against dangers, real or pretended, from abroad."

was the object of their fondest devotion; nor was it esteemed less impious than it was ignominious, to abandon that sacred ensign in the hour of danger." (Ch. 1; 10) Although these types of honor and religion were inferior to the virtue that had animated the armies of the early republic, they were preferable to the cowardice, seditiousness, and love of comfort characteristic of the legions in the last century of the Empire.

Motivated chiefly by honor, martial religion, and money, and cut off from the normal permanent attachments of community and patriotism, the army degenerated into an instrument of despotism, and ultimately into one of the chief forces that destroyed the Empire from within. Much of the *Decline and Fall* is taken up with the long process by which the legions gradually lost even that courage, which justified their existence, to defend the Empire against barbarians. Towards the end, the legions spent whatever spiritedness remained to them in military coups, internecine quarrels, and in oppressive depredations against their own countrymen.

The moral seemed clear to Gibbon. Without virtue and freedom, a civilized society may lose its capacity to survive in the furious struggles of international politics. While military dictatorship and despotism seem alluring as means to the discipline and organization necessary for national survival, they also can introduce long-term elements of decay and disintegration. While a virtuous, free people will find the courage with which to defend itself, a society sinking under despotism may find that, as it loses its freedom, it also loses the spiritedness required to ward off foreign dangers. Meanwhile, the professional military, preoccupied with the tasks of domestic repression, demoralized by the contempt and hatred of their own people, and pampered by the largesse of the despot, may lose their martial virtues. In an acerbic discussion of the Romans' advanced military technology reminiscent of Machiavelli's *Discourses*, Gibbon remarked that "the rise of [machines] in the field gradually became more prevalent, in proportion as personal valour and military skill declined with the Roman empire. When men were no longer found, their place was supplied by machines." (Ch. 1; 14-15)

Gibbon's observation was directed at civilized, economically prosperous societies, which needed to nurture a degree of individual freedom and spiritedness in order to prevent their cultural refinements and ease of living from softening and corrupting them. He did not deny that there were despotic societies capable of martial valor. The eighteenth-century Russians were very much on his mind—as today's Russia is on our own. But once a society combined despotism

with a high level of material affluence it was doomed, in his view, to gradual impotence and eventual defeat.

Gibbon's analysis of the decline of liberty raises difficult questions concerning the relationship of outward expansion and what he called "luxury" to the durability of a society's free institutions. Does empire inevitably lead to despotism and decay? Could Rome have chosen not to expand? Gibbon did not offer any clear or easy answers to these perpetually relevant questions. But he underlined the severe dangers to liberty arising from the creation of a vast empire and the maintenance of a large, permanent, military establishment, a theme that was of great concern to many eighteenth-century Englishmen.

Concerning "luxury" or material affluence, Gibbon was more ambiguous. He repeatedly connected luxury with urban life, the decay of virtue, and despotism. Yet, he also presented some of its social and economic benefits:

[I]n the present imperfect condition of society, luxury, though it may proceed from vice or folly, seems to be the only means that can correct the unequal distribution of property. The diligent mechanic and the skillful artist, who have obtained no share in the divisions of the earth, receive a voluntary tax from the possessors of land; and the latter are prompted, by a sense of interest, to improve those estates, with whose produce they may purchase additional pleasures. This operation, the particular effects of which are felt in every society, acted with much more diffusive energy in the Roman world. The provinces would soon have been exhausted of their wealth, if the manufactures and commerce of luxury had not insensibly restored to the industrious subjects the sums which were exacted from them by the arms and authority of Rome. As long as the circulation was confined within the bounds of the empire, it impressed the political machine with a new degree of activity, and its consequences, sometimes beneficial, could never become pernicious. (Ch. 2; 48-49)

Like the author of *The Wealth of Nations*, Gibbon did not see an inherent contradiction between patriotism and the pursuit of trade and industry. He even admired the eighteenth-century French for combining a highly refined, affluent society with the virtue of martial courage. Both Gibbon and Smith distinguished between two kinds of affluence. The first, produced by industriousness and entrepreneurship, was wholesome. It rewarded the creativity, discipline, and thrift of people, expanded their economic independence and hence their capacity for political freedom, and made possible the existence of cul-

ture, learning, and other refinements of the good life. In fact, Gibbon considered a hard-working middle class one of the greatest strengths of any society. "In populous cities," he wrote, "the middle ranks of inhabitants, who derive their subsistence from the dexterity or labour of their hands, are commonly the most prolific, the most useful, and, in that sense, the most respectable part of the community." (Ch. 31; 145) He had none of the aversion to manual labor or commerce one finds among many ancient and medieval philosophers. The second type of affluence or luxury was that derived from conquest, rapine, slavery, governmental largesse, and the manipulation of political power to obtain undeserved economic advantages. Such luxury was morally, politically, and even economically debilitating, especially if accompanied by the enervating effects of despotism. A combination of oppressive authoritarianism, love of affluence, and the barbarian invasions undermined productivity and economic growth in the last decades of the western empire:

If it can be affirmed, with any degree of truth, that the luxury of the Romans was more shameless and dissolute in the reign of Theodosius than in the age of Constantine, perhaps, or of Augustus, the alteration cannot be ascribed to any beneficial improvements which had gradually increased the stock of national riches. A long period of calamity or decay must have checked the industry and diminished the wealth of the people; and their profuse luxury must have been the result of that indolent despair which enjoys the present hour and declines the thoughts of futurity. The uncertain condition of their property discouraged the subjects of Theodosius from engaging in those useful and laborious undertakings which require an immediate expense, and promise a slow and distant advantage. (Ch. 27; 45)

Centralization, the imposition of uniformity, and the elimination of "mediating structures" between the state and society contributed mightily to Rome's decline. Their chief agent was the Emperor Septimius Severus, who consolidated his power in 197 A.D. after quelling a civil war and vanquishing several generals who vied with him for possession of the highest office. Severus re-established order and a semblance of prosperity by further concentrating power in the imperial bureaucracy and expanding the influence and privileges of the army's elite, the Praetorian Guards. As Gibbon lamented:

Till the reign of Severus, the virtue and even the good sense of the emperors had been distinguished by their zeal or affected rever-

ence for the senate, and by a tender regard to the nice frame of civil policy instituted by Augustus. But the youth of Severus had been trained in the implicit obedience of camps, and his riper years spent in the despotism of military command. His haughty and inflexible spirit could not discover, or would not acknowledge, the advantage of preserving an intermediate power, however imaginary, between the emperor and the army. He disdained to profess himself the servant of an assembly that detested his person and trembled at his frown; he issued his command, where his request would have proved as effectual; assumed the conduct and style of a sovereign and a conqueror, and exercised, without disguise, the whole legislative as well as executive power.

The victory over the senate was easy and inglorious. Every eye and every passion was directed to the supreme magistrate, who possessed the arms and treasure of the state; whilst the senate, neither elected by the people, nor guarded by military force, nor animated by public spirit, rested its declining authority on the frail and crumbling basis of ancient opinion. The fine theory of a republic insensibly vanished and made way for the more natural and substantial feelings of monarchy.... [T]he tradition of republican maxims was gradually obliterated. (Ch. 5; 109)

Severus disguised the absence of freedom by much-welcomed improvements in the administration of justice and, as many tyrants throughout history have done, by economic and social policies to help the poor:

Severus considered the Roman empire as his property, and had no sooner secured the possession, than he bestowed his care on the cultivation and improvement of so valuable an acquisition. In the administration of justice, the judgments of the emperor were characterised by attention, discernment, and impartiality; and whenever he deviated from the strict line of equity, it was generally in favour of the poor and oppressed; not so much indeed from any sense of humanity, as from the natural propensity of a despot, to humble the pride of greatness, and to sink all his subjects to the same common level of absolute dependence. His expensive taste for building, magnificent shows, and above all a constant and liberal distribution of corn and provisions, were the surest means of captivating the affection of the Roman people. (Ch. 5; 106)

Although most of the emperor's contemporaries praised him for his impressive achievements, Gibbon, surveying the long-term political effects of his centralizing policies, considered him the principal

author of the decline of the Roman empire." (Ch. 5; 110) Nor was he sympathetic to the distinguished lawyers who, dazzled by Severus's love of uniformity and absolute power, accepted and justified his system:

The lawyers and the historians concurred in teaching, that the Imperial authority was held, not by the delegated commission, but by the irrevocable resignation of the senate; that the emperor was freed from the restraint of civil laws, could command by his arbitrary will the lives and fortunes of his subjects, and might dispose of the empire as of his private patrimony. The most eminent of the civil lawyers, and particularly Papinian, Paulus, and Ulpian, flourished under the house of Severus; and the Roman jurisprudence having closely united itself with the system of monarchy, was supposed to have attained its full maturity and perfection. (Ch. 5; 109-10)

Gibbon thought that lawyers and the law not only failed to arrest the decline of Roman liberty and political greatness, but actually contributed to this decline. Rome's legal profession, while boasting of exceptional individuals devoted to the greater good of society, was for the most part composed of money-loving, clever men who plied their trade without inquiring into the deeper political or social implications of those legal principles about which they argued in the courts for the sake of profit:

[I]n the decline of Roman jurisprudence the ordinary promotion of lawyers was pregnant with mischief and disgrace. The noble art, which had once been preserved as the sacred inheritance of the patricians, was fallen into the hands of freedmen and plebeians, who, with cunning rather than with skill, exercised a sordid and pernicious trade. Some of them procured admittance into families for the purpose of fomenting differences, of encouraging suits, and of preparing a harvest of gain for themselves or their brethren. Others, recluse in their chambers, maintained the gravity of legal professors, by furnishing a rich client with subtleties to confound the plainest truth, and with arguments to colour the most unjustifiable pretensions. The splendid and popular class was composed of the advocates, who filled the Forum with the sound of their turgid and loquacious rhetoric. Careless of fame and of justice, they are described for the most part as ignorant and rapacious guides, who conducted their clients through a maze of expense, of delay, and of disappointment; from whence, after a tedious series of years, they were at length dismissed, when their patience and fortune were almost exhausted. (Ch. 17; 536)

Just as the divorce of civic from military virtue led to their mutual degeneracy, the divorce of civic virtue and the principles of political freedom from the theory and practice of law contributed to the decay of both. A group of men devoted to manipulating the law for their own benefit hardly could be an obstacle to tyranny. In fact, as centralization proceeded and the imperial laws and regulations grew in number and complexity, the lawyers' profits were bound to increase, giving them a vested interest in the preservation of the system. Gibbon's famous forty-fourth chapter has won praise as a masterful summation of the history and principles of Roman law. He also admitted that even in the decline of the western empire, "the sage principles of the Roman jurisprudence preserved a sense of order and equity unknown to the despotic governments of the East." (Ch. 17; 560) Yet, despite his obvious respect for the intelligence, erudition and arduous labors of the great Roman legal commentators, he noted with bitter irony that their zenith coincided with the onset of the centralized, absolute monarchy under Severus. Unfortunately, most lawyers were too occupied with arguing and elaborating narrow legal principles to question the principles themselves, their broader implications, or their possible long-term deleterious effects on society. Thus, the cause of liberty and national greatness could not be entrusted to lawyers or the institution of the law for its nurture, but to men of private and public virtue possessed of courage and the love of freedom. Such men, found occasionally but certainly not exclusively in the ranks of lawyers, would put liberty and the common good above the exigencies of profit and advocacy, and they would be quick to detect any encroachments on freedom disguised under legal principles or procedures. Eventually, argued Gibbon, in the same way that the legions failed to defend the empire, the law, oblivious to the citizens' liberty, failed to provide them with justice. As the rules became more complex and the lawyers more necessary, the long and costly judicial process moved beyond the reach of the average citizen and became the preserve chiefly of the rich and of all those who hoped to join their rank by the cunning manipulation of the law.

Political centralization was inevitably accompanied by the growth of a large bureaucracy, which in turn required ever-heavier taxes to support it. One of the most oppressive of these was a simple version of the value-added tax, a levy imposed on the producers of most goods and services:

The honourable merchant of Alexandria, who imported the gems and spices of India for the use of the western world; the usurer, who

derived from the interest of money a silent and ignominious profit; the ingenious manufacturer, the diligent mechanic, and even the most obscure retailer of a sequestered village, were obliged to admit the officer of the revenue into the partnership of their gain; and the sovereign of the Roman empire, who tolerated the profession, consented to share the infamous salary of public prostitutes. As this general tax upon industry was collected every fourth year, it was styled the *Lustral Contribution*: and the historian Zosimus laments that the approach of the fatal period was announced by the tears and terrors of the citizens, who were often compelled by the impending scourge to embrace the most abhorred and unnatural methods of procuring the sum at which their poverty had been assessed. (Ch. 17; 558)

Such taxation sapped Rome's economy and reduced further the scope of individual liberty. Describing the last decades preceding the fall of the western empire, Gibbon wrote:

The Roman government appeared every day less formidable to its enemies, more odious and oppressive to its subjects. The taxes were multiplied with the public distress; economy was neglected in proportion as it became necessary; and the injustice of the rich shifted the unequal burden from themselves to the people, whom they defrauded of the *indulgences* that might sometimes have alleviated their misery. The severe inquisition, which confiscated their goods and tortured their persons, compelled the subjects of Valentinian to prefer the more simple tyranny of the barbarians, to fly to the woods and mountains, or to embrace the vile and abject condition of mercenary servants. (Ch. 35; 298-99)

Gibbon described in detail the government's growing appetite for revenues, the variety of taxes, which included levies on land and personal income, and the tax collectors' diligence in ferreting out every cent due. The most productive citizens involved in the cultivation of land, commerce, and the manual arts were hardest hit. Eventually, taxes became so high that in some parts of the Empire many landholders abandoned their lands or refused to till them so as to avoid the tax burdens they were increasingly unable to bear. No doubt these disincentives to useful labor contributed to that "dissolute luxury" and "indolent despair" which Gibbon detected among the later Romans. As taxes grew, so did the size of the bureaucracy, and modern historians have confirmed Gibbon's observation by noting the excessively high ratio of government officials to productive

citizens in the last 150 years of the Empire^s Meanwhile, the bureaucracy's size and vast powers encouraged widespread corruption and venality. Bribery, fraud, and embezzlement became rampant among bureaucrats and among those citizens able to purchase their favor.

According to Gibbon, the general political oppressiveness and high levels of taxation were partly responsible for the gradual decrease in the birthrate in the last two centuries of the Empire. During the reign of Constantine the Great (306-337 A.D.), infanticide was rampant, as were also, one may presume, abortion and numerous forms of birth control:

The horrid practice, so familiar to the ancients, of exposing or murdering their new-born infants, was becoming every day more frequent in the provinces, especially in Italy. It was the effect of distress; and the distress was principally occasioned by the intolerable burden of taxes, and by the vexations as well as cruel prosecutions of the officers of the revenue against their insolvent debtors. The less opulent or less industrial part of mankind, instead of rejoicing in an increase of family, deemed it an act of paternal tenderness to release their children from the impending miseries of a life which they themselves were unable to support. (Ch. 14; 375)

When the emperors of the late fourth century began to allow the Gothic invaders and migrants to stay permanently as "guests" of the Romans, they did so not only because they feared the Goths militarily, but also because the provinces were becoming depopulated. By that time, the legions also were filled mostly with barbarians, a development which Gibbon connected with the decline in the birthrate and the aversion of the "decadent" Romans to the dangers of military service:

In the various states of society armies are recruited from very different motives. Barbarians are urged by their love of war; the citizens of a free republic may be prompted by a principle of duty; the subjects, or at least the nobles, of a monarchy are animated by a sentiment of honour; but the timid and luxurious inhabitants of a declining empire must be allured into the service by the hopes of profit, or compelled by the dread of punishment. The resources of

8. See, for example, the massive studies by A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire* 284-602. *A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964); and M. Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926).

the Roman treasury were exhausted by the increase of pay, by the repetition of donatives, and by the invention of new emoluments and indulgences, which, in the opinion of the provincial youth, might compensate the hardships and dangers of a military life. Yet, although the stature was lowered, although slaves, at least by a tacit connivance, were indiscriminately received into the ranks, the insurmountable difficulty of procuring a regular and adequate supply of volunteers obliged the emperors to adopt more effectual and coercive methods.... Such was the horror for the profession of a soldier which had affected the minds of the degenerate Romans that many of the youth of Italy and the provinces chose to cut off fingers of their right hand to escape from being pressed into the service.... The introduction of barbarians into the Roman armies became every day more universal, more necessary, and more fatal. The most daring of the Scythians, of the Goths, and of the Germans, who delighted in war, and who found it more profitable to defend than to ravage the provinces, were enrolled not only in the auxiliaries of their respective nations, but in the legions themselves, and among the most distinguished of the Palatine troops. As they freely mingled with the subjects of the empire, they gradually learned to despise their manners and to imitate their arts.... But as these hardy veterans, who had been educated in the ignorance or contempt of the laws were incapable of exercising any civil offices, the powers of the human mind were contracted by the irreconcilable separation of talents as well as of professions. (Ch. 17; 541-43)

The picture that emerges from Gibbon's sober account is that of a once-great empire whose vital energies have been sapped by the loss of political freedom, increasing centralization and taxes, and an unruly military establishment whose unchecked power corrupted it, eventually rendering it unable to defend the commonwealth or rule it. The later Romans lost not only the civic virtue, but even the intellectual vigor of their republican ancestors. Gibbon drew an unfavorable contrast between the Romans of the Empire's last century and the "accomplished citizens of the Greek and Roman republics, whose characters could adapt themselves to the bar, the senate, the camp, or the schools, and who had learned to write, to speak, and to act with the same spirit, and with equal abilities." (Ch. 17; 543)

There was undoubtedly a general decline of architecture, art, and literature in the last two centuries of the Empire, which modern archaeological researchers have confirmed. When Constantine set out to build a magnificent new capital for the Empire, Gibbon noted that "he soon discovered that, in the decline of the arts, the skill as

well as the numbers of his architects bore a very unequal proportion to the greatness of his designs." (Ch. 17; 514) The emperor then spent lavish sums to train a number of architects, so that they could design and oversee the construction of the city's buildings. But, to "revive the genius of Phidias and Lysippus surpassed indeed the power of a Roman emperor." Lacking good sculptors who could decorate his buildings and public squares, Constantine plundered many of the masterpieces of ancient Greek art scattered throughout Greece and Asia Minor and brought them to his new capital. The connection between the loss of freedom and virtue and the decline of the human spirit represented by cultural atrophy did not escape Gibbon's eye:

The trophies of memorable wars, the objects of religious veneration, the most finished statues of the gods and heroes, of the sages and poets of ancient times, contributed to the splendid triumph of Constantinople; and gave occasion to the remark of the historian Cederenus, who observes, with some enthusiasm, that nothing seemed wanting except the souls of the illustrious men whom these admirable monuments were intended to represent. But it is not in the city of Constantine, nor in the declining period of an empire, when the human mind was depressed by civil and religious slavery, that we should seek for the souls of Homer and of Demosthenes. (Ch. 17; 514)

Such artistic and cultural decline continued at a rapid pace. The Emperor Majorian (440A.D.) passed severe laws to punish the then widespread practice in the city of Rome of taking from the older architectural masterworks any materials that could be useful for the repair or construction of new buildings. By this time, Gibbon commented, "the diminished crowds of the Romans were lost in the immense space of their baths and porticoes; and the stately libraries and halls of justice became useless to an indolent generation whose repose was seldom disturbed either by study or business." (Ch. 36; 315)

According to Gibbon, however, the decline of Roman intellect and culture had begun as early as the age of the Antonines (96-180 A.D.), the golden era of enlightened imperial absolutism, and it coincided with the quiet decay of political freedom and individual initiative. Of the Antonine age, Gibbon wrote: "If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without

hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus." (Ch. 3; 70) These were long years of unparalleled stability and prosperity, and the "vast extent of the Roman empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom." Yet, a "just, but melancholy reflection" must have "embittered" the thoughts of the noble emperors of this era. "They must often have recollected the instability of a happiness which depended on the character of a single man. The fatal moment was perhaps approaching when some licentious youth, or some jealous tyrant, would abuse, to the destruction, that absolute power which they had exerted for the benefit of their people." (Ch. 3; 70) Apart from these justifiable anxieties, the emperors' despotism, enlightened though it was, sowed the seeds of political and social decline:

This long peace, and the uniform government of the Romans, introduced a slow and secret poison into the vitals of the empire. The minds of men were gradually reduced to the same level, the fire of genius was extinguished, and even the military spirit evaporated. ... Their personal valour remained, but they no longer possessed that public courage which is nourished by the love of independence, the sense of national honour, the presence of danger, and the habit of command. They received laws and governors from the will of their sovereign, and trusted for their defence to a mercenary army. The posterity of their boldest leaders was contented with the rank of citizens and subjects. The most aspiring spirits resorted to the court or standard of the emperors; and the deserted provinces, deprived of political strength or union, insensibly sunk into the languid indifference of private life. (Ch. 2; 50-51)

The disappearance of individual freedom and initiative produced a general intellectual and cultural enervation, and in one of the harshest indictments ever brought by a historian against the celebrated Antonine era Gibbon wrote:

[I]f we except the inimitable Lucian, this age of indolence passed away without having produced a single writer of original genius, or who excelled in the arts of elegant composition. The authority of Plato and Aristotle, of Zeno and Epicurus, still reigned in the schools, and their systems, transmitted with blind deference from one generation of disciples to another, precluded every generous attempt to exercise the powers, or enlarge the limits, of the human mind. The beauties of the poets and orators, instead of kindling a

fire like their own, inspired only cold and servile imitations; or if any ventured to deviate from those models, they deviated at the same time from good sense and propriety.... A cloud of critics, of compilers, of commentators, darkened the face of learning, and the decline of genius was soon followed by the corruption of taste. (Ch. 2; 51-52)

For Gibbon, the connection between freedom and creativity was clear and its social implications too profound to ignore. Quoting the Greek philosopher Longinus (d. 273 A.D.), he used a vivid metaphor to describe the spiritual and intellectual shrinkage which the Romans experienced as their freedom disappeared:

The sublime Longinus, who in a somewhat later period, and in the court of a Syrian queen, preserved the spirit of ancient Athens, observes and laments this degeneracy of his contemporaries, which debased their sentiments, enervated their courage, and depressed their talents. "In the same manner," says he, "as some children always remain pygmies, whose infant limbs have been too closely confined; thus our tender minds, fettered by the prejudices and habits of a just servitude, are unable to expand themselves, or to attain that well-proportioned greatness which we admire in the ancients; who living under a popular government, wrote with the same freedom as they acted." This diminutive stature of mankind, if we pursue the metaphor, was daily sinking below the old standard, and the Roman world was indeed peopled by a race of pygmies; when the fierce giants of the north broke in, and mended the puny breed. (Ch. 2; 52)

III

One of the fondest hopes of many philosophers in all ages has been the creation of a world state that will encompass the entire globe under its sway, maintaining universal peace and prosperity through its unopposed power.⁹ The twentieth century, which has experienced two world wars and today lives under the shadow of nuclear annihilation and global economic anarchy, has not been immune to this hope.

9. In the past, many proposals for world government have been presented as plans to bring about world peace. For two good histories of such projects, see Sylvester John Hemleben, *Plans for World Peace through Six Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943); F.H. Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963).

Plans for world government, or for the gradual strengthening of international organizations and institutions in the direction of an effective global political authority, flourished after the Second World War and still command the support of various distinguished thinkers."

Today, the proposals for the establishment of a world state are subtler and more sophisticated than in former times. The case, as developed by American theorists such as Richard Falk and Saul Mendlovitz, focuses on the world's increasing economic interdependence and the prospects of nuclear holocaust, overpopulation, famine, and the deterioration of the environment. These problems supposedly can be solved only through stronger transnational institutions that will decrease state sovereignty and promote world order. The implication, often not stated directly, is that eventually some form of global political authority will emerge. Since such an authority would require a monopoly of military power and political coercion to hold in check persisting ideological and nationalist rivalries, it would amount to a world government, even if Falk and Mendlovitz are hesitant to use that term because of its authoritarian connotations.

In its philosophical majesty and its appeal to the noble aspiration for universal peace, the world state remains one of the most powerful and attractive political visions in the history of man. While the Roman Empire was not a genuine world state, it was the closest to it that Western civilization has ever come, and for all practical purposes seemed one for the peoples that lived in it. Gibbon was obviously impressed with the material advantages of the "world state" of Roman civilization, especially at its height of concord and refinement under the Antonines. But, in the heated debate that has taken place over the course of millennia between the advocates and opponents of a world state, he finally came out on the side of those who are suspicious of such a grand and lofty vision.

His chief inspiration was his love of freedom. A world state would tend to crush freedom and spontaneity; its vast power, unrestrained by the boundaries of geography or the power of other states, carried within it tendencies toward centralization, uniformity, and the suppression of individuality and dissent. He did not think the advantages of universal order were worth the high price; besides, if Rome was any example, its history suggested that a world state would not be immune to civil wars, governmental corruption, social and economic chaos, and eventual decline. While the society of nation-states into

10. The best critique of the idea of world government is by Inis L. Claude, Jr., *Power and International Relations* (New York: Random House, 1962).

which the Europe of his day was divided was not a perfect form of political organization, it seemed to him preferable to a universal state.

In fact, Gibbon was unduly positive toward the European state system and its regulator, the balance of power. According to him, the competition generated by the balance of power was healthy; it preserved Europe from stagnation or decline. He described eighteenth-century Europe in fairly glowing terms:

The abuses of tyranny are restrained by the mutual influence of fear and shame; republics have acquired order and stability; monarchies have imbibed the principles of freedom, or, at least, of moderation; and some sense of honour and justice is introduced into the most defective constitutions by the general manners of the times. In peace, the progress of knowledge and industry is accelerated by the emulation of so many rivals: in war, the European forces are exercised by temperate and undecisive contests. (Ch. 38; 441)

Critics of Gibbon can legitimately ask whether he would be of the same opinion if he lived today. After all, the last volume of the *Decline and Fall* appeared in 1788, well before the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and the rise of fervent nationalism shattered the delicate restraints that kept the lively competition among European states within reasonable limits. During his lifetime, wars remained "temperate and undecisive contests." Had he lived well into the twentieth century and witnessed the carnage of two world wars and the prospects of nuclear conflagration, might he have toned down his earlier encomium of the European system of independent states and wondered whether a world state was not the best alternative? This is possible, but perhaps unlikely. His love of freedom and spontaneity was too intense, his suspiciousness of centralized power too strong. If anything, the image of Hitler, that modern-day Caracalla in whom he surely would have traced "the utmost lines of vice . . . and the meanest degeneracy of our own species" (Ch. 3; 70), might have caused him to contemplate with horror the dangers of a world government in the late twentieth century. Regardless of the qualifications one may append to it, Gibbon's critique of the world state, eerily Orwellian in its imagery, retains much validity for our times:

A modern tyrant, who should find no resistance either in his own breast, or in his people, would soon experience a gentle restraint from the example of his equals, the dread of present censure, the

advice of his allies, and the apprehension of his enemies. The object of his displeasure, escaping from the narrow limits of his dominions, would easily obtain, in a happier climate, a secure refuge, a new fortune adequate to his merit, the freedom of complaint, and perhaps the means of revenge. But the empire of the Romans filled the world, and when that empire fell into the hands of a single person, the world became a safe and dreary prison for his enemies. The slave of Imperial despotism, whether he was condemned to drag his gilded chain in Rome and the senate, or to wear out a life of exile on the barren rock of Seriplus, or the frozen banks of the Danube, expected his fate in silent despair. To resist was fatal, and it was impossible to fly. On every side he was encompassed with a vast extent of sea and land, which he could never hope to traverse without being discovered, seized, and restored to his irritated master. Beyond the frontiers, his anxious view could discover nothing, except the ocean, inhospitable deserts, hostile tribes of barbarians, of fierce manners and unknown language, or dependent kings, who would gladly purchase the emperor's protection by the sacrifice of an obnoxious fugitive. (Ch. 3; 72-73)

IV

Gibbon was aware that the causes of Rome's decline and fall were numerous and complex. In his historical tour de force he highlighted those he considered most important, the "critical facts" which, as long-term trends, destroyed the greatest empire in the history of Western man. He singled out Christianity for instilling among the Romans a dangerous otherworldliness and for embroiling the late Empire in endless theological controversies that were socially and politically debilitating. Then, there were also the barbarian invasions, although these were only the final blow, the last stroke that brought down the tottering edifice. Describing the Empire of the early fifth century A.D., he wrote: "[I]f all the barbarian conquerors had been annihilated in the same hour, their total destruction would not have restored the empire of the West: and if Rome still survived, she survived the loss of freedom, of virtue, and of honour." (Ch. 35; 299)

The loss of freedom, virtue, and honor (military pride) predated the barbarian invasions as well as Christianity. The decline of private virtue took impetus in the late republic, as private virtue was separated from civic and military virtue and as civil wars, occasioned by greed and ambition, paved the way for military dictatorships. The Romans preferred the dictators to social chaos. But, with the loss of

political freedom, private virtue withdrew to the confines of private life, where it decayed. Meanwhile, tho institution of professional armies deprived the common citizen of those continuous exercises in the martial arts and courage that Gibbon, like Machiavelli, considered indispensable to the liveliness of public as well as private virtue. As virtue decayed, so did the love of freedom and, indeed, freedom itself. Tyranny, in turn, brought with it the evils of centralization, a burdensome bureaucracy, punitive taxes, and a bloated military that became more incapable of defending the Empire as it became more oppressive domestically. These trends, however, were not simply connected to one another in linear causation; they also reinforced each other. As despotism and centralization grew, the incentives to public virtue diminished, and private virtue further decayed as a result of that "indolent despair," that absence of challenge and the risks of freedom, in which moral character cannot grow.

Gibbon. believed that sometimes the political institutions of a society could foster the virtue of its citizens. In the sunset of the western empire the Emperor Honorius (395-423 A.D.) tried to revive the energies of his Gallic subjects by establishing seven provincial assemblies at which the leading citizens would take an active role in the government of Gaul. The assemblies were to have the power to interpret the emperor's laws, reduce taxes, and petition for the redress of grievances. Although, according to Gibbon, Rome's decline had advanced too far to be reversed by such measures:

If such an institution, which gave the people an interest in their own government, had been universally established by Trajan or the Antonines, the seeds of public wisdom and virtue might have been cherished and propagated in the empire of Rome. The privileges of the subject would have secured the throne of the monarch; the abuses of an arbitrary administration might have been prevented, in some degree, or corrected, by the interposition of these representative assemblies; and the country would have been defended against a foreign enemy by the arms of natives and freemen. Under the mild and generous influence of liberty, the Roman empire might have remained invincible and immortal; or if its excessive magnitude, and the instability of human affairs, had opposed such perpetual continuance, its vital and constituent members might have separately preserved their vigour and independence. (Ch. 31; 193)

Thus, while virtue was necessary to support free political institutions, the reverse was also true. Certain kinds of political institutions-in

particular representative assemblies that balanced the interests of the aristocracy and middle classes, and that served as "mediating structures" by restraining the executive power and encouraging political initiative-nurtured freedom and, with it, public and private virtue. The similar ideas of Montesquieu, Hume, and John Adams immediately come to mind.

Gibbon was unduly optimistic about the prospects for staving off decline in his own European civilization. In his analysis of Roman society he revealed a sense of tragedy and of the limits to man's political abilities. He also understood that the causes of Rome's decline and fall were not merely material or technological but also moral. Yet, when at the end of his third volume he raised the question of "whether Europe is still threatened with a repetition of those calamities which formerly oppressed the arms and institutions of Rome," he gave too complacent an answer, a reflection, no doubt, of the unusual optimism of his age. His argument was twofold. First, there were no longer any barbarians threatening Europe. While "new enemies and unknown dangers may possibly arise from some obscure people," such unexpected barbarians would have to "vanquish the robust peasants of Russia, the numerous armies of Germany, the gallant nobles of France, and the intrepid freemen of Britain; who, perhaps, might confederate for their common defense." Even if the barbarians prevailed, "ten thousand vessels would transport beyond their pursuit the remains of civilized society; and Europe would revive and flourish in the American world." (Ch. 38; 441) It is interesting to note that in 1940, at the height of Great Britain's struggle for survival, Winston Churchill, whose general outlook on life was shaped by Gibbon more than by any other single writer, was determined in the event of a successful German invasion to remove the king and his government to Canada to continue the war from there.

Gibbon's second source of comfort about the future of the West lay in Europe's mastery of modern science and military technology. Any future barbarians wishing to subjugate the Europeans would first have to emulate their scientific advances and in the process would "cease to be barbarous." "Their gradual advances in the science of war would always be accompanied, as we may learn from the example of Russia, with a proportionable improvement in the arts of peace and civil policy." (Ch. 38; 442)

In fact, proclaimed Gibbon confidently, "we cannot determine to what height the human species may aspire in their advance towards

perfection; but it may safely be presumed that no people, unless the face of nature is changed, will relapse into their original barbarism." (Ch. 38; 443) While there might be ups and downs in the future course of European civilization, no retrogression or retrenchment as severe as that which followed Rome's decline and fall would be likely to occur again. The reason: man's accumulation of knowledge and technical skills had proceeded to the point where civilization was irreversible, progress inevitable. No conceivable disaster could erase from the human mind the discoveries of the scientific and industrial revolutions. Moreover, by spreading such discoveries around the globe, the European colonial empires had performed a valuable service; henceforth, a prolonged Dark Age in a particular region would be impossible, as science and technology would flow in from other parts of the world. Gibbon's observations amounted to an affirmation of man's creativity and economic resourcefulness as strong as that of Adam Smith and the proponents of capitalism: "Private genius and public industry may be extirpated, but these hardy plants survive the tempest, and strike an everlasting root into the most unfavorable soil." Thus, Gibbon could "acquiesce in the pleasing conclusion that every age of the world has increased and still increases the real wealth, the happiness, the knowledge, and perhaps the virtue, of the human race." (Ch. 38; 444)

Pleasing though it was, his conclusion contradicted much of his earlier analysis of the causes of Rome's decline. And it could not obviate the tragic implications of the preceding three volumes. Although Gibbon refused to consider the future of European civilization in the light of such implications, a later historian of equal stature, Jacob Burckhardt (1818-97), did so. A student and admirer of classical antiquity, Burckhardt shared with Gibbon a profound hope about man's enduring creativity and vitality even in the face of the most terrible disasters. Yet, while Burckhardt was confident of man's ultimate capacity to survive and create new forms of cultural and political life in the aftermath of the numerous wrecks of history, he did not placidly downplay the chaos, desolation, and suffering that accompanied such historical crises. He feared an approaching collapse of European civilization as rude and shocking as Rome's decline and fall. With an intuitive insight unmatched by Gibbon, Burckhardt foretold the cultural impoverishment, mass upheavals, tyrannical dictatorships, and global wars of the twentieth century; the barbarians would arise from within, and they would master modern technology

and industry to smash traditional European values and culture, while remaining barbaric in their souls.

In spite of its limitations, Gibbon's work contains invaluable allusions for the study and practice of international relations. His entire kaleidoscope of 1,400 years of history is a powerful reminder that the course of international politics is seldom static, but, on the contrary, always in flux and often taking unexpected, surprising turns. A major source of such surprises is the force of human personality—the policies, ambitions, and character of leaders—although even the strongest of leaders may fail to reverse long-term trends of decline or contain the rising dynamism of a people. Another source of historical change is war, which Gibbon saw as ubiquitous in history.

Many of the most prominent thinkers of the Enlightenment, such as Voltaire, Diderot, and Kant, were harsh critics of war and the policies of the balance of power. They believed that these were largely irrational games that kings forced their people to play and that had no relation to the true interests of their people. Gibbon, steeped in the past as he was, could not accept this view of war. While a few wars in history might have been frivolous, most were deadly serious struggles for survival and power in which the life, identity, and destiny of entire nations were at stake. Hence, rather than pouring scorn and ridicule upon war and the balance of power, Gibbon thought that martial valor and readiness for war were indispensable for a state's successful conduct of foreign policy. His attitude resembled that of his compatriots Hume and Smith. They did not glorify war, since it was destructive of human life, commerce, and culture. Yet there was no strain of Erasmian pacifism in them, nor any overtones of that excessive idealization of the pacific benefits of free trade that overtook later English thinkers such as Richard Cobden. Military preparedness, attention to the ever-changing balance of power, and the nurture of patriotism were public virtues that Hume, Smith, and Gibbon considered part of a civilized society's prescription for long-term survival in a violent world. Since Gibbon thought that patriotism and martial valor were most firmly rooted in public and private virtue, it was evident to him that the nurture of virtue was highly relevant to the course of international relations, and that history and political philosophy were essential to a comprehensive understanding of international politics.

For modern-day America, the leader and defender of that Western civilization to which Rome bequeathed its heritage, Gibbon's philo-

sophical commentaries have a profound relevance. He drew attention to the long-term debilitating effects of excessive bureaucracy, oppressive taxes, and centralized government. He warned of the fatal combination of material affluence with political apathy. While conscious of the need for military power, he argued that the best armies were composed of free citizens rather than professionals. Finally, he underlined the connection between a society's virtue and freedom, and its inner health and outer vitality. Like his guide Tacitus, whose writings the Founding Fathers knew well, Gibbon refused to dissociate virtue and freedom from the essence of national power. While it is fashionable to argue that the great issues of politics revolve only around the clash of interests, Gibbon, without ignoring the role of these, also pointed to virtue as another important, although scientifically unquantifiable, factor. While many statesmen and thinkers continue to focus on the primacy of foreign policy and on military and economic power as the key to survival, Gibbon, though attentive to them, suggested that the primary foundation of a nation's courage and resolve in foreign affairs was the moral and civic virtue of its free citizens.

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