

Roman History and America's Future

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By Steele Brand

FLEMINGTON, N.J.—The United States didn't simply pop into existence, fully formed, from the brains of the Founders. History guided them as they crafted the American system of governance.

This included the European traditions they were partially rejecting, but also elements from an older generation of republics that they wished to copy, especially the Roman Republic.

While our problems today feel distinctly modern, Rome still has lessons that can guide our republic. Polybius, a Greek who saw Rome's republic conquer the world, believed those statesmen and citizens who knew Roman history could shape the future with wisdom and justice.

This is what the Founders did, adapting the lessons of Rome to new problems—and it's what we must do again today.

In 509 B.C., leading citizens in Rome overthrew a monarchy and created a republic that slowly took over the Mediterranean. For 500 years, this republic dazzled the world with its hard-working farmers, good laws, shrewd diplomacy and indomitable citizen armies.

The Founders knew this history well.

They had read Roman historians like Sallust and Livy, reveled in the biographies of Roman statesmen by Plutarch, and were steeped in the orations of Cicero. Thomas Jefferson even tweaked the poems of Horace celebrating Roman farms to describe Virginia agricultural life.

Not surprisingly, then, Rome inspired many features of our own Constitution, including its checks and balances, bicameral legislature, term limits and age requirements. In some cases, the Founders copied terms straight out of the Roman constitution—words like senate, capitol and committee.

They named places in honor of Rome like Tiber Creek and Cincinnati. American coinage and civic architecture are also strikingly Roman.

The Founders also preferred Rome's approach to warfare over Britain's. This preference explains why they denounced standing armies and made militias and conscription of citizen-soldiers the primary method for national defense.

And citizen-soldiering was only one aspect of the Roman-inspired civic virtue the Founders believed citizens should exhibit. A tour through the artwork of the U.S. Capitol today reveals early Americans saw the Roman ideals of farming, working hard, raising strong families and participating in local government as the building blocks for a strong national republic.

In addition to shaping America's governing structures and virtues, Rome also shaped America's expectations for its leaders and civic heroes. The best compliment an 18th-century statesman could receive was a comparison to a Roman.

Abigail Adams called Elbridge Gerry, who was a leading revolutionary and later vice president under James Madison, a modern Cato.

John Adams liked to think of himself as Cicero.

The veneration of all things Roman helps explain why Madison, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay used the shared pen name "Publius" for the Federalist Papers, honoring the founding Roman statesman Publicola.

This Roman influence was crucial, because a very different path presented itself at the time the Founders were designing the United States.

The French Revolution took a different course from that of its American counterpart. It did not simply seek to rebalance power but rather to eradicate all existing power bases.

The revolutionaries overthrew everything: the monarchy, the church, the nobility, property rights and most of the other things that had held the French people together for centuries. The result was total anarchy fueled by bloody purges of whoever happened to be on the wrong side of the revolution, which was constantly changing in the 1790s.

The situation ended not with a stable republic but with a strongman, Gen. Napoleon Bonaparte. The bloodshed of his regime stood in stark contrast to the reign of the former general leading the United States in the 1790s—George Washington stepped aside from the presidency in 1797, personifying self-sacrifice and a peaceful transfer of power.

While Washington propagated these lessons in republican civic virtue, the French Revolution became a model for the brutal communist and fascist takeovers of the 20th century in Russia and Germany. Like the French, Russian and Nazi revolutionaries believed they could ignore the bounds of history and create a new world order from scratch.

These alternatives reveal how differently things might have gone for the United States had Founders like Washington not humbly sought the wisdom of the ancients.

By staying rooted in history, America did not descend into France's revolutionary tyranny or the totalitarian utopianism of the 20th century.

In a broad sense, America was remarkably unoriginal. The way it governed, the virtues it demanded of its citizens and the heroes it celebrated were inspired by the successes of the past.

By looking at the republican path hewed by Rome so many centuries earlier, the American founders learned how to move into the future. They knew what humans were capable of, what government could and couldn't do and what citizens ought to do.

That was the brilliance of the Founders— rather than trying to create something never tested, they adapted the lessons of history to their own age.

They used older models in innovative ways, like making Rome's unwritten constitutional norms part of America's written Constitution and extending a republic across a continent using federalism and representation. Their legacy challenges us not just to know history, but to understand how it applies to the questions of today.

This raises the most pressing and dangerous risk confronting us: A republic can endure many things, but a citizenry ignorant of the past dooms it to failure.

Generations of Americans—and Romans—grappled with many of the problems plaguing our society in modern ways, like complicated wars, crooked politicians, economic disparity and the disintegration of the civic mores that bind a people together.

Understanding the successes and failures of our republican forebears does not guarantee we can solve all our problems, but it does promise that we'll bring the arsenal of history's wisdom with us into the fray.