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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2008 Volume III: Democracy in Theory and Practice

Why Rome Fell and Is the United States Next?

Curriculum Unit 08.03.07, published September 2008
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Background

In the middle school level in California, a seventh grade Medieval and Early Modern Times history course builds from the important themes and events learned in the sixth grade Ancient Civilizations history course and prepares students for understanding United States history in the eighth grade. One of the major themes that transcends throughout middle school history courses and beyond is having students critically think about why civilizations developed, where and when they did, why they became dominant, and why they declined. As students learn about various cultures, they are identifying enduring contributions and constantly making connections between ancient and medieval worlds to our own today.

An important aspect of studying any civilization is learning what kind of government it had. Who held power? How were decisions made? What kind of relationship did a government have with its people? In our seventh grade Medieval and Early Modern Times history course we begin where their sixth grade Ancient Civilizations course left off, with revisiting the Roman Empire. Specifically, we review the early strengths and lasting contributions of Rome and we analyze the causes and effects of the vast expansion and ultimate disintegration of the empire. Since it is widely believed that Rome's government as a republic and then as an empire has much to do both with Rome's success as well as its demise, in this unit government will be one of the main lenses we use to look closer into Rome's dominance and decline.

In the Yale National Initiative 2008 seminar, "The Theory and Practice of Democracy", one major area we focused on was the arguments for and against democracy in the western tradition. Though Rome's government cannot claim to have been a democracy throughout its reign, Rome was founded on democratic principles. If we accept that Rome's government is a useful lens to analyze the Fall of Rome through, and if we agree that Rome's government was infused with democratic ideals, then it follows that in our analysis of the Fall of Rome we must also consider the role of democracy, specifically, how was democracy's presence or absence a factor in Rome's fall.

By the seventh grade students will have been formally exposed to the idea of democracy throughout elementary school, and will have been indirectly exposed to democracy simply by living in the United States and observing in our government who holds power, and how citizens participate in democracy. The idea of democracy is more heavily emphasized towards the end of our seventh grade Medieval and Early Modern Times history course. At this time students learn about the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is a critical

period of study for transitioning student attention toward United States history in the eighth grade. Subsequently, a civilization's government, and specifically here, the influence of democracy, resonates as a theme throughout middle school curriculum, and definitely beyond.

As this unit on the fall of the Roman Empire will be our students' first direct exposure in the school year to democracy, it is important to begin where our students are at, with assessing what students already know about democracy. As stated above, students are entering our classrooms with their own schema of democracy through knowing about elections, the constitution, citizens' rights, etc. By accessing their prior knowledge and giving them terminology to use, we are not only affirming what our students already know, but we are also re-emphasizing a necessary social sciences skill, making historical connections to our lives today. In relation to this unit, learning lessons from Rome's fall to apply to our lives today is precisely what we are doing when we will continually come back to these overarching questions: *Why did Rome Fall?* Is the United States next?

Overview

In the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) our recently adopted history curriculum is called "History Alive!" and it comes from the Teachers Curriculum Institute (TCI). After teaching their seventh grade TCI curriculum "History Alive! The Medieval World and Beyond" for going on three years now, I have found their approach to history to be very interactive, creative, and engaging as it recognizes the importance of teaching to multiple intelligences. Despite "History Alive!" being school district mandated, in preparing for this unit, I also know that our new curriculum is too rich and valuable to even want to cast it completely aside. Instead, I have aimed to use "History Alive!" not only as an entry point into learning about the fall of Rome, but to also use it as a source of inspiration to create and adapt additional performance assessments that can enhance the breadth and depth of my unit topic.

According to our "History Alive!" pacing guide, which our SFUSD teachers must also comply with, and in order to cover over a thousand years of history within our approximately nine month academic school year, every chapter we cover must only take about one week to teach. The introductory chapter in our curriculum, "The Legacy of the Roman Empire", which is the chapter this unit is based around, is not an exception to the confines of our district pacing guide. However, knowing that other school districts have different time parameters for their coverage of curriculum, I have adapted this unit to be taught in the timeframe of anywhere from one week to up to three weeks.

Just as the title of this unit suggests, *Why Rome Fell and Is the United States Next?*, we will explore some of the most popular theories for what led to the decline of the Roman Empire in the west and what possible implications this may have for us in the United States today. Americans looking towards Rome as a point of reference is not a new idea. Since before the American Revolution we have been trying to model ourselves after Rome, especially Rome the Republic when we ourselves were emerging as a republic. The first time Americans compared themselves to Rome comes before the American Revolution, when, according to Jay Tolson in his *U.S. News & World Report* article, "Rome & Us",

"the colonial elite, all of whom have a classical education and are steeped in Roman history, begin to see themselves as the embodiment of the Roman republican ideal. They contrast that ideal with the tyranny of the Roman monarchy before the republic - and of course they equated

that tyranny with Britain's. With the image of a virtuous Roman republic in front of them, they pursued the dream of an American republic. They had Roman governance on their minds: the idea of checks and balances, certain notions of Roman virtue, what it meant to be a citizen and an upright person. This was an ideal that was very much in the thinking of people like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and James Madison" (Tolson 2007).

However, the comparisons do not end there and some believe that the Roman Empire that replaced their Republic provides even more opportunities for comparisons with our own evolution. No longer do we look to Rome for only heroic stories of its rise and zenith but also for stories of its decline and eventual fall. In Cullen Murphy's book, *Are We Rome?*, he shares that depending on the perspective, Rome can serve as "either a grim cautionary tale or an inspirational call to action" (Murphy 2007). Though we can argue whether the United States is an empire or not, what we cannot deny is that Rome and the U.S. are the most powerful actors in each of their respective periods. During America's inception our founders were greatly hoping that our model would be Rome of the republic, though they greatly feared that one day we would become Rome of the Caesars for according to J. Rufus Fears, Ph.D. in his Heritage Lectures article, "the Lessons of the Roman Empire for America Today", "Rome of the Caesars and the United States today are the only two absolute superpowers that have ever existed in history" (Fears 2005). Fears goes on to define an absolute superpower as being "a nation that is dominant militarily, politically, economically, and culturally" (Fears 2005). According to his definition, the United States is absolutely a superpower. Though "we may never produce a Beethoven or a Bach, a Goethe or a Shakespeare [because] that is not how our culture dominates. [Instead], it is our music, our McDonald's, our popular culture that spreads all over the globe" (Fears 2005). In this way we understand that our superpower status has much to do with global consumption of American popular culture, enabling America to rule far beyond our borders. Murphy agrees with Fears that a civilization's power goes beyond just military strength by also including what he defines as "the 'soft power' of language, culture, commerce, technology, and ideas" (Murphy 2007). Both Rome and the U.S. are also made up of many different people, cultures and newcomers, whom they have absorbed into their societies through citizenship, guaranteeing the constant and continual change of identities of both long-term and recent citizens. Although we cannot ignore that the United States is only in its third century of existence, whereas the Western Roman Empire lasted for over a millennium, both also have in common their abilities to molt repeatedly from their previous selves.

Clearly there are many popular comparisons to make between Rome and the United States that are all worth further investigation. In addition to those, Murphy encourages us to think beyond easy comparisons by advising us to think

"less about decadence, less about military might, and more about how our two societies view the outside world, more about the slow decay of homegrown institutions. Think less about threats from unwelcome barbarians, and more about the healthy functioning of a multi-ethnic society. Think less about the ability of a superpower to influence everything on earth, and more about how everything on earth affects a superpower" (Murphy 2007).

Following his recommendation, this unit allows students opportunities to closely examine ten popularly held theories for why Rome fell. After being exposed to these theories students will apply their findings to the state of America today, ultimately deciding for themselves what lessons, if any, there are for the United States to draw from Rome's fall.

The revered historian Edward Gibbon in his now classic text, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, put forth several internal weaknesses within the Roman Empire that, he believed, ultimately led to its demise.

However compelling his arguments were, historians remain in disagreement about the most likely reasons for the fall of their empire, no matter how big or detailed the issues may be. Historian Peter J. Heather reminds us that in our inquiry the "barbarians" should not be overlooked, especially since they provided military manpower for desperate and diminishing Roman legions towards the end of Rome's reign, essentially becoming "armed outsiders" (Heather 2006). Heather is seeking to challenge the great narrative of this traditional history by sharing in his book, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*, that in recent times academia is getting to know more about "a later Roman Empire, [one] that was not on the brink of social, economic and moral collapse, and a world beyond its frontiers that was not characterized by simple, unchanging barbarism" (Heather 2006) xii). In this vein, Heather, along with other similarly minded historians want to change "the image of the 'civilized' but ever declining Romans implacably at war with 'barbarian' outsiders" (Heather 2006). Not only should we avoid underestimating the strength and strategy of the barbarians, but we should also be aware of "the many instances that our sources provide of barbarian-Roman cooperation and nonviolent interaction" (Heather 2006). Staying abreast with historians like Heather and the evolving schools of thought in regard to Rome's fall, this unit will take into account the complex relationship between Romans and barbarians while still considering Rome's internal weaknesses as also viable causes for Rome's ultimate end.

The United States has long been compared to modeling itself after Roman Republic ideals and has also long been warned of becoming another Roman Empire. As students learn about the many reasons for why Rome declined, they can apply their findings to American society today, making history immediately relevant and tangible in their comparisons. Like the Roman Republic, the United States was founded on democratic ideals, and upon closer analysis of those governments, students can compare and contrast democratic practices in both societies. In this way students will be able to uncover the relationship between existent and non-existent and effective and ineffective democratic practices, observing the results in both societies. Comparisons between the United States and Rome are not new, however, this ongoing debate will likely increase as similarities continue to reveal themselves. The more students can understand the multiple and complex reasons for why Rome fell, especially in understanding the difference between democratic ideals and democratic realities, the more they will be able to apply these theories to understanding the United States today. As students better understand the parallels and the differences between these two dominant "empires", the more they themselves will be able to participate in the larger ongoing debate about America's future, outside of just our classrooms. Ultimately our students will be deciding for themselves what role they may take in writing the next chapters of our American story.

Why Rome Fell

In order to hypothesize whether or not our American 'empire' will fall into the footsteps of Rome, we must first explore reasons for why Rome fell. Since there is not an agreement across all historians for the exact reasons why the Roman Empire collapsed, we will examine ten popular reasons here. Historians like Gibbon, Heather, and Murphy have all put forth their opinions about Rome's demise through their own findings. In order not to discredit any one particular viewpoint, while also not solely following another, the ten theories on the fall of Rome that this unit revolves around have been chosen from the "History Alive!" curriculum, which encompasses perspectives from historians like Gibbon and Heather. The rationale of the ten theories on the fall of Rome are: 1. Barbarian Invasions, 2. Decline in Morals and Values, 3. Environmental and Public Health Concerns, 4.

Excessive Military Spending to Defend the Empire, 5. Inferior Technology, 6. Inflation, 7. Political Corruption, 8. Rise in Christianity, 9. Unemployment, and 10. Urban Decay.

When presenting these theories to students it is important to stress that this list does not contain the *only* theories for Rome's fall, ending our discussion here. Rather, this list merely reflects ten of the most popular theories in this area and that whether or not they think one theory in particular, a few, or all are sound, or if they think none weigh valid, they are entitled to their opinion as long as they can show evidence that they are thinking and basing their views on history. In this way, this list of ten theories becomes an entry point for students into this long-contested dialogue among historians, which now, they too, will be equipped to participate in.

Barbarian Invasions

Rome and the United States definitely see themselves as world powers. To maintain such an unwavering self-perception it also follows that these two powers see non-Romans and non-Americans as outsiders, and more or less, inherently inferior. In relation to the United States, Murphy asks "what accounts for such an attitude toward the world - this strange mixture of studied ignorance, intense involvement, and instinctive withdrawal? Is it a form of the 'moral barrier' that some say separated insiders and outsiders in Roman eyes - and which also may have constituted an 'information barrier'? Is it a sense of superiority? There's certainly some of each of these things" (Murphy 2007). In relation to the Romans, the very word they used for outsiders: barbarian, means uncivilized or uncultured. Clearly, both Rome's and America's self-righteous perception was followed by viewing foreigners as less than themselves.

For many years the Roman army was able to defend themselves from the barbarians of Germany, keeping their outsiders at bay. However, in the third century A.D., when Rome withdrew their army from the Rhine-Danube front in order to fight civil wars in Italy, they left their Roman border vulnerable to attack. Despite having a strong and well-equipped army, the Germanic 'barbarians', hunters and herders from northern and central Europe, gradually began to raid and take over Roman territory in Greece and Gaul. This was merely the beginning of increasing barbarian attacks, raids, and eventual takeovers of more and more land throughout the Roman Empire. These takeovers eventually lead up to the decisive conquest of Odovacar, a Germanic general who overthrew the last Roman emperor, proclaiming himself ruler of all of Italy. "From then on, the western part of the Empire was ruled by Germanic tribal chiefs. Roads and bridges were left in disrepair and many fields were left untilled. Pirates and bandits made travel unsafe. Cities began to decline and trade and business began to disappear" (Bower et al 1993). As Heather advises, the barbarians gradually became a powerful force, who, some argue, were greatly responsible for the collapse of the Roman Empire.

Indeed, barbarian invasions proved to have grave consequences for Rome. However, the question remains: *why* did barbarians invade Rome in the first place? To bring this discussion back to one of our main questions in this unit about the United States possibly falling just like Rome, we must ask what implications from barbarian invasions in Rome are there for us. Beginning with the former question, Murphy shares that "by and large barbarians came not [only] to destroy what Rome had to offer, but to get some of it for themselves, in the form of land, employment, power, status. First in the borderlands of the empire and then farther inside, they were given jobs that Romans didn't want or couldn't fill, in the fields and the mines and the forts, including jobs as seasonal laborers" (Murphy 2007). This phenomena of invade and take, or immigrate and assimilate, is obviously not limited to Romans and barbarians. Murphy reminds us of the delicate and often volatile role borders serve in dividing two nations. "When a political border runs between societies that are at vastly different stages of development and are vastly unequal in terms of wealth and power - as between

Rome and *barbaricum*, or between the United States and Mexico - the attempt to enforce separation is an unnatural act: the economic dynamic pushes the relationship the other way, toward intimacy, no matter how loudly either partner cries 'No!' (Murphy 2007). If we accept borders as social and arbitrary concepts, the inequalities between nations surface in their push and pull dynamics. Not only in the case of Rome was there vast amounts of wealth on one side, but also in the case of the United States, historian David Kennedy cites that currently "the wage differential between America and Mexico 'is the largest between any two contiguous countries in the world'" (Murphy 2007).

Our previously asked question was, what implications from barbarian invasions in Rome are there for us? The United States definitely has immigrants seeking refuge and opportunity for many of the abovementioned reasons. However, what would be the equivalent of barbarians invading, taking over, and eventually conquering, for us in the United States today? Perhaps our neighbors to the south are not the ones to fear and instead we should look to those we have welcomed into our borders, for their financial support, for years. Murphy warns that "the past few years have seen an unprecedented influx of foreign companies seeking to take over American ones" (Murphy 2007). Some examples include the buy-out of Chrysler by Germany's Daimler-Benz and the take-over of Random House by Germany's Bertelsmann. Perhaps the American fear of immigrants should be redirected to multinational companies investing, buying-out and taking over American corporations. If all of our foreign investors one day decided to pull-out of our American market or relocate their recently purchased American company to their borders, where would that leave us? One day the United States might very well be left at the whims of our foreign neighbors just as, some argue, how Rome's fate was ultimately decided by their neighbors. Tolson warns that

"another reality we face that Rome faced long ago is that you can't just exert military power in a vacuum. It's not as though America is the only actor whose behavior matters. Every action creates a reaction, and the more actions you take around the world, the more reactions you elicit. Those reactions are outside of your control, and in the end can become overwhelming" (Tolson 2007).

Decline in Morals and Values

Many often cite Rome's decline in morals and values as a major reason for the fall of the Roman Empire. Many historians note that the final years of the Empire were especially excessive in declining morals and values as witnessed through decreasing safety, promiscuity, lavish overindulgent parties, and violence. During this time the Empire's larger cities were very unsafe because violent crimes were rampant in their streets. Roman historians recount that "there were 32,000 prostitutes in Rome during the reign of Trajan. Emperors like Nero and Caligula became infamous for wasting money on lavish parties, where guests ate and drank until they became ill" (Bower et al 1993). Some believe that the most alarming trend during this time was the rise in Roman passion for cruelty. Gladiatorial combats, which brought together the rich, the poor, and often the emperor himself, became the most popular form of entertainment. The audience would shout out cries and curses as the gladiators fought and multiple contests took place on the same stage daily. "Should the ground of the arena become too soaked with blood, it was covered over with a fresh layer of sand, and the revolting performances went on" (Bower et al 1993). These are just a few of many examples that historians often cite when arguing that the overall decline in Roman morals and values was one of the major reasons why Rome eventually fell.

The United States today cannot claim purity in comparison to Rome regarding our own decline in morals and values. Las Vegas, one of the most popular tourist destinations in our country advertises gambling, sex, and

overall gluttony twenty-four hours a day. Despite the lack of values that Las Vegas promotes, it is also one of the fastest growing cities in the United States. Murphy is well-aware of easily made comparisons between Rome and the United States today in terms of declining morals and values when he writes that "Romans and Americans can't get enough of laws and lawyers and lawsuits. They believe deeply in private property. They relish in humiliation of public figures: Americans through comedy and satire, talk radio and Court TV; the Romans through vicious satire, to be sure, but also, during the republic, by means of the censorial nota, the public airing, name by name, of everything the great men of the time should be ashamed of" (Murphy 2007). Tolson acknowledges that such symptoms are indicative of larger systemic problems as he observes that

"on the microhistoric level, America possesses certain characteristics, and is looking at some trends, that ought to give us pause if you project the consequences down the road fifty years or a century. The hollowing out of government. The mismatch of ambitions and resources. The growing inequality. One of the reasons the example of Rome is so useful is that it allows you to see how forces play out over long periods of time. Rome was in business for a millennium" (Tolson 2007).

Despite possible causes, what remains is that hundreds of years after the fall of Rome, some strongly believe that United States' declining morals and values rival those of our predecessor. Does the state of America's morals and values really merit such a comparison to Rome in its final years? Will such a warning fall upon deaf ears or merely deaf ears?

Environmental and Public Health Problems

Environmental and public health problems, some historians argue, significantly contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire. These historians call for a closer examination of the cause of death for many Roman leaders. They urge us to look beyond the traditionally accepted views of assassination or old age, and instead recommend that we examine what these rulers were ingesting, even if they themselves were unaware of possible self-poisoning. These historians argue that "since only the wealthy could afford to have lead pipes bring water into their homes and to cook with lead utensils, their death rate increased considerably" (Bower et al 1993). Rome's elite may have lived more privileged lives, yet the irony may be that it was exactly their lifestyles that may have caused many Roman leaders to unconsciously consume excessive amounts of lead, contributing to their deaths.

The United States today definitely has our share of alarming environmental and public health problems. In regards to lead poisoning, this remains a serious environmental illness that is entirely preventable. High blood lead levels have devastating effects such as being associated with learning and behavioral problems in children and are capable of causing seizures, comas, and even death. In the past 30 years our Federal government has made great strides in effectively combating lead poisoning by focusing on and decreasing the sources of lead exposure such as those found in gasoline, drinking water, toys, food cans, etc. However, according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) "almost 310,000 children under six still have blood lead levels above 10 micrograms per deciliter, with a disproportionate number of them living in inner cities; thus lead poisoning is a major concern associated with environmental justice issues" (EPA 2008). Will our government be able to effectively curb this environmental illness in time? Or will our inner city youth continue being victim to this preventable disease contributing to our fall as a nation just as some historians believe that the Rome's lead consumption led to their fall?

Excessive Military Spending to Defend the Empire

We cannot contest that both Rome and the United States are the military leaders in each of their respective worlds. As far as Rome knew, most of the world that they know about was territory that they dominated. The "Roman Empire is the only entity in history that ever controlled the entire Mediterranean coastline" (Murphy 2007). However, controlling such a massive empire required maintaining an equally massive army to defend themselves from barbarian attacks. However, such an endeavor was a constant drain on their military budget. With absorbent amounts of money going to military spending, this drained their resources for economically supporting other vital and necessary programs such as public housing and maintenance of their public roads system. "Rome often had to squeeze its people hard to extract the money it needed for national security, and it continually devalued its currency to make ends meet" (Murphy 2007). Similarly, we know that when the United States needs to increase its military budget, we borrow "trillions of dollars, going ever more deeply into debt while trying not to worry about the many serious national needs it's simply ignoring" (Murphy 2007). In fact, excessive military spending is at such a rise that if we take out Social Security and Medical from our government's budget, "running the military is the single most expensive single thing the American government does" (Murphy 2007).

Towards the final years of the Empire, this financial burden placed on citizens to support the military caused "frustrated Romans [to lose] their desire to defend the Empire. Thus, the government found it necessary to rely increasingly on hired soldiers recruited from the unemployed city mobs or foreign countries" (Bower et al 1993). The resulting armies were not only ineffective, but also quite costly, forcing emperors to raise taxes often. Out of desperation and necessity, some of these hired recruits were the barbarians themselves. "Barbarians have for centuries been assimilated into the military in large but digestible numbers. Now, [after the huge Roman loss 20,000 in the Battle of Adrianople in 378 A.D.] for the very first time, they were invited to en masse to fight under the imperial banners - and allowed to stay intact as peoples, and to occupy territory, and to be led by their own leaders. These *foederati* would turn out to be a devil's bargain. Yes, the barbarian forces often proved their mettle. At the same time, they were prone to independence and loyal to their own commanders. Their level of training did not match that of the Romans. They behaved according to their own cultural standards" (Murphy 2007).

Rome's difficulty in retaining their military was not isolated to their empire. Today in the United States we are also experiencing great difficulty in our military retention beyond required service. "There's one military resource that not even an emperor can just conjure into existence, however: flesh-and-blood human beings. Manpower shortages became a big problem for both Rome and America - and both arrive at the same unsatisfactory solution" (Murphy 2007). Clearly manpower and lack thereof was a key issue for Rome then and remains a key issue for America today. "Rome in the end did not have enough people - or enough money, or enough will - to do all the jobs that needed doing, and at the same time to keep the army as strong as it needed to be. The United States finds itself in a similar situation" (Tolson 2007). In 2005 the army, Army Reserve and the National Guard failed to meet their recruiting goals. Just as a larger military was needed in Rome to protect their borders from barbarians, here in the United States, "virtually all Army and Marine combat units are in Iraq or Afghanistan, on their way back, or preparing to deploy, and the pace of rotation is proceeding at an unprecedented speed" (Murphy 2007). Rome had to rely on hired recruits and foreigners, even other barbarians, to help maintain their military strength. The United States response has been to make it "easier to enlist by lowering their entrance standards, looking to recruit in unincorporated U.S. territories, and promising citizenship to undocumented, non-citizen children" (Murphy 2007).

Just as towards Rome's decline they hired foreigners to help fight their battles and protect their borders,

Tolson observes that

"the United States is doing the same thing by hiring contractors. We're not using the Huns or Visigoths, but we are using Aegis and Blackwater. One big story of the Iraq war is the degree to which we're relying on private security contractors - more than 50,000 of them - to perform very basic functions that would otherwise have to be done by soldiers. But this isn't enough. We are very close to stretching our military to the breaking point" (Tolson 2007).

Along this vein of overstretching our military, in Paul Kennedy's book, *The Rise and Fallof the Great Powers*, he observes patterns in world politics. In relation to a country's military and foreign policy he notices that

"the history of the past five hundred years of international rivalry demonstrates that military 'security' alone is never enough. It may, over the shorter term, deter or defeat rival states (and that, for most political leaders and their publics, is perfectly satisfactory). But if, by such victories, the nation overextends itself geographically and strategically; if even at a less imperial level, it chooses to devote a large proportion of its total income to 'protection,' leaving less for 'productive investment,' it is likely to find its economic output slowing down, with dire implications for its long-term capacity to maintain both its citizens' consumption demands and its international position" (Kennedy 1987).

Kennedy's observation follows popular contemporary economic theory for why empires fall. This belief states that when empires abroad disproportionately finance large amounts of international public goods, like international institutions and law enforcement, these powers can become so financially over-extended that this, along with other factors, leads to their inevitable decline.

In both situations, Rome and the United States chose to increase their military budget to support their military actions at all costs. In the Roman Empire, the tax increases to financially support their military were mainly paid by businessmen and farmers, which, ironically, continued to hurt their economy even more. Although the long-term effects of excessive military spending remain unknown, what we do know is that "investments of one kind diminish investments of another" (Murphy 2007).

Inferior Technology

Although the Roman Empire perished, their legacy lives on today through their many achievements in art, architecture, writing, language, and citizenship to name a few. However during the last 400 years of their Empire, some believe that their inability to innovate new technology was a main contributing factor in the demise of their empire. Their earlier scientific achievements in engineering brought long-lasting roads, bridges, and aqueducts. Their organization of public services helped establish the first system of medicine to benefit the poor. However "the Romans relied so much on human and animal labor, [that] they failed to invent many new machines or find new technology to produce goods more efficiently" (Bower et al 1993). Their reliance on outdated and eventually, inferior, production techniques resulted in their inability to provide all the necessary goods and services to their rapidly increasing population. Murphy cites a study by historian Lynn White Jr. where she suggests that in a hypothetical situation where we could measure which group had more invention patents, the Romans or the barbarians, "the barbarians - 'far too little understood' - would [actually] have garnered a lot more patents than the Romans, maybe because they were so much less reliant on slaves to do their work for them" (Murphy 2007). Perhaps we should not only recognize the barbarians' military strength, but we should also recognize that in the case of innovative technology, where the Romans chose to rely on earlier achievements, the barbarians chose to keep inventing.

In the case of the United States we have long hailed ourselves as being the innovative world leaders in many industries and fields such as space exploration, agriculture, and manufacturing. However, a closer look suggests that we may not be too far behind Rome's model of making great strides in technology and then relishing in our achievements without producing more. The United States may have been the first to enter the automobile industry, but their "inability to compete with foreign competition in recent decades symbolizes to many the decline of America's innovation and economic dominance" (Bower et al 1993). This may just be one example, but if more sectors of our American market continue to plateau, this will significantly weaken our ability to remain not only innovative, but also competitive in the national and world market.

In Thomas L. Friedman's *The World is Flat*, the definition of "flat" in his metaphor of today's "flat world" means "equalizing, because the flattening [world] forces are empowering more and more individuals today to reach farther, faster, deeper, and cheaper than ever before, and [this] equalizing power - equalizing opportunity [gives] so many more people the tools and ability to connect, compete, and collaborate" (Friedman 2007). Friedman believes that economic competition in our flat world will become more extreme and involve more participants. Therefore he warns that "we Americans will have to work harder, run faster, and become smarter to make sure that more of us are able to connect and compete, collaborate and innovate on the flat-world platform - and derive all the benefits it has to offer" (Friedman 2007). While he may have coined the term "flat world", Friedman did not create this globalizing force, nor can any single person stop it now that it is in motion. While we live in a world shaped by powerful events like 9/11, instead of living in fear, Friedman urges us to forever be "the generation of strategic optimists, the generation with more dreams than memories, the generation that wakes up each morning and not only imagines that things can be better but also acts on that imagination every day" (Friedman 2007). Will the United States strive to remain competitive and innovative in our increasingly "flat world"? Or will we remain content with our past glory and grow increasingly fearful in this globalizing world? The path we choose can make the difference between thriving or declining in this ever evolving "flat world".

Inflation

After the reign of emperor Marcus Aurelius, Roman conquest of new territory significantly decreased and their economy suffered greatly eventually causing inflation. By not conquering new lands, the amount of gold flowing into their economy also decreased. Meanwhile, remaining gold was still being used to pay for luxury items. Gold was also a key mineral used in their coins. With less gold circulating in their economy, the amount of gold used in their coins also decreased causing the value of the coins themselves to plummet as well. "To make up for this loss in value, merchants raised the prices on the goods they sold. Many people stopped using coins and began to barter to get what they needed" (Bower et al 1993). With this revival of a barter economy instead of paying salaries in money, employers paid in food and clothing and taxes were paid through fruits and vegetables. This significant decrease of circulating gold caused prices to rise. Through this imposition Rome's economy suffered greatly and many argue that they were never able to completely recover. For these reasons some historians believe that inflation played a major role in Rome's downfall.

The United States knows all too well the impact of inflation. Economists cite that inflation is a natural evolution of our economy, as over time the goal in a market economy is that prices even out, including our salaries. However, until this evening out process takes effect, and it impacts citizens differently, the average American often first feels this burden with their noticeably thinner wallets. Currently, in 2008, many household goods, like milk, eggs, etc. and many transportation costs, like gas, fuel, and airline tickets are at record high prices. Will the United States economy self-correct alleviating this financial burden on all of our citizens in time? Or, will prices continue to skyrocket, leading to more disillusionment and mistrust of not only of our market, but of

our political leaders? Many cite long-lasting inflation as a key reason for Rome's collapse. Could our current inflation troubles be indicative of greater ominous consequences in our American empire?

Political Corruption

Rome definitely had its share of political corruption. One key area where Rome struggled was in the difficulty of choosing their new emperors. Since the Romans never came up with an effective and consistent system, choosing the next successor was always a debate between the former emperor, the Senate, the emperor's private army, the Praetorian Guard, and the army. The winners were those who would fight the hardest for his candidate, using all means necessary. Over time, the Praetorian Guard won complete power to choose the new emperor. In exchange, the new emperor generously rewarded the Guard for their selection. This accepted process worked for a time. However, beginning in 186 A.D. "when the army strangled the new emperor, the practice began of selling the throne to the highest bidder. During the next 100 years, Rome had 37 different emperors - 25 of whom were removed from office by assassination" (Bower et al 1993). Rampant political corruption like with their practice of choosing a new emperor is what, some historians believe, led to the fall of Rome.

In *The Federalist Papers* "No. 9: The Union as a Safeguard against Domestic Faction and Insurrection", Hamilton argues in favor of a strong Union that can guarantee "peace and liberty" and serve as a "barrier against domestic faction and insurrection" (Hamilton, Jay and Madison 2003). He points to examples of the republics of Greece and Italy as lessons to learn from and avoid within their new, budding republic. Hamilton cites that these republics "were continually agitated, and at the rapid succession of revolutions by which they were kept in a state of perpetual vibration between the extremes of tyranny and anarchy" (Hamilton, Jay and Madison 2003). It is clear that our founding fathers were not blind to political corruption and had foresight into what could happen in our Union. However, despite their foresight, our American leaders are not immune to this incessant disease. Even Plato warned that anytime power meets greed, political corruption is inevitable. In the United States today citizens are well aware that our elected officials are merely human and also succumb to the greed and power that Plato cautions. From the Watergate scandal to lying about weapons of mass destruction, the United States is not an exception to the corruption, leaving citizens skeptical and cynical about our government. However, does simply having corrupt leaders automatically lead to our own demise? Or, will this along with other intolerances finally lead our public to a boiling point demanding change?

Rise in Christianity

Christianity rose and spread during the Roman Empire. However, Rome did not welcome this new religion with open arms right from the start. Some emperors, like Marcus Aurelius openly rejected Christianity numerous times, though some historians believe that he himself embodied Christian principles more than any other Roman ruler. It was not until the emperor Justinian welcomed this new religion into the empire that it grew in popularity. Once Christianity was welcomed and even encouraged, many people followed their emperor's lead and embraced this new religion. Some historians point to the dramatic cultural changes that Christianity produced, especially during a time when barbarian pressure was at a rise. These historians argue that "Christianity made its followers into pacifists, thus making it more difficult to defend Roman lands from barbarian attacks" (Bower et al 1993). They also suggest that "the Church attracted many qualified leaders whose talents were needed to deal with the problems of the Empire" (Bower et al 1993). With a growing increase in Christian pacifists who were opposed to and therefore avoided war, especially those of military strategists, Rome was at a loss in defense with rising barbarian threat. Lastly, these same historians believe that money that citizens generously contributed to the Church could have been more beneficial if given to

support their empire. For these reasons combined, the rise in Christianity is often cited by some as a significant factor in the fall of Rome.

Unemployment

In the waning years of the empire, some of Rome's wealthy with large estates used slave labor to farm on their property. By not having to pay their workers they could produce and sell their goods for much cheaper than other farmers who paid their workers. These other farmers eventually could not compete with such low prices and ended up having to sell or lose their farms. This resulted in "thousands of these men [filling] the cities of the Empire, where there were not enough jobs to accommodate them. At one time, the emperor was importing grain to feed more than 100,000 unemployed people in Rome alone" (Bower et al 1993). Some historians strongly believe that Rome's rising unemployment rate, without a viable plan of action, only created chaos, anger, crime, and contributed to the overall growing disillusionment of government. Were high unemployment rates, and all the proceeding consequences of a non-working populous, a driving cause for Rome's decline?

In recent decades, bouts of high unemployment rates have been particularly difficult problems in the United States. For example, with a sharp decline in union manufacturing jobs contributing to the numbers of unemployed, workers are forced to accept lower-paying jobs, or to be retrained for other service industries, which can be costly and timely. High unemployment rates are often followed by recession periods which unfortunately can lead to more layoffs at all workforce level. Thus, this unemployment-recession cycle can easily repeat.

A closer look at American and Roman government labor and unemployment rates is quite revealing as well. Although our American government is much larger and more complex than Rome's was, there is still much to learn from each of their government employment trends. Over time what happened in Rome is that "government functions and government jobs in essence fell into private hands, and were performed because money changed hands. And in time there was a great disconnect between the wishes of the people at the center and the performance at the extremities: the levers of government didn't work any longer" (Tolson 2007). The United States is following a similar trend. Increasing amounts of government jobs are being outsourced and privatized such as some of our prisons, roads, water systems, parks, border security, national intelligence, and military operations. Every time a government position is outsourced or privatized, a job is lost, increasing our unemployment rates. Tolson warned us that the "Roman example tells us to watch out: there will come a point when those trying to move the levers of government find that they're no longer connected to anything" (Tolson 2007). Will our own high unemployment levels and increased privatization and outsourcing trends inevitably lead to our downfall as many historians believe it did for Rome?

Urban Decay

Although Rome's wealthy elite lived in homes, the majority of its citizens did not. Instead, they likely lived in 'islands', tiny, smelly rooms in apartment houses, often six or more stories high. Each island was about the size of an entire city block. At one time, it was recorded that "there were 44,000 apartment houses within the city walls of Rome. First-floor apartments were not occupied by the poor since these living quarters rented for about \$400 a year. The more shaky wooden stairs a family had to climb, the cheaper the rent became. The upper apartments that the poor rented for \$40 a year were hot, dirty, crowded, and dangerous" (Bower et al 1993). If a tenant could not afford their rent, they had no choice but to move out or live in the crime-infested streets. These filthy, dangerous, and violent conditions all contributed to the overall decay of Roman cities. Their cities and citizens under such downtrodden conditions, are what some historians believe left Rome

vulnerable to not only attack, but to its eventual end.

Urban cities in the United States have also been experiencing the effects of urban decay. Every year we hear of a steady increase in violent crimes, drug addictions, unsanitary living conditions, homelessness, and even general public hopelessness. Many major American cities are struggling with providing their citizens basic services for the longevity of every individual and ultimately for our society. However, will the United States ever figure out to effectively reform and rebuild a broken system? And if we do find a viable solution, will it be in time? Or is the steady increase of urban decay too great to amend, leaving citizens to their own devices, perhaps eventually choosing to opt out of a system that is not working for them?

Objectives

This unit is designed to meet established History-Social Science content standards for California public schools for seventh grade students. The overarching standard applicable for this unit calls for students to analyze the causes and effects of the vast expansion and ultimate disintegration of the Roman Empire. The main substandard that this unit addresses requires students to understand the ultimate internal weaknesses (e.g., rise of autonomous military powers within the empire, undermining of citizenship by the growth of corruption and slavery, lack of education, and distribution of news). The following are specific objectives within this unit that will help students learn the required information and beyond. Students will be able to:

Understand and Explain Problems that Contributed to the Decline of the Roman Empire

Students will learn popular theories for the fall of the Roman Empire. The emphasis will be on conveying that the ten we study in class, as popular as they are, are merely theories, which means that they have not or cannot be proven. In this way, students gain an understanding of the complexities for why Rome fell, which can extend to why civilizations end in general.

Identify Democratic Practices in Rome and the United States

Rome aspired to mold their government to follow democratic principles. The United States is essentially an experiment, entrenching ourselves in democratic beliefs as well, especially those from the Roman Republic. By being able to identify democratic ideals within both societies, they can then better judge whether or not these ideals were achieved or merely aimed for.

Compare and Contrast Reasons for the Fall of Rome to the Possible Fall of the United States

After students are grounded in popular theories for the fall of Rome and can clearly decipher between ideological ideals and ideological practices, in this case democracy, students will then be well-equipped to take an educated stance on the fate of the United States. Since the United States has long been compared to Rome since our inception, students can now look for similarities and differences between these two great powers, ultimately deciding for themselves if the United States reign is doomed to end like our predecessor or if we have distinguished ourselves enough to decide our own fate.

Strategies

K-W-L Chart

This is a graphic organizer for students to access what students already know. Traditionally the 'K' stands for 'know' as in: What do you know about the Roman Empire? However, in my classroom we call 'K': What do you *think* you know about the Roman Empire? By adding the word, think, this lowers the stakes for students to share information they already know about a given topic. The 'W' stands for "Want to know" as in: What do you want to know about the Roman Empire? Lastly, the 'L' stands for "Learned" as in: Now that we have completed this unit, what have you learned about the Roman Empire? This is a particularly useful question to ask at the end of a unit to informally assess what students are taking with them about the subject.

Political Cartoons

Students will analyze several American political cartoons on such issues as political corruption, unemployment, military spending, and urban decay to determine how they relate to similar issues that led to the collapse of the Roman Empire. The goal is for students to notice the entire cartoon, the picture, the captions, and to even notice what is missing so that upon closer examination they can find deeper meaning and especially uncover the hidden implications beyond surface value.

Think-Pair-Share

This is an effective strategy in enabling students to process their thoughts first on their own, then by sharing with a partner, and finally aloud with the class. This activity is particularly useful with helping students build confidence to share aloud their ideas in class. We will use Think-Pair-Share several times throughout this unit, especially in the beginning when students are analyzing political cartoons.

Similarities vs. Differences Graphic Organizer

As students analyze the political cartoons and read about the popular theories for the fall of Rome, it is important that students utilize a graphic organizer to record all of their observations, realizations, and opinions. By keeping all of their information in one organized location, not only does this help with their overall organizational skills, but it serves as an easy visual reference guide for everything they are learning. Eventually when students are asked to make a recommendation or formulate an opinion about the fate of the United States, this 'Similarities vs. Differences' graphic organizer becomes a quick reminder for them to easily use.

State of the Union/Community Address

After students have thoughtfully analyzed the political cartoons, have thoroughly been exposed to the ten popular theories on Rome's fall, and have carefully completed their 'Similarities vs. Differences' graphic organizer, they are now ready to make insightful recommendations for either their community or the entire United States in a State of the Union address. State of the Union speeches are an opportunity for a leader to give the lay of the land on the current state of affairs as well as to set goals for an upcoming period and make projections on future projects that can help achieve those goals.

In groups of four, students will work together to write a State of the Union/ Community speech and deliver the

speech to the class. To ensure cooperative group work, assign each group member a role. The roles include: 1) Facilitator: He/she will make sure all students in the group participate equally and contribute ideas for the main points of the speech. He/she will also be responsible for delivering the speech in an audible manner. 2) Speech Writer: He/she will listen carefully to all shared ideas and will take notes on the most agreed upon and thoughtful ideas. These notes will later be transformed into their speech. 3) Speech Writer Assistant & Editor: He/she will work closely with the Speech Writer to produce a brief speech that reflects the groups' shared recommendations. He/she is mainly responsible for making final edits to the speech before delivery. 4) Visual Artist: He/she will create and draw a slogan that captures visually and written the main idea(s) in the speech

Classroom Debate

In their same groups of four, students will participate in a debate about the fate of the United States with the resolve being: The U.S. is doomed to fall into the trappings of Rome. Two students will be randomly chosen to argue the affirmative and two will argue the negative. Using their 'Similarities vs. Differences' graphic organizer, students will work with their partner (person at their table assigned to the same position) to list their key opening arguments in this debate. These partners will then predict what their opponents might raise as arguments and brainstorm a list of rebuttals to refute those statements. Once all pairs have their arguments and rebuttals prepared, the debate will begin. Randomly choose which position will begin and have one student from that position begin with their opening argument. The debate will go back and forth between both positions, with the debaters on each side taking turns responding. After the debate, debrief as a class to hear some strong arguments on both positions. Then, conduct a class vote to find out what the majority of students on their own now think about the fate of the U.S. in relation to Rome.

Annotated Bibliography

Bower, Bert, Jim Lobdell, Terry Coburn, Anne Maloney, Sharon Hootnick, Kelley

Mathews, and Marci Shore. *Europe After the Fall of the Roman Empire*. Palo

Alto, CA: Teachers' Curriculum Institute, 1993.

This is a Teachers Curriculum Institute (TCI) curriculum binder and the precursor

to the San Francisco Unified School District's (SFUSD) recently adopted history

curriculum called "History Alive! The Medieval World and Beyond". Their

activity, "Exploring the Reasons for Rome's Fall" served as the basis and inspiration for this unit.

"LEAD." Environmental Protection Agency.

<http://yosemite.epa.gov/r10/OWCM.NSF/lead/lead1pg> (accessed July 30, 2008).

The EPA website provides extensive information about current environmental

issues in the United States. This particular article provides statistics and facts

about lead poisoning today.

Fears, Ph.D., J. Rufus. "The Lessons of the Roman Empire for America Today."

The Heritage Foundation. <http://www.heritage.org/research/politicalphilosophy/hl917.cfm> (accessed June 25, 2008).

This article provides a thorough overview for why Rome fell and highlights a few lessons that the United States can learn from our predecessor.

Friedman, Thomas L. *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*.

New York: Picador/ Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

This book makes the argument that globalization creates a more interconnected

world and we that need to embrace this inevitable evolution. This book was

mentioned in the "Inferior Technology" section to help make the point that the United States is struggling to remain competitive and innovative in our increasingly "flat world".

Hamilton, Alexander, John Jay, James Madison, and Clinton Rossiter. *The Federalist*

Papers (Signet Classics). New York: Signet Classics, 2003.

This book's article No. 9, "The Union as a Safeguard against Domestic Faction

and Insurrection" was used in the "Political Corruption" section as evidence that our American founding fathers were in favor of a strong Union when they point to examples of the republics of Greece and Italy as lessons to learn from and avoid within their new, budding republic.

Heather, Peter J. *The fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Heather reminds us that in our inquiry the "barbarians" should not be overlooked.

He advocates for us to not only avoid underestimating the strength and strategy of the barbarians, but to also be aware of the many instances of barbarian-Roman cooperation and nonviolent interaction. Historians like Heather help broaden our perspective of the complex relationship between Romans and barbarians while still considering Rome's internal weaknesses as also viable causes for Rome's ultimate end.

Kennedy, Paul. *The Rise and fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*. New York: Random House, 1987.

In the "Excessive Military Spending to Defend the Empire" Kennedy helps explain a popular contemporary economic theory for why empires fall; That when empires abroad disproportionately finance large amounts of international public goods, like international institutions and law enforcement, these powers can become so financially over-extended that this, along with other factors, leads to their inevitable decline.

Murphy, Cullen. *Are we Rome? : The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America*.

Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2007.

Murphy's book argues that the United States has much to learn from our predecessor, Rome. Many of his arguments are aligned with (TCI) curriculum binder's activity; "Exploring the Reasons for Rome's Fall", therefore Murphy's ideas were cited multiple times throughout this unit.

Plato. *Republic, The (Plato) (Penguin Classics)*. London: Penguin Classics, 2007.

Plato is mentioned in the "Political Corruption" section as he warned that anytime power meets greed, political corruption is inevitable.

Tolson, Jay. "Nation & World: Rome and Us - US News and World Report." US News & World Report - USNews.com.

<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/news/articles/070430/30murphyqa.htm> (accessed June 25, 2008).

In this article Tolson draws many comparisons between Rome then and the United States today. His comparisons include a wide range of topics, from acknowledging that our American government was inspired by the Roman republic model to highlighting similarities between our foreign policies and our corrupt governments.

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