

THE DOWNFALL OF NATIONS  
by James Brooks

*'Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas.'*<sup>1</sup>

An inquiry into the causes which have effected the downfall of nations, particularly the republics of antiquity, cannot fail to furnish a moral lesson deeply interesting to the American Citizen. Greece, the cradle of science, and of art—the home of philosophers, heroes, and statesmen—sunk under a despotism which in the lapse of two thousand years nearly obliterated the recollection of her former glories and extinguished the ardor which the mention of her early achievements once produced. From the second century preceding the Christian era, to the fourteenth subsequent on that event, we find her groaning under the oppression of her Roman masters. When the disciples of Mahomet, in the fifteenth century, burst like a flood, against which all barriers were useless, on the eastern Roman empire, the land of Lycurgus and Solon changed her masters, but not her destiny. The Spirit of Freedom, which in her early and better days would have produced resistance to a new domination, had been destroyed, under that demoralization which is the inseparable attendant on despotism, and far-famed Hellas passed, without a struggle, under the iron yoke of the Crescent. Carthage, once the abode of luxury and wealth—the center of commerce—the emporium of the world—the garner-house of the riches of nations, has passed to the land of oblivion. Its *ruins* are no more. The inquiring traveler in vain searches for a solitary monument which shall decide, with certainty, on the site of this great Roman rival. The sword of the barbarian has been there: her walls are leveled—her altars in dust—her three hundred cities annihilated—and the celebrated temple in which a Carthaginian matron offered herself and children as a sacrifice to the injured honor of her country, lives only in the fabulous records of the past. Rome—which extinguished the liberties of these republics—stretched forth her eagle wings from the Euphrates to the Tiber and extended her dominion over three quarters of the globe—presents nothing to remind us of her pristine vigor, save the ruins of her splendid coliseum—her magnificent cathedral—her fountains and aqueducts, which time has spared, as if to mock the imperial city in the greatness of her degradation. She whose triumphs were formerly swollen by the swarthy Asiatic and the darkened Ethiopian—at whose command kings worshipped and nations fell prostrate—now stands the fraction of an unit, amid a mighty assemblage of nations once her own. Surrounded by a wall, twelve miles in circumference, and with a dominion bounded by the waters of the Mediterranean and Adriatic, what a moral lesson does she furnish for the philosopher who reflects on the mutability of nations!

In tracing the causes which have overthrown the ancient republics, Greece first presents herself to our observation, divided into the commonwealths of Sparta and Athens. The laws of the celebrated Lycurgus, in the first named State, have been the theme of almost universal panegyric. Yet we are persuaded they accelerated its destruction. Nor, if we inquire into the constitution of these laws, abstractedly from the consequences which followed them, is there

---

<sup>1</sup> Translation — “Fortunate is he who has been able to understand the causes of things.”; Virgil, Georgics 2:490

much to praise. The substitution of iron for gold and silver—the destruction of commerce—the prevention of travelling—the encouragement of theft—the neglect of moral and intellectual culture—the subservience of every principle which softens and adorns human nature—the inculcation of military ambition—formed the principal elements entering into the constitution of that political code which the applause of ages has sanctioned. We do not admit that a widely extended commerce is injurious to the happiness of a people. On the contrary, it produces a liberal interchange of ideas between remote nations—forms a moral bond of union—produces a spirit of laudable emulation and improves the moral and intellectual condition of the world. It impresses upon the minds of all connected with it, the principles of justice and honor. Extensively and generally pursued, it presupposes a world at peace. If it should be argued that Sparta, after having thrown off the legal trammels of Lycurgus, and grasped the glittering metals from the treasury at Athens, became corrupt, licentious, and enervated, we answer, it was not the accumulation of wealth, but a total ignorance as to its proper uses and objects, added to the sudden bursting forth of a martial spirit, which five centuries had nourished and *confined*—the ambition and disunion of her chiefs—the desire to establish an universal aristocracy and military despotism at the dagger's point—which prepared Lacedaemon, after the fall of her great rival, for her ultimate destiny—that of an appendage to the immense empire of the Macedonian monarch. The republic of Athens—differing materially in her political structure from the oligarchy of Sparta—fell from her proud elevation from similar causes to those which destroyed her stern but less cultivated rival—a dearth of general intelligence, and consequent lack of virtue among the mass of her population. Her first enacted laws, of which we have authentic record, are marked either by uncommon cruelty in the legislator, or the most base degeneracy in the people. They are emphatically said to have been written in blood. Too sanguinary in their character to exist even in the midst of degeneracy, they gave place before they had received the seal of the republic, to the milder institutions of Solon. This legislator, in the formation of his legal code, had the laws of Lycurgus in his view: but those whom he had to regenerate were more depraved—more refined and tenacious of innovation—than those over whom the Spartan law-giver had thrown the iron yoke of restraint. The people became the sovereign masters of the republic: rapine, violence, and bloodshed followed: the balance of power, which a well-directed government would have created, gave place to anarchy, and Athens, under the usurpation of a talented individual, shortly became the seat of a monarchy. Aristocracy and democracy arrayed themselves against each other—each faction prevailing in its turn—overwhelming Athens with the innumerable evils attendant on a state of anarchy. The democratic party at length prevailed—the second descendant of the Usurper fled to the court of Persia for assistance to regain the crown from which the *vox populi*<sup>2</sup> had expelled him, and died at the battle of Marathon, fighting against the people over whom he had ruled. The tyranny exercised by this monarch, and the fear of a similar repetition, produced evils in the Athenian commonwealth greater than those it was intended to overcome. Superior merit, on all occasions, excited fear of usurpation. Jealousy became the watch-word of the republic: levity and inconstancy followed in the train. We find the Athenians frequently banishing their most virtuous citizens, unheard—almost unaccused—dooming them to an ignominious death for alleged crimes, and subsequently erecting altars to the memory of the men whom they had thus wantonly sacrificed—an evil undoubtedly

---

<sup>2</sup> *vox populi* — (literally) Voice of the people

arising from unlimited power, placed in the hands of an unintelligent and immoral people. Haughty in their prosperity and debased in their adversity—constantly the victim of some new demagogue, who exercised, under the name of freedom, a tyranny more execrable than the most absolute monarchy—the moral energies of Athens became prostrated by her internal struggles, and she fell, in the day of her greatest splendor, under the dominion of her watchful enemy. A corresponding principle to that which caused Herostratus to fire the temple of Diana, and Alexander to conquer a world, destroyed this commonwealth—the desire of fame—the thirst for the gratification of a lawless ambition. There was no bond of union between the peasant and the wealthy citizen. Bribes were essential to the dispatch of business, with the officers who directed the legal proceedings. Protection for iniquity might be bought, and justice was either prostrated or *purchased*, as poverty or riches directed the energies of the applicant for her protection. Tyranny was an inherent ingredient in the constitution of Athens—a total disregard for property or right. This position is strikingly illustrated by the fact, that when an expensive office was forced upon an individual, he might present another before the Council, more wealthy, for its fulfilment, and in case of refusal by the latter, might claim the right to exchange estates with him. No man's house was his castle. The protection of property, arising from well-directed laws like our own—stronger than the defense of a citadel by a garrison, or a kingdom by armies—was unknown at Athens. Attachment to such a constitution was impossible. There was no common bond of interest to defend it. The rich Athenian was in as much danger as the wealthy Hebrew, at Constantinople. The nobles in the oligarchy of Sparta, commanded—in the democracy of Athens, feared, deceived, or submitted. No degree of interest subsisted between these and the poorer classes. The laws under which the gilded bribes of the one might find protection, doomed the other to ignominy and disgrace. In the early ages of this commonwealth, martial fame was the idol of the Athenian. As wealth increased, and faction destroyed the heroic ardor which fired the breast of the early Grecian, the desire of fame remained, but its objects had departed. The Athenian no longer sought it amidst the din of war, but in the bowers of the muses, and in the emulation at public games. Monarchs became poets; and the wreath with which the Athenian virgin had hitherto decked the warrior on his return from victory, now decorated the brow of the fortunate musician at the festal games, or the orator most successful in rousing the passions of the people. Hence arose the extreme thirst for theatrical exhibitions which marked and hastened the fall of the republic. The stage became the great object of public concern. Poets and players engrossed the honors due to heroes and statesmen. The treasures expended on the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides, exceeded those spent in defense of their common liberties, and Aeschylus died in the anguish of disappointment at having lost a splendid prize. It was in the midst of a degeneracy arising from this extreme abandonment of the useful and honorable avocations of life for evanescent pleasures, which should have merely given a zest to its leisure moments, that Athens eventually fell under the power of Philip of Macedon. That wily monarch saw she had lost that virtue which in her early days would have scornfully rejected the proffered bribe with which he purchased her liberty. The gilded offer was made—treachery accepted it—and unfortunate Athens became a dependency on the crown of Macedon. The fate of this flourishing republic—her degradation from a great maritime and commercial nation, to a mere vassal of a kingdom she might once have subdued—furnishes a moral not unworthy the consideration of our own and future republics. Athens commenced her decline in the meridian of her splendor. While an admiring world was looking in astonishment at her

resources—science making rapid progress in her academic walls—and the arts had arrived at a state of unparalleled perfection—the canker of corruption was gnawing at her roots, and rapidly ascending to her vitals. Her numerous colonies, powerful fleet, ample fortifications, splendid edifices, magnificent temples, exquisite statues, inimitable paintings, during the age of Pericles, throw a ray of glory around the memory of that celebrated statesman, which is unfortunately eclipsed by the means he made use of to acquire power—the ambition that directed his operations—to gratify which he involved his country in an unjust and nefarious warfare, unprovoked in its beginning, and disastrous in its termination. Nor can the few decaying wreaths which martial glory planted on his brow, cause a forgetfulness of the withering influence produced by his measures on unfortunate Attica, in the destruction of a city which in her fall excited the admiration of the conqueror, as he gazed on the splendid edifices erected by her destroyer, or conversed with the heroes, statesmen, poets, and sages, whose names, like a halo of glory, surrounded their dismantled capitals, and maintained for her a respect among the nations of the earth, which, like the ruins of her Parthenon, still remains to consign her to imperishable fame. The victory which placed Athens in the power of Sparta, was dearly won. Like two enemies in the last mortal struggle—the life blood flowing from the one, while in the other the vital stream is totally exhausted—the mighty shock enabled Lacedaemon to survive but a period sufficiently long to behold the disadvantages of conquests—the destruction which awaits a country rent asunder by internal divisions—her rival prostrated, and to prepare for a similar destiny. A few faint struggles, after her subjugation by Philip of Macedon, marked the declining glory of this once celebrated republic: but corruption, gold, and disunion, prevailed—and in the distraction of her councils, the ambition of her statesmen, the profligacy and immorality of her population, she fell at length into the gigantic power of the Roman commonwealth, under the name of Achaia.

The circumstances which produced the downfall of Rome as a republic and an empire, now claim our attention. From a few mean cottages on the banks of the Tiber—with a population the refuse of the world—we see her gradually rise in power and splendor, through the conditions of a kingdom and republic, to an empire more extensive than any other on historic record—and falling into decay, overwhelmed by conquests—sinking under the results of victory. If the consequences attendant on avarice, ambition, and cruelty, annihilated the freedom of Greece, they are still more strongly visible in the downfall of the Latin republic and empire. Her history is written amid the horrors of intestine commotion, with a pen dipped in blood. The tyranny of her first rulers exasperated the people, effected the demolition of the monarchy, and the establishment of a democratic form of government. The change was however produced by that portion of her citizens to whom the principles of republicanism were as hateful as those of despotism. The power of an aristocracy which three centuries had established and confirmed, was not to be destroyed by the demolition of the tyranny under which it had been formed, and Rome passed from a monarchy to a more dangerous and oppressive yoke, gilded by the *name* of a republic. From the expulsion of Tarquin to the dictatorship of Appius, the mind is overwhelmed in reflecting on the sacrifice of honor, principle, and every tie which can strengthen or adorn humanity, in the contests between the patricians and plebeians—the former for the retention, the latter for the possession of power. The plebeians at length prevailed in the election of tribunes, and eventually in that of a consul from their own body. Fresh concessions were continually

demanded by them from their former oppressors. The proud patrician, who formerly scorned the society of the humble plebeian, now courted it with servility. The balance of power was lost—Rome assumed the character of a military republic—and the idol, Liberty, fell prostrate before lawless Power, as she set her unhallowed feet on the rock of Ambition, amid a sea of human gore. It is an astonishing feature in the character of Rome, as a republic, that while the capitol was transformed into a slaughter-house—where no man was safe from the cabals of faction—while honor, justice, and integrity seemed to have fled forever from the fated city, and the Demon of Ruin smiled in savage triumph as he gloated over the thousands who were offered on his altar—that her armies, directed by councils thus heterogeneous and vacillating, should in two centuries have added to her dominions the most opulent empires in the world. Here we trace fresh causes of her dissolution—first, in the contests for the consulship to the subjugated kingdoms—secondly, in the oppression of these ministers of the republic—and thirdly, in the reaction of the conquered upon the conquerors. Gold was able to purchase what patriotism and integrity alone should have secured—the appointment to the situation of consul over the vassal states. When the means of bribery were equal, the sword decided. Kingdoms were bartered in the public market-place for wealth, or the sword decided between two candidates equal in pecuniary means, the contest in which corruption had failed. It is natural to suppose that offices thus obtained, must be supported by corresponding means. Hence the provinces of this republic were drained of their wealth, to extend and maintain the venality which avarice had commenced. The Roman soldier, no longer the hardy veteran and uncorrupted warrior, became a common plunderer, subject to no control, and obeying no law but the blind and savage instinct of gain. The *amor patriae*<sup>3</sup> which originally distinguished him, wore off by degrees. He was no longer the *Roman* soldier, but that of the province over which his nominal master was consul. The latter—in the possession of a state he had purchased and guarded by a soldiery attached to him by a common interest—no longer acknowledged a dependency on the councils by which he had been thus exalted, or rested satisfied with a portion of the republic, while the whole might be obtained. We have a memorable record of this insatiate thirst for power, in the blood-stained annals which record the contests between Marius and Sulla. They are unparalleled by anything in the page of human guilt. Rome was deluged with the crimson gore of her best and bravest men—led, as lambs, to the shambles of these iron-hearted despots. One hundred and fifty thousand human beings piled the hecatomb of their vengeance and left on the scroll of history an awful lesson to the blind admirers of military fame. In this state of contention between the consuls, the ablest man generally proved the conqueror, until Julius Caesar passed the Rubicon—marched his army to the gates of the capital—banished his rival, whom he ultimately defeated on the plains of Pharsalia—seized on the public treasury, and put the finishing stroke to his country's liberties, by assuming the rank and power of Perpetual Dictator. Dazzled by the conquests of this great warrior and consummate politician, the degenerate Roman saw not that the hand which thus increased the riches, was undermining the liberties of his native land, and plunging her into a state of anarchy which would terminate in a second triumvirate, and eventually in a despotic monarchy. The effects were hidden from his mental vision, amid the evanescent luster which surrounded their causes. When he at length awoke from the delusive dreams of ambition, the genius of freedom had departed—the dagger of the assassin had prostrated the man who

---

<sup>3</sup> *amor patriae* — Love of one's country

had despoiled her temple, and the fiend of cruelty, as he shrieked in vengeance from the caverns of guilt, placed at the head of her councils the triumvirate to which we have alluded. The embers of liberty which beamed with a faint illumination at the assassination of the dictator, blazed for a limited period before the bloodstained coalition succeeding his fall; but finally sunk in the darkness of a moral desolation, which history has consecrated to infamy, in the fields of Philippi.

The moral turpitude evinced at this period was another source from whence arose the destruction of this gigantic republic. Honor, friendship, the ties of blood—every dear and sacred pledge—were sacrificed to fill up the measure of iniquity. Humanity sickens at the depravity which disgraced the union of Caesar, Anthony, and Lepidus. The best and the most eloquent were the first sacrifices offered by these inhuman monsters. Cicero, who had supported his country in the day of her adversity and defeated the daring conspiracy of Catiline and his band, unaccused of a solitary crime, was offered up on their altar, and as his bleeding head streamed from the walls of the forum he had so often graced, it seemed to wash away the last remnant of that freedom which his eloquence had sustained. Rome was now no longer a commonwealth. The *name* of a republic, which had hitherto been upheld under the tyranny of contending military chieftains, now yielded to that of *Empire*—the elevated character which adorned the Roman, gave place to abject servility. Kings became objects of the homage due to God. The streets and places of public worship, in this once proud mistress of the globe, were filled with wretches sunk below humanity, offering incense to idols whom their flattery and venality had created, and who were more contemptible than the wooden images which represented their ancient deities. In proportion as we recede from the reign of Augustus, the night of desolation thickens over the imperial city; the empire becomes a vast military camp—the majesty of a people who had received the homage of a universe, trembles before the throne of some heartless despot; and the awe-stricken citizen, as he groans beneath the yoke, offers no resistance to its bondage. Poverty and idleness stalk forth in the midst of slavery, bounded in their requirements by the gratification of the wants of animal existence and diversions, to fill up the vacuity of a debased and degraded mind. The theatres became the continued scene of riot and murder, in which the noble and slave mingled together, and on which even the profligate Tiberius could not look, without astonishment and fear. The ultimate cause which effected the annihilation of this empire remains to be noticed—the re-action of the conquered upon the conquerors.

In the reign of Augustus, Rome was in the meridian of her splendor. Asia, Africa, and Europe were in her grasp. The world was a Roman prison, from which no one could escape. It was necessary, in order that the conquered provinces might be kept in vassalage, to garrison them with soldiers: but where were these troops to be found? Italy could not garrison *nations!* The emperors succeeding Augustus were compelled to hold one country in subjection with troops drawn from another which they had likewise enslaved. In the days of her commonwealth, she had been assailed by the Gauls, who marched to the gates of her capitol under Brennus, and now, when her troops were generally withdrawn to secure her ill-gotten conquests, the world she had enslaved was waiting a favorable opportunity to commence the great work of retribution. She had been the common enemy of mankind, the oppressor, the tyrant, the robber of the earth—had carried her victories to the holy city of Jerusalem, despoiled the sacred temple, borne away the golden candlesticks, formed under

the express direction of heaven and placed within the sanctuary, to adorn and swell the triumph of Titus. But the day of her visitation was come. The barbarian to whom, in conquering, she had taught the art of war, turned the dreadful engine upon his instructor—and in the fifth century following the Christian era, an army of Vandals, headed by Genseric, entered the city, razed her walls, destroyed her temples, despoiled her monuments of art, and departed with her immense treasure, (a twice stolen plunder) to Africa. It was not from one point alone that this falling empire was assailed. The conquered world seemed to rise as if by mutual consent, determined to conquer and to hold up to the gaze of future ages the consequences attending an unhallowed violation of the rights of nations and of men, by a power which, in fifteen hundred years, had marched onward in an unbroken line of victory to an extent of dominion greater than the celebrated monarchies of the Medes and Persians, or that of Alexander of Macedon. Some few faint gleams of her former destiny irradiated the declining fortunes of the land of Romulus, but they resembled the expiring flame of the taper, each flash becoming fainter, before darkness eclipses it forever. It has been usual to ascribe the downfall of this celebrated commonwealth to the influx of wealth and luxury which flowed into her cities on the destruction of Carthage, her formidable rival. We cannot admit this fact, unless based upon another—the general dearth of intelligence among the great mass of the people. That the sudden influx of wealth on an unenlightened population may produce the disastrous consequences which preceded the fall of the Roman empire, we will not deny: but the introduction of riches, abstractedly considered, was not sufficient to effect the dismemberment of an empire cemented by the lapse of fifteen centuries, and embracing within its boundaries—a world. It was the lust of conquest—the desire of mutual distinction—the sacrifice of principle to power—the open violation of the law—the sale of patriotism at the mart of gold, the utter destitution of national union—the extraordinary and unnecessary effusion of human blood—the horrid sacrifices that superstition offered on the altars of ignorance—the open violation of religious principle—the utter contempt for the laws of God, which shed their baneful influence around the setting sun of the Latin empire, and finally eclipsed its beams in the utter darkness of a moral and physical destruction. Christianity, indeed, once seated herself on the throne of the Caesars, during the period of heathenism over which we have passed: but no sooner had she risen from a state of dependency to that of power, than, forgetting the principles of benignity which distinguished her mild and benevolent founder, she turned against herself the barbed point of envy. Clothed in the robe of imperial dignity, with a diadem on her head, and nations at her footstool—from the victim at the altar, she became the high priest of the sacrifice. Murder attended on her footsteps, and humanity withered in her path. These remarks are more particularly applicable to the assassination of the son of Constantine by his father's hand, or order, and the subsequent practices of his sons. The sun of Christianity had scarcely risen above the horizon—the festal blazes of heathenism were shining in darkened splendor—and during the cold and cheerless twilight the worst and most degrading passions held unlimited sway.

In contrasting the situation of the republics whose histories we have thus faintly drawn, with that under which we have the happiness to live, there is every reason to hope that America will long bear evidence of the fact, that republics *can* endure: that the enlightened condition of a community insures the perpetuity of her institutions—that the rock of Plymouth, consecrated to future millions of people, will remain the sign of a *lasting* covenant

among the children of America for the protection and preservation of the first, best, dearest rights of man. Faction may sometimes raise a feeble voice among the councils which freedom directs, but there is a regenerating influence in liberty, when guided by moral and rational principles, which must eventually triumph over all attempts at disunion, and perpetuate the constitution of the 'pilgrims' to future ages. Every day—every hour—is bringing us nearer together. Navigation is rapidly uniting the most distant cities of our republic and forming a common bond of feeling and union between men hitherto strangers to each other. The day is probably not far distant, when the waters of the Mississippi may mingle with those of the Hudson, and our noble river bear on its bosom the hidden treasures of the Rocky Mountains. It is the dissemination of principles which such means afford, that is the best safeguard of a nation, and will secure her stability, though the sword should never be unsheathed on her land—or the cannon's roar sound along her waters. It forms a moral lever on which to move mankind—more formidable than armies—more potent than victories—an altar of communion around which a *people* may gather, to offer their united aspirations of gratitude to the benevolent dispenser of their blessings. The widow approaches it, not to bewail the loss of her husband, or the orphan the bereavement of a parent. Its corner stone is in the temple of moral virtue—its turrets reach to heaven! Let us appreciate the blessings we enjoy. The anniversary of our freedom is at hand: it has nearly reached the age allotted to man, and still blooms as in the vigor and nerve of youth. Fifty-nine years of freedom have converted the haunt of the wolf into the abode of civilized man. Towns and cities have sprung into existence, as if touched by the wand of the enchanter, and we are still going onward, in wealth and population, with a rapidity unparalleled in the annals of the world. What an extent of territory have we yet to people! Millions may be added to us, with scarcely a *visible* increase. Our range of western forests offers a home to the desolate and oppressed, which centuries may find unpeopled. Nature, too, has been bountiful in her gifts. Metallic ores abound in our mountains, and interminable beds of coal have opened their veins to our view, as if in anticipation of the immense forest destruction which future generations may effect in the pathless wilderness. If in the midst of such munificence, with the republics of antiquity in the range of memory—their follies, crimes, and immorality before us—we are destined to increase the monumental pile erected to perpetuate the annals of human guilt and folly—if local feeling shall eventually triumph over general good, and petty animosities destroy the bond which ages have consecrated—if some factious chieftain, taking advantage of such anarchy, shall enter the temple of freedom, tear the genius of Liberty from her throne, and erect the standard of despotism, the Demon of Tyranny, standing *securely* on his altar, surrounded by a universe, may vauntingly exclaim, as he points to the grave of American glory—'Behold The Last of The Republics!'

Source: The Knickerbocker, New York monthly magazine, Vol. VI, 6 July 1835, pp. 44-53