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How Empires Really End

by Sean Corrigan

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Here is what the standard historical textbooks will tell you. The Romans, after nearly four centuries of occupation, abandoned Britain in the year 410 a.d., when the western Emperor Honorius sent a "Rescript" or official proclamation to the leaders of the British municipalities, telling them, thereafter, to look to their own defense.

Those same books with their urge to chop history up into neatly packaged slivers then roundly declare that Civilization was abolished and that the "Dark Ages" promptly began.

They will inform you that, within the space of barely two generations, the feeble British had abandoned the fertile lowland fields and farms, which their ancestors had tended since the last Ice Age, giving them up to a few boatloads of Germanic pirates and that they began to flee, finding a bleak refuge in the harsher highlands on the oceanic fringes of their island.

And why would this not be true no less than Rome herself was sacked by Alaric and his Goths that same year, was it not?

As for Honorius, well, he was sheltering safely in Ravenna while his people were enduring the barbarian siege. The story goes that when he heard the news of its ruin, he thought it was a lesser evil than would be the death of his pet cockerel of the same name!

But rather than using the words of a fool in purple, historians consider the cataclysm was better encapsulated by the pen of St. Jerome, who gave out a whole series of lamentations, wailing, in one letter, that:

"...the bright light of all the world was put out, or, rather, when the Roman Empire was decapitated, and, to speak more correctly, the whole world perished in one city."

Here and now, sixteen centuries later, in my line of work as an investment analyst, you come across more and more latter-day St. Jeromes, wherever you turn.

I know of people who are selling up and moving to seek Shangri-La in the Southern Alps of New Zealand. I've met those who think Paradise is to be found among the palm trees of the Dominican Republic or Costa Rica.

A smart and very highly-educated American with whom I'm friendly speaks for many when he ends an e-mail with the words: "I'm looking forward to seeing you in Zurich. The way things are here, I might even stay."

In fact, it's becoming increasingly common for well-to-do professional folks and retired businessmen to reveal, in the course of a conversation, that they are prey to increasing anxieties about their future.

These people evidently fear that their quality of life can no longer be guaranteed and they often don't know what they can do about it.

Meanwhile, out in the wider world, the Gold Bugs and the more extreme religious crazies (of all faiths) have seemingly set up a joint venture.



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These two incongruous lobby groups have joined hands in trying to persuade people that the End of Days financial or universal is at hand.

What they seem to have agreed upon is that when God/Jehovah/Allah/Shiva is shortly revealed in all His mighty wrath and when He causes credit to collapse and the stock market to plunge, He will expect the Faithful not to be caught up in the rout.

Oh, no! For the mark of the True Believer is that, when the Crash comes, he should be ready to take the Lord straight to where he has his gold coins buried instead!

As that mellifluous voice of carefully-crafted pessimism, Bill Bonner, put it, in a recent piece:

"We like gold the way we like stacks of firewood, jars of canned green beans and cheerful women. They make the going so much more fun when the going gets rough. As we mention above, the going has never been easier. So easy have things become that people no longer see the need for reserves. . . . But someday, the going may not be so good. We hold it in inventory for the day when just in time fails and just in case comes back into style . . ."

This sounds eminently more reasonable, but, in truth, it is simply more of the same doom-mongering just more soothingly and articulately expressed by a master of the art.

For my part, I'll admit that our rulers chickens finally may be coming home to roost, and that ours will be the generation up to our necks in guano.

However, I'm among those who also find this vogue for paranoia this cult of the Apocalypse both unattractive and unfruitful.

The lesson of history

This is where the story of Rome and the manner of its telling is particularly instructive. This is because, as frequently happens in life, if we look beyond the banner headlines of despair, we can find cause for hope.

We can also draw several parallels with what is happening to us today though not on the way our present crop of St. Jeromes would do it.

Let's take a glimpse at how Rome and her history can give us a reaffirmation of our unshaken belief in the ability of Everyman, acting as a free individual, to repair all the damage ever done by history's tyrants and their tax gatherers.

The first thing to be pointed out is that, however dramatic the official version of those past events, what historians and, more emphatically, archaeologists are coming to realize is that, changes in political leadership aside, nothing very much at all can otherwise be found to distinguish the days before 410 a.d. with those afterwards.

Rome may have swapped leaders. Violence may have been done and property destroyed on a considerable scale. Individual tragedy was, we suspect, both undeniable and heart-rending, as it always is in such times.

Yet, the vast majority of men and women still lived their lives, tended their livestock, took their goods to market, and worshipped their gods, as they had always done Rome, or no Rome.

The thrifty and the enterprising still, on the whole, fared better than the prodigal and the unthinking. In fact, freed of the crushing exactions laid upon them by a Rome always eager to bribe its vast, unproductive military class into quietude, they may even have been left to enjoy more of the fruits of their own labors than usual.

But, the academic historians have always sought to ignore things like this, for these are concerns of common people of traders and farmers and historians focus mainly on the swaggering fools at the head of the State on generals and governors.

Even if we momentarily share their obsession and even if we stick to the old texts, unbacked by any harder evidence, the accepted view does not bear much scrutiny.

Take the case of those feeble Britons, for instance.

Here, it should be noted that Honorius' letter was not a denial of some grovelling plea for

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aid, but a recognition of their de facto and self-attained independence.

In early 5th-century Britain, memories still burned with the flames of the pogrom unleashed by Emperor Constantius II's emissary, Paulus Catena, sixty years before, after the native leaders had backed the wrong contender in a struggle for his master's throne.

Many of the current leaders' fathers had probably collaborated in fomenting what the texts call the "Barbarian Conspiracy," in 367 a.d. traditionally viewed as yet another mark of Britain's weakness, but now being revised into what may actually have been another concerted attempt to shed the Imperial yoke.

In fact, far from being wretched, the Britons invaded the continent several times themselves after this supposed disaster; notably, under Maximus in 383 a.d., and, again, under Constantine III in 409 a.d. They even deposed two previous, more circumspect leaders in swift succession in order to give Constantine his shot at the title!

Thus, just a year before Honorius wrote his famous missive, one faction of the Island Celts had already come close to deposing him, while another spurned his rule completely.

As Zosimus wrote of the period:

". . . [events saw] some of the Celtic peoples defecting from the Roman rule and living their own lives, independent from the Roman laws. The Britons therefore took up arms and, braving the danger on their own behalf, freed their cities from the barbarian threat. And all Armorica and the other Gallic provinces followed their example, freed themselves in the same way, expelling the Roman officials and setting up a constitution such as they pleased . . ."

If this was the case, if some Celtic Washingtons and Jeffersons had, indeed, won and formalized their people's freedom, what of the notorious Groans of the Britons' letter, addressed to Generalissimo Aetius a generation later? Surely this must prove that British sheep were still being shorn by Saxon wolves?

Well, perhaps not, for it can better be read as the futile obsecration of one pro-Roman (and Augustinian?) faction, losing out to their retro-Celtic (Pelagian?) foes.

Note that, in it, the plaintiffs were bleating that the barbarians push us to the sea; the sea pushes us back to the barbarians: between these two kinds of death, we are either slaughtered or drowned.

Anglo-historians swell with pride here, assuming that their virile Saxon forebears are pushing the effete Welsh off the cliffs of Cornwall, but a far more realistic construction is that supreme commander Vortigern's men are riding the imperial faction into the surf in Kent!

Moreover, as late as 470 a.d. when the Saxons had supposedly started their "ethnic cleansing" it was a contingent of 12,000 Britons under King Riothamus (tentatively identified by some as Vortigern's disobedient warrior son, Vortimer) which is said to have sailed up the Loire in the unsuccessful effort to succor the Emperor Anthemius against his Gothic foes.

So, contrary to popular belief, military aid and military adventurism did not always flow West from Rome, but often it was directed the other way around!

The victors write the history

But, no matter.

Objective truth counted for little when generations of Englishmen had been schooled in the ways of Rome and were taught to treat its authors' propagandistic Latin as plain fact.

Who understood that these same worthies and their teachers were all too eager to trace their contemporary naval and commercial pre-eminence back to the alleged superiority of their race?

Who realized that history must bend if Victorian overlords were eager to see in their own Empire a reflection of more ancient glories?

Thus was conjured up the myth of the Anglo-Saxon supremacy and its counterpoise, the rapid descent of the degenerate post-Roman Britons back to the mud huts and pig sties from

which their Italian masters had briefly roused them.

As evidence for this, the historians cited the collapse of urban society.

They noted the dwindling of the cash economy as the barely-civilized savages retreated to rural isolation and relied, once more, upon barter for the exchange of their few, poor goods.

Deprived of their Tacituses and Cassius Dio's, they scorned the natives' lack of learning and mocked the dearth of literacy, which had replaced the renowned intellectual salons of the auxiliary castra.

The fact that the Celtic Church, sponsored by the sovereign Celtic princes, was the re-educator of continental Europe and that its footsore saints were the proselytizers of both Faith and Science throughout these times, was neatly overlooked.

Even on the economic front, the distortions are plain.

New archaeological evidence and recent reinterpretations of old data suggest the towns had been undergoing a continual period of slow decay for many years prior to 410 a.d. and that the cause was not to be found in barbarian depredations, but in Rome's own dysfunctional society.

For far too long, Rome had lived by conquest—through seizing, by force of arms, what its spendthrift patricians and Caesarian mafiosi could not hope to gain by trade alone.

But once the Empire came to butt up against lands too infertile to be worth the taking, or against terrain too inhospitable for its Legions to control in the face of active native "insurgents," this predatory State turned increasingly inward to devour its own wealth producers instead.

Punitive taxes were needed, above all, to pay the vast numbers of soldiers.

In some strikingly modern ways, it was mainly the military contractors and the tradesmen (and trollops) in the towns (vici) which sprang up alongside the legionary camps who did well out of equipping and servicing (in all sorts of ways) their oppressors.

Naturally, in response to these tolls, rich men sought to keep their wealth to themselves, as far as was possible.

Rather than squandering money—some of it borrowed at hefty rates of interest—to build public edifices, such as baths and temples, solely for reasons of prestige, the urban elite began actively to avoid such impositions.

Indeed, the former privilege of Roman citizenship and the pride of holding the offices which accrued to it became such a burden that the wealthy retired to the Dominican Republics of their day, their country villas.

There, they could minimize the loss of their property to overt taxation and there they could avoid the constant, unsubtle pressure for those contributions aimed at displaying their loyalty to the regime.

So, unrepaired and unfrequented, town centers began to look dilapidated, long before any unwelcome barbarian tongues were heard in their near empty streets.

Fex urbis, lex orbis

Added to all this was the presence of that perennial, wasting affliction, that debilitating disease so often visited by reckless rulers on their long-suffering subjects—monetary inflation.

Long before Alaric's Goths had plundered the so-called Eternal City, its money had become so debased that Imperial tribute and taxes were having to be levied in kind, not in cash.

This greatly decreased the efficiency of the process. It also hurt the leadership indirectly, because it made tax collection more personal and more violently confrontational.

Gradually, then, the whole empire had become little more than an arena in which competing warlords would raise forces to bid for the throne.

Increasingly, its farmers and merchants were seen as nothing more than tax slaves to be

exploited in order to provide the Dole to the restless urban proletariat and to buy the fickle loyalties of the ever-important soldiers.

Over time, the difference between the "barbarians" and the Romans was becoming blurred, too.

For one, the legions' military pre-eminence became eroded as the hardy peasants of Italy in its ranks gave way to the unwilling sons of the conquered who were conscripted in their place.

Additionally, many sons of the unconquered would volunteer to join them— attracted by the pay and conditions and by the very modern enticement of the chance to learn a trade.

There was also the prospect of becoming a man of mark back home when the volunteer's term was up. This was an advancement aided substantially by the often sizeable retirement bonus with which nervous emperors made further attempts to keep the military caste inside.

That bonus, could, of course, be most readily employed as capital in a business which relied on the veteran's ability to use his inside contacts. He could call in a few favors, grease a few palms and so win a lucrative tender to supply his old army mess mates with their victuals, their gear, or their trinkets.

Once more, the parallels with today's "revolving doors" are obvious, Mr. Cheney.

But, it wasn't just the soldiers: "foreign" tradesmen and artisans, too, had learned what there was to learn from Rome and they applied it both in their home markets and inside the imperial lines.

While this meant tribal leaders far beyond the empire's boundaries were able to show off their collections of Roman jewellery and plate and to quaff the best Roman wines when feasting with their henchmen— just as their unsavory equivalents today all drive Mercedes and sport Rolex watches— it was they who often had the better of the terms of trade.

This must have discomfited the Romans then no less than China's new manufacturing competitiveness or India's growing software programming skills frighten British and American union bosses today.

Rome, then, was not only undermined from within, but it became much less singular in its abilities, as knowledge of its technologies and innovations diffused across its borders.

The lessons we should draw from all this is that though things were, in some senses, gradually getting worse as the Fifth Century began, many of the evils were not the result of sudden irruptions of savages from the outer fringes of the world, but were due primarily to a slow corrosion from within.

Inflation, arbitrary government, swingeing taxation, the confiscation of property— often undertaken on the flimsy pretext of punishing dissent, or after the accidental infringement of some obscure regulation: these we would all recognize as things which plague us today.

The development of an increasingly remote, self-serving and fabulously wealthy governing elite; the destruction of the bedrock middle class; the reliance of the poor on State grants and subsidies; the inhibition of free enterprise and the pervasive militarization of society— these are all things we also know all too well.

Our Rome, too, may be ending in exactly this fashion and in this, the End-of-the-World crowd may be right about a coming reckoning.

But, just like Ancient Rome was lost long before the Goths invaded her precincts, it will not be our empire's external foes who bring it down, but the self-inflicted wounds from which it has been suffering for decades.

Should we care?

At the margin, perhaps, we should, for we may have to work that bit harder to make our way against people outside the empire who will now be able to compete on a more level playing field than before.

But what we should also remember is that Rome's passing was not universally mourned— certainly not by those at risk of its institutionalized terror.

As the noted British archaeologist, Sir Mortimer Wheeler summed it up, after a lifetime of work in the field:

"I suffered from a surfeit of things Roman. I felt disgusted by the mechanistic quality of their art and by the nearness of their civilization at all times to cruelty and corruption."

We should recall also the passages above which showed that the Briton and some of their Gaulish cousins thrived under their new found freedoms and their recovered self-determination.

We should listen to the testimony of the present generation of less-hidebound archaeologists and historians who are beginning to see matters in a different light to that by which their professors worked.

Men such as Francis Pryor, who goes to great lengths to point out that history (and prehistory, too, in his case) provides much more evidence of continuity, overlaid with gradual change, than it does of revolutions or mass invasions.

In fact, based on a careful study of settlement patterns, artifact finds and burial practices, Pryor even doubts whether the "Anglo-Saxons" themselves might not be largely or wholly a post-dated fiction, constructed to give one set of relatively successful British kinglets a suitably glorious lineage, the better to distinguish themselves more clearly from their losing opponents among the other, no-less British kinglets!

At present, that seems too far a stretch for me, but his point is nonetheless well made.

To return to the main issue, will the fall of our Rome mean a fundamental change in the way our lives will be lived?

I would contend not and to support this contention, I would ask you to consider the historical record again.

Life goes on

Over four centuries of occupation and countless more of commercial traffic Britons adopted certain Roman mannerisms, were influenced by Roman religious cults, and sought to purchase Roman consumer goods, just as people in Tehran today wear Levi Jeans and Nike trainers while listening to REM or Eminem on their iPods.

But, at heart they remained Britons and, beyond even that broad classification, they were individual acting humans, each driven to provide for himself and his family through working to satisfy their needs.

In their labors, these Britons were aided by the use of what capital they had and they appreciated the benefits which came from specializing in a trade.

In this, they did best when their property was most secure from either legal or criminal jeopardy.

Then, just as now, they would look for opportunities to exchange the surplus to which their trade gave rise. They would swap it for others surplus goods at the best mutually agreed rate they felt they could achieve.

In short, their lives like ours were dominated, not so much by their rulers, as by plain old economic necessity: by matters such as scarcity, choice, capital, income, profit, and enterprise.

Do you suppose that all of this was called into question because a Pope died, or an Emperor was usurped?

Do you suppose people thought that the local warrior prince even if he spoke German, or Welsh, not Latin was any less, or any more, of an inevitable ill with which to put up than were the procurators and legates of a distant sovereign?

Do you think it will matter now if a President is thrown out, or if a Prime Minister resigns?

No.

Now, as then, Men will adapt to their new circumstances as they always do, if their

government allows them the necessary freedom.

Yes, there may be economic upsets and, yes, certain long-standing trading networks might become defunct. Conversely, new business ventures will suggest themselves as being potentially profitable and ships will still ply the deep oceans, with holds stuffed full of goods to exchange.

No doubt, different loyalties will be expressed as the balance of political risks changes.

Threats to life and property will take newer forms, though not necessarily less bearable ones.

Crucially, the blessings of thrift and hard work and the fruits of enterprise will still be enjoyed especially where the State's footprint lies a little less heavily on the soil.

In summary, life will go on today, as it did even when the mightiest Empire history had known was sinking into legend.

Life will go on, in the 21st Century as it did in the 5th—different, yet the same.

If we cut through the religious intolerance and ascetic distaste evident in the words of the sour old monk we met earlier, Saint Jerome himself, from his hermit's cell in Bethlehem, had already recognized this, well before the embers had ceased to smoulder in his erstwhile City of Light:

"The world sinks into ruin . . . he wrote, as mournful as ever. The renowned city, the capital of the Roman Empire, is swallowed up in one tremendous fire; and there is no part of the earth where Romans are not in exile. . . ."

But, pay particular attention to what he had to say next:

". . . and yet we have our minds set on the desire of gain. We live as though we are going to die tomorrow; yet we build as though we are going to live always in this world"

Well, of course, his contemporaries did just that—and it was no sin that they did, either, but rather a matter for thanksgiving!

For, why wouldn't we expect people to go about their daily lives in much the same fashion as they did before; buying and selling, building and dreaming, speculating and investing?

And why wouldn't we carry on, pretty much regardless, even if our modern Western Empire loses its pre-eminence in its turn?

No. The one thing of which we can be sure is that whatever the details of the looming change—more will stay the same than will be altered by it.

What you should do about it

Buy gold, then, if you will—but only because you share the view that it is very much harder to acquire than paper money is to create and that this means it should tend to maintain its value better.

But, whatever you do, don't buy it as part of a retreat from life you are making just because times seem more uncertain than they used to appear.

In trying to preserve your liberty from the zealots in charge of today's increasingly Roman State, don't surrender it instead to your fears by becoming either a metaphorical or an actual survivalist.

Don't be tempted to hole up in the mountains with only your water purifier, your rifle, and your Krugerrands for company for, if the end of the world does come, no amount of gold is going to comfort you very much.

But if it is only our version of Rome which falls—this will not invalidate the lasting truth that your own wealth is best preserved when it helps another entrepreneur in the process of creating his.

This means you must not hoard what is yours, for its real worth will only dwindle, if you do, eaten away by inflation, confiscated by the tax farmers.

No, rather, you must keep on trying to invest it wisely by using it to participate in

undertakings which make their owners a living through serving their post-Imperial, just as their pre-Imperial, customers better than their competitors can.

All in all, you know the Emperor Honorius may not have been such a fool, after all.

Maybe his rooster a most useful bird, economically speaking did matter more than the fate of any ruler or regime, for the final lesson we must draw is that, as long as Men are Men, entrepreneurship will always outlast empire.

So, take note, you historians of decline : our times will be no exception!

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