

# **Empires of Absent Mind: Rome and the USA**

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## **An imperialist culture?**

'We seem, as it were, to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind.' This is the famous explanation given by Victorian classicist and historian JR Seeley for the British Empire.

However debatable, it could equally be applied to the Roman republic. By 146 BC, the Romans found themselves the undisputed masters of the Mediterranean world. But they had achieved this without ever really intending to, and consequently they were unprepared to take on that mantle.

This is the position that the United States of America finds itself in today. Like the Roman republic, the US is now the policeman of the western world. Its armed forces are unstoppable, its influence is everywhere and just like the Romans, it got there by mistake.

Some commentators have said that the key difference between Rome and the US is that Rome was proud of her empire and America is not. The US, so the argument goes, will not forge an empire like Rome's, because the US does not have an imperialist culture.

This argument is based upon a fundamental misunderstanding of what drove these two great superpowers. In fact, both Rome and America were founded upon the same myth, and that myth has shaped their respective destinies.

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## **Creation myths**

In 509 BC, so the story goes, the son of the Etruscan tyrant of Rome, Tarquinius Superbus, fell in lust with a beautiful Roman bride called Lucretia. The young Superbus had no compunction in raping Lucretia and then casting her aside.

In revenge, Lucretia's family murdered the young Superbus and led the Romans in a rebellion against his father's domination. They ousted the Etruscans and set up the Roman republic.

The defining moment of this rebellion came when a hero called Horatius single-handedly held the bridge across the River Tiber against an Etruscan army as his fellows cut it down behind him.

The rebel republic was saved and went on to defeat its old masters, conquering great tracts of Italy in defense of its new-found liberty.

Fast-forward 2,000 years to Boston, Massachusetts, where a small group of die-hards are tipping a cargo of tea into the harbor in an act of defiance against their colonial masters. In the war that follows, the defining act of the fledgling American republic is the daring midnight ride of Paul Revere to warn his compatriots of an approaching British army.

And so the republic is saved and goes on to defeat its colonial masters, ejecting them from American soil and conquering vast tracts of colonial land in defense of its hard-won freedom.

The details are different, but the sentiment is the same. Both Rome and America were founded on a myth of liberty—a tale of plucky underdogs fighting an evil empire in defense of their rightful freedom from the oppressor’s yoke.

It doesn’t matter that the mythology is at best exaggerated and at worst untrue. The crucial thing is that the myth persisted and influenced everything that the new republics did for centuries to come.

The ‘founding fathers’ of the American constitution would have had no problem with that comparison. In fact, they were the first to draw it. Steeped as they were in classical literature, it seemed only natural to hark back to the greatest republic of them all—that of ancient Rome—for inspiration.

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### **Tyranny and war**

So, the whole concept of the separation of powers, with its checks and balances, was lifted virtually wholesale from Rome and given a new, modern gloss. You only have to read the names of key institutions in United States’ government—the senate, the veto, the governor—to see just what a debt the American republic owes to the republic of Rome.

And if you read the writings of the founding fathers, you will see just how consciously they pursued the creation of a new Rome. They even debated whether they should have two consuls, just like the Roman republic, instead of a single president.

The problem with the myth of liberty for a republic founded upon freedom is that it is supposed to be fighting against tyranny.

Tyrants invade their defenseless neighbors and impose their will upon the defeated population. Tyrants annex vast tracts of land that don’t belong to them. Tyrants go to war on a whim.

Republics only go to war in defense of their people. If this happens to expand their empire, then that’s not intentional, it’s just a natural consequence of a perfectly justified act of self-defense. After all, republics only annex territory that is rightfully theirs. Don’t they?

Both America and Rome spread like a virus into the bodies of their home continents without ever admitting that they were empire-building. They did this by creating yet another fiction, what Rome called the *casus belli*—the ‘cause of war’.

It was enshrined in Roman law that the republic could never go to war without a ‘just cause’. The law even defined what these just causes could be, and in all cases it ultimately boiled down to an act of aggression by another power.

This gave rise to the concept of the defensive war, espoused by all republics and democracies in history. The people will only go to war to defend their (and others') liberty against oppression, and as far as Rome and America were concerned, that's exactly what they did.

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### **Just causes**

An appeal for help from certain Greek cities prompted Rome's conquest of southern Italy. An appeal from San Francisco brought California into the United States.

A response to Gallic aggression took Rome into northern Italy. A highly-suspect attack on the USS Maine gave America the excuse to invade Cuba. (The newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst is rumored to have told his reporter to stay in Cuba at the time saying: 'You provide the pictures, I'll provide the war.').

Neither republic could admit that it was ruthlessly expanding at the expense of its neighbors.

Mythmaking plays its part here, too. The Alamo still stands as a symbol of plucky American individualists defending their liberty against the tyranny of the Mexican military junta.

'Remember the Alamo!' became a rallying cry for America's colonial take-over of Texas. Yet the Alamo is symbolic of something far more insidious that lay behind the concept of the defensive war. It sheds light on the dark rationale that drove both the American and Roman empires.

So when is a just cause not a just cause? Let's look at the Alamo in detail. It was the perfect pretext for the United States' annexation of Texas.

Never mind that the frontiersmen who defended it had no legitimate right to be there (it was, after all, Mexican territory). They were fellow Americans appealing to the United States for help in defense of their liberty, and that was reason enough for the United States to invade.

It is possible, even likely, that the Alamo was a spontaneous act of self-expression on the part of American frontiersmen, but that really doesn't matter. What matters is that Texas ended up in American hands because America went to war to 'defend' the rights of a bunch of adventurers who almost certainly had no right to be there in the first place.

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### **Sudden superpowers**

Such 'absent-minded' expansionism has its consequences. In 264 BC, Rome intervened in Sicily on behalf of a group of Latin pirates called the Mamertines. These Mamertines were using the town of Messana in Sicily as a base from which to pillage the area. This naturally annoyed the local inhabitants, who tried to throw them out.

When Rome stepped in, the Sicilians appealed to Carthage—the great North African trading power that dominated the Mediterranean. All of a sudden, Rome found herself thrust out of the local concerns of Italy and fighting a war on a world stage.

Three wars and a hundred years later, Rome had lost more than a quarter of a million men and the African city was a pile of rubble.

In 146 BC, the hawks in the senate pointed to evidence provided by Rome's allies that Carthage was rearming and preparing to strike once more. Never mind the fact that these allies had most to gain if Carthage was ground into the dust. '*Delenda Carthago est!*' they thundered: 'Carthage must be destroyed!' And destroyed it was.

Rome's victory changed everything. Suddenly Rome was a superpower—a force to be reckoned with. A power you could appeal to. Such power inevitably breeds arrogance. Even before the destruction of Carthage, when the Persian king Antiochus invaded Egypt in 168 BC, the Romans dispatched an envoy called Popilius Laenas to deal with the situation.

He did so by drawing a line in the sand, stepping back and telling Antiochus that if he took one step further onto Egyptian soil, Rome would declare war. Antiochus decided not to cross the line.

America now finds itself in a very similar position to the Roman republic of 146 BC. It is the dominant power on the world stage. Its armies are unstoppable and its culture permeates everywhere. It controls its foreign interests through what the Romans would have called 'client' kings—local rulers propped up by the superpower.

If it doesn't like what a 'rogue' state is doing, it flexes its military and economic muscle until that state backs down or succumbs to war.

Yet the pressures of such dominance inevitably warped Rome until it was a republic no more. How the United States fares in the same position will depend on what it can learn from the histories written by Rome.