

## **America's Disgrace in the Middle East is the Death of an Empire. Vladimir Putin is Caesar Now**

by Robert Fisk via jess - The Independent UK *Friday, Oct 18 2019, 8:01pm*  
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In days gone by, I used to compare the Trump presidency with the Arab dictatorships. He took preposterous pleasure in the company of Egypt's Sisi (60,000 political prisoners) and his inane ramblings had much in common with those of Muammar Gaddafi, who also "authored" a book he never wrote but whom Trump never met (albeit that Tony Blair and Gaddafi kissed each other on the cheek). But over the past week, I've begun to realise that the crackpot in the White House has much more in common with ancient Rome.

My former classics professor once told me - when I melodramatically called him on my mobile phone from the original Roman forum during the US occupation of Iraq under George W Bush - that the Romans were a "manic" people, but that they would have been pretty unimpressed with the American handling of the Iraqi campaign.

He was right. But I am now convinced that there is something distinctly "manic" about the Trump presidency. The hatred, the threats, the fury, have much in common with both the Roman republic (Rome's version of popular "democracy") and the Roman empire, when quite a number of emperors showed themselves to be just as insane as Trump.

Cato the Censor, a dangerous man, would end each of his speeches in Rome with the words *Carthago delenda est*. "Carthage must be destroyed". Is this not exactly the language of Trump? Did he not say that he could have Afghanistan "wiped off the face of the earth", that he could "totally destroy" North Korea, that Iran "will be destroyed" if it attacks the US?

Cato got what he wanted. Carthage was indeed razed, its people sold into slavery, although its lands were not in fact sown with salt as English historians would later claim. So far, Trump has been more Cicero than Cato, Pompeo more Pliny than Pompey. So far.

But the American retreat from Syria, its army's greatest disgrace only ghosted over by its new role as Saudi Arabia's mercenaries - for the new US military arrival in the kingdom is to be paid for by the regime which butchered Jamal Khashoggi - has dark echoes in antiquity.

Contrary to the Hollywood version of history, the Roman empire did not collapse in a couple of days. The Goths, Ostrogoths and Visigoths did not just gobble up Italy over a weekend. The fall of the empire came slowly, over years, in small incremental pieces: legions forgotten, tribal allies unpaid - and then betrayed.

One of Rome's most troublesome provinces was Cilicia. It was always changing hands. Its people allied themselves to Rome - and were then abandoned when legions left or taxes ran out. Cilicia, by extraordinary mischance, lay almost exactly along the western border of what is today the Turkish-Syrian (Kurdish) frontier.

There are still a few Roman ruins in that ancient province to remind its present-day armies of what -

they should have surely realised – would be their fate. I doubt if there is a single US soldier in Syria – who must, of course, negotiate their own way out of that equally ancient country – who knows of this. Institutional memory, let alone historical memory, has long ago been erased by the internet.

The Roman empire fell in bits. The senators, living in the political wreckage of the old Roman republic, knew that something was going wrong. The people understood their demise only in stages. The great Roman roads went unrepaired. The legions could not move so fast (even if they were still loyal to Rome). Then the imperial mail service from north Africa was impaired, even halted. The wheat for bread – often from what is today the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon – failed to arrive in Rome.

Amid popular unrest in Rome, where rival leaders could and did physically threaten each other, these matters often went unnoticed. Impeachment, alas, was not an option in the ancient world.

But the sword (or poison) could do its work. Political enemies would be accused of treachery. “Crucify them!” But is that not what Trump says of the American press, the Democrats or anyone who dares to confront him with his abominable lies and his assaults on American democracy?

No, I am not suggesting that the American empire will leave us quite like this. But last week’s deplorable abandonment of the Kurds, Trump’s wickedness in allowing the Turks – and their wretched “Arab” allies – to slaughter their way into northern Syria, will have the same effect as it did in antiquity. If you can no longer trust Rome, to which other empire do you turn?

Well, Putin’s, of course. Tyrant he may be – but at least he’s sane. And his legions stayed out of the war in Syria and saved the Assad regime. They cleared the highways of Isis mines – they restored the roads, sometimes (incredibly) what were once Roman roads – and they learned Arabic. Perhaps, indeed, Putin now plays the role of the later Roman empire of the east, the Christian one which survived in Constantinople/Byzantium/Istanbul for hundreds more years after the fall of Rome itself. All the Middle East is now his empire, every capital welcoming the emperor: Tehran, Cairo, Ankara, Damascus, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi.

More than 20 years ago, I was in Washington, seeking to find the missile-maker who manufactured the rocket which Israel fired into a civilian ambulance in southern Lebanon, killing all inside. And I was much struck at how Roman Washington looked. Its great palaces of state (save for the State Department itself, of course) were self-consciously modelled on Roman architecture.

Washington was not built as the capital of a physical empire – more a philosophical one, I suspect, in my kinder moments – but it looks (like Vienna, Berlin, Paris, London) as if the early Americans of the independence era realised it might one day be the capital of the most powerful nation on earth. Well, it was.

But Trump has changed all that. To the despair of his few friends (of the non-“manic” kind) and the delight of his enemies, he has laid America low. The Syrians, whose history goes back far longer than America’s, have played their old political policy again: wait. And wait. And wait. And then drive into Manbij the moment the Americans leave. That’s what Rome’s enemies did when the empire’s frontiers crumbled in Germania and then in Gaul and then in the Balkans – of all places – and then in Palmyra and in what is today Syria.

As for Washington’s noble architecture, it now takes its place alongside the old capital of the Austro-Hungarian empire, where the fine Viennese buildings of state seem shamed by their majesty. The powerful and historical walls to study today are those of the Kremlin.

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