



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

[fff@fff.org](mailto:fff@fff.org) [www.fff.org](http://www.fff.org)

## **The United States and the Roman Empire**

### **by Lawrence W. Reed**

Nearly four decades before the birth of Christ, the Roman orator Cicero offered this sound advice: "The budget should be balanced, public debt should be reduced, the treasury should be rebuilt, the arrogance of officialdom should be tempered and controlled, and assistance to foreign hands should be curtailed, lest Rome fall."

Well, the Romans didn't take his advice and guess what? Rome fell.

At nearly \$3 trillion, our government's "national debt" represents an ominous recurrence of just what Cicero warned twenty centuries ago. If figures that large mean little to you, let's put it another way. If the national debt were in \$1 bills, it would stack almost to the moon, fill 282,730 dump trucks, weigh as much as 2.14 million Oldsmobile Cutlasses, or buy enough food to feed the current population of Los Angeles for 978 years.

Government in ancient Rome grew to mammoth size for some of the same reasons ours has. The philosopher George Santayana may have had that in mind when he said, "Those who ignore history are condemned to repeat it." Consider the following:

Long before Christ, a Roman politician named Clodius was elected to public office on a platform of "free wheat for the masses." When Julius Caesar came to power, he found 320,000 persons in Rome — a city of 1 million — on government grain relief.

Emperor Nero once declared, "Let us tax and tax again. Let us see to it that no one owns anything!" He may also have been the architect of the first urban-renewal program. He burnt a large portion of Rome to make way for a number of construction projects.

A few years later, another emperor dabbled in farm policy. To reduce production and raise the price of wine, he ordered the destruction of half of the vineyards in Rome's provinces.

The ancient government assumed the responsibility of providing the people with publicly funded entertainment and arts programs. One historian estimates the modern equivalent of \$100 million a year was poured out in circuses and gladiator duels alone.

Welfare statists loved it in A.D. 274 when Emperor Aurelian made the right to relief hereditary and boosted welfare benefits considerably.

Businesses were pulverized under a burden of public hostility and excessive taxation and regulation. The masses demanded their handouts and the most productive in Roman society were made to cough up. Some of them, thinking they were buying time, actually supported those politicians and funded those institutions which were dedicated to their very destruction. What was left of their businesses was eventually confiscated and nationalized.

City administrations within the empire spent themselves silly and, beginning with the emperor Hadrian, were bailed out through a kind of "federal revenue sharing," with lots of strings attached. (After all, he who pays the piper sooner or later calls the tune.)

Spending to satisfy special interests and a soaring debt prompted the government to debauch the national currency. It imposed wage and price controls, seized the people's gold holdings, took the silver out of the coinage and manufactured junk money like there was no tomorrow. And for Rome, there wasn't.

The great empire expired in A.D. 476. It fell like a ripe plum to foreign enemies. When the barbarians walked into the city, many Romans actually welcomed them in the belief that anything was better than the tyranny of their own tax collectors and regulators.

It has been said that many civilizations have run their course by this pattern: From bondage to individualism to great courage to liberty to abundance, then from abundance to complacency to apathy to dependency and finally back to bondage again.

More to the point, what is called "Kershner's First Law" sums up what happened to Rome pretty well: "When a self-governing people confer upon their government the power to take from some and give to others, the process will not stop until the last bone of the last taxpayer is picked bare."

Are we going to continue letting it happen here?

*Lawrence W. Reed, an economist, is president of the Mackinac Center in Midland, Michigan, and also serves on the Board of Speakers of The Future of Freedom Foundation.*

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