

Homeland Security Circa AD 285

by Harold B. Jones, Jr.

Alexis de Tocqueville said that nothing is so threatening to individual liberty as extended war. Wars add to the relative power of the central government, and this change in the balance of power is accompanied by the decline of personal freedom. “A long war almost always places nations in this sad alternative: that their defeat delivers them to destruction and their triumph to despotism.”¹

He seems to have been thinking of Rome, which was destroyed less by barbarian invasions than by its own bureaucracy. The record points to the dangers in Mr. Bush’s Department of Homeland Security.

The last of the second-century emperors who paid attention to the proper tasks of government was Marcus Aurelius. At the center of the following century’s chaos was the Roman Army. It was finally brought to heel by Aurelian, of whom Gibbon in an admirable passage says, “His own conduct gave a sanction to his laws, and the seditious legions dreaded a chief who had learned to obey, and was worthy to command.”²

When Diocletian came to the throne in 285, the single most powerful force on the planet, the Roman military, was a pale shadow of its former self. Its decline is evident in the fact that to provide for the city’s

security, Aurelian had been forced to build a wall, the first that Rome had seen in five centuries.³ The *Pax Romana* was a thing of the past.

Diocletian’s plan for homeland security was one of systematic centralization. The empire was divided into 96 provinces, 72 dioceses, and 4 prefectures, each with its own civil and military rulers. Every official received his appointment directly from the Emperor. A vast bureaucracy stretched out to choke anything around which it could get its tentacles. The Roman government, says Will Durant, had come to regard democracy and local autonomy as the luxuries of security and peace; it “excused its dictatorship by the needs of actual or imminent war.”⁴

The technique of concealing irresponsible expenditure by means of public borrowing had yet to be discovered. Current expenses for the army, public works, the dole, the bureaucracy, and the imperial court had to be met from current receipts. Taxes rose to new heights. As the burden grew, an increasing number of people tried to escape from it. Virtually every taxpayer became a tax evader. A special force of revenue police was organized to examine every citizen’s financial resources. Slaves, wives, and children were tortured in the attempt to determine every household’s assets and income.

To insure supplies for the cities and the army, Diocletian entrusted the control of industry to the imperial bureaucracy. The merchants, ship owners, and crews of the

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Diocletian

grain trade were persuaded to accept this control in exchange for guaranteed employment and a guaranteed rate of return. Armaments factories, textile mills, and bakeries were nationalized if they could not meet the government's demands for goods of a specified quality at a specified price. Workers were bound to their jobs. Detailed regulations spelled out the tasks of butchers, bakers, masons, glassblowers, and ironworkers. "In every large town," writes Paul-Louis, "the state became a powerful employer . . . standing head and shoulders above the private industrialists, who were in any case crushed by taxation."⁵

From the citizens who attempted to meet their obligations to the Empire with its own debased currency Diocletian demanded payment in kind. Warehouses were set up to store the proceeds. In 301 he issued his *Edictum de pretiis*, which put a wage-price cap on everything that was important for imperial security. In the preamble to this law he described himself and his colleagues as the "watchful parents of the whole human race" and complained of the "abominable thieves" who were attempting to destroy "the general prosperity" with "usurious and ruinous prices."⁶

These "reforms," says M.I. Rostovtzeff, gave "permanence to the policy of organized robbery on the part of the state" and "made all productive economic activity impossible." But there were fortunes to be made if one could find a place at the public trough. Society was thus "divided into two classes: those who became steadily poorer and more destitute, and those who built up their pros-

perity on the spoils of the ruined empire."⁷

Destroyed by taxation, farmers ceased to maintain their drainage and irrigation systems. As marshes reclaimed the land, malaria became more prevalent. Roads deteriorated and with them the little that was left of the empire's once busy commercial life. Private citizens found no reason to exert themselves on behalf of a civilization that brought them nothing but pain. Those who could escape the burdens of responsibility did so. The barbarians did not so much conquer Rome as take over a polity that had lost the will to live.

Homeland Self-Destruction

Why did Rome rise as it did, and why did it fall? These, it has been said, are history's greatest questions. The declining vigilance associated with the prosperity of the second century and the rising uncertainty associated with the political chaos of the third may provide partial answers. Rome may already have had one foot in the grave by the time Diocletian came to the throne. If that is true, however, it is equally true that the final nails of the Roman coffin were hammered in by the centralization of the third and fourth centuries.

Although it may be too early to talk about the final nails in the American coffin, it is more than possible that the Department of Homeland Security will get the country measured for one. Twenty-two federal departments will be reorganized into four divisions and provided with a budget of \$40 billion. In size Homeland Security will be behind only Defense and Veterans Affairs. The net effect, according to Mr. Bush, will not be an expansion of federal power but the use of new technology and management techniques in the creation of an "agile organization" that can meet constantly evolving dangers.

He should know better. His own most bitter battles have been not with the Democrats in Congress, but with federal officials. The EPA, for example, was quick to undercut his policy on the Kyoto agreement by insisting on emissions as the cause of global warming. Some of this bureaucratic inde-

pendence may be traceable to the policies of the Clinton administration, which allowed federal officials to run free. Most of it, however, is due to the nature of bureaucracies, which seem to operate by laws of their own. Commenting on the vexations awaiting his successor in the White House, Harry Truman said, "He'll sit here and he'll say, 'Do this! Do that!' And nothing will happen. Poor Ike—it won't be a bit like the Army."⁸

While bureaucracies are in theory subservient to Congress and the president, in practice they display a large measure of independence. Max Weber observed that a high-ranking civil servant, whose position is secure, has little to fear from an elected official, whose position is not. The bureaucrat, moreover, having been at his post for a long time, knows more about the inner workings of government than the elected official does.⁹ The uncomfortable truth is that George Bush is more dependent on his bureaucrats than they are on him. His small victory with regard to union rules and accountability in the new department does nothing to change that.

Bureaucracies are even less responsive to the demands of a changing situation than they are to orders from above. According to the Peter Principle, "Bureaucracy defends the status quo long past the time when the quo has lost its status."¹⁰ This is no accident. It flows from the nature of bureaucracy, which Weber said was designed to meet "calculable and recurrent needs by means of a normal routine."¹¹ Bureaucracies can (sometimes) deal with the predictable by means of a familiar procedure, but they have trouble making decisions. Meetings go on endlessly and nothing happens, as in the case of the Federal Aviation Administration's process for picking the colors of a Denver air-traffic control tower, which took six years.¹² And if bureaucracies cannot make decisions they are incapable of initiative, creativity, or innovation.

A bureaucracy excels at preventing, said Tocqueville, not at doing. A local headline reads, "Bureaucracy Leaves Computers in the Dust." The story is about a dozen boxes of Gateway personal computers that sit

unopened in a courthouse storage area. The county clerk purchased them three years ago for managing court fees but neglected to obtain the necessary software and has since forgotten about them. According to one state representative, this is the common experience with government's attempt to enter the information age.

Such a record provides an idea of the administrative problems facing Diocletian. He thought he could deal with them by increasing the number of his officials and arranging them in a taller pyramid. He soon learned, as Mr. Bush is about to learn, that a bureaucracy becomes even less effective as it expands. Dr. Max Gammon's *Theory of Bureaucratic Displacement* says that in every bureaucratic system an increase in expenditure will lead to a decrease in productivity. Expanding bureaucracies, he says, become "like 'black holes' in the economic universe, simultaneously sucking in resources and shrinking in terms of 'emitted' production."¹³ Case in point: the bureaucracy that reduced Rome's capacity for dealing with the challenges of the late third and early fourth centuries. It is probable that the Department of Homeland Security will have a similar effect on America's capacity for dealing with terrorism.

Mind Control

This assumes that the threat really is all that it has been made out to be. The media's willingness to adopt "terrorism" as a central theme should be enough to give us pause. It is possible that the recipe for the current crisis reads "one part fact to ten parts spin." During the late '50s and early '60s it was argued we needed to expand the defense budget because, given the rate at which the Soviet economy was growing, the Russians would soon overtake us. Perhaps the future will show that early twenty-first century worries about terrorism are no better founded than mid-twentieth century concern over the jet bomber and missile "crises."

If the threat is real, though, administrative centralization is not the way to deal with it. A long stream of research has demonstrated

hierarchies' shortcomings when dealing with uncertain environments. What works in such situations are organizations that depend on strong personal commitment and "diffuse interpersonal ties."¹⁴ What works, in other words, are organizations like al Qaeda. In dealing with them, a stodgy bureaucracy cannot be expected to have much success.

To the extent that the threat is real, Mr. Bush's Department of Homeland Security will accumulate nothing more than a list of explanations for its failure to stem terrorist attacks. If this happens, it is unlikely that the officials in charge will be told to pack their bags and go home. The more probable result will be that failure will lead to requests for additional funding, the bureaucracy will expand, and its ineffectiveness will combine with its expense to make it unbearable. That is what happened to Rome. "The number of ministers, of magistrates, of officers, and of servants, who filled the different departments of state," writes Gibbon, "was multiplied beyond the example of former times; and (if we may borrow the warm expression of a contemporary), 'when the proportion of those who received exceeded the proportion of those who contributed, the provinces were oppressed by the weight of tributes.' From this period to the extinction of the empire, it would be easy to deduce an uninterrupted series of clamors and complaints."¹⁵

As complaints increased, the emperors felt an increasing need to get control of public opinion. Galerius convinced Diocletian that Christianity was the last obstacle to absolute rule. The persecution was carried out with the same bureaucratic plodding that characterized everything else about third-century Rome. One could avoid trouble simply by filling out the paperwork to show that he had made obeisance to the official gods: "To the commission appointed to supervise sacrifices . . . I request you to certify this below."¹⁶

When Constantine took control of the Empire in 312 the persecution came to an end. His "conversion" to Christianity gave expression not so much to a change of heart as to an insight with regard to the regula-

tion of popular sentiment. Better organized than paganism, the Church was a better means to the uniformity of opinion. Constantine may have become a Christian toward the end of his life, but for as long as he was on the throne he regarded religion as a device for easing the problems of administration. This is what he told his bishops: "I had proposed to lead back to a single form the ideas which all people conceive of the Deity; for I feel strongly that if I could induce men to unite on this subject, the conduct of public affairs would be considerably eased."¹⁷

It was not long before the Church, now backed by the power of a threatened state, became more insistent on uniformity and more effective in enforcing it than paganism could ever have hoped to be.

Suppressing Dissent

The history of the United States offers fewer precedents than that of Rome for the use of violence in the pursuit of political correctness. One need not go back to the Salem witch trials, however, to see that Americans are as much subject to mass hysteria and therefore to cooperation in the suppression of dissent as any other people. The McCarthy hearings spoke to a widespread concern and were allowed to continue. More recently we have McCain-Feingold's attempt to legally restrict free speech.

Then, too, we have writers like Philip Howard, who was amazed to discover "that America has lost the idea that people with responsibility . . . should have the authority to make decisions just because it seems right."¹⁸ The people subject to their decisions, in other words, should have no right of appeal. To such sentiments former Senators George McGovern and Alan Simpson gave their support in a *Wall Street Journal* article entitled "We're Reaping What We Sue."¹⁹ Its title notwithstanding, the article had little to do with frivolous lawsuits. It was concerned primarily with setting bureaucratic decisions free from the nuisance of challenges in the courts. As Howard puts it with a clever semantic shift, the

“regime of individual rights” has now become a threat to freedom.²⁰

Two generations before Diocletian, Roman jurists like Papian, Paulus, and Ulpian had begun similarly to offer arguments for the necessity of absolutism. During World War II, the Office of Price Administration required slaughterhouses to deliver meat for less than the cost of the cattle and the labor it took to process them.²¹ The distance between ancient Rome and modern America may not be so great as the centuries suggest.

Our Last Best Chance

The expression “War on Terror” leads us astray. It is not a matter of pitched battles between standing armies. There will seldom be a need for moving regiments to the right place on the field. Terrorist acts are local and specific. They can be hindered only by means of personal initiative and individuals’ expertise with regard to the situation at hand. That is the story behind Rome’s success in repelling barbarian invasions during the centuries before the Punic Wars. It is also the story behind America’s only success in thwarting the attacks staged on 9/11. It is the story as well of the speed with which New York was cleaned up in the days that followed.

In the wake of Hurricane Andrew, Miami residents took the initiative to clean things up and help one another. They were soon joined by volunteers from as far away as Canada. Progress was rapid—until the Dade County Emergency Management Office stepped in to ensure that all the rules were being observed. If those who came to help at Ground Zero had faced a similar obstacle, university studies about the best way to proceed would still be in their early stages, and the debris would remain untouched even now.

Rome was not destroyed by the barbarians. It destroyed itself:

. . . the rising costs of armies, doles, public works, an expanding bureaucracy,

and a parasitic court; the depreciation of the currency; the discouragement of ability and the absorption of investment capital by confiscatory taxation, the strait jacket of serfdom placed upon agriculture, and of caste forced upon industry: all these conspired to sap the material bases of Italian life, until at last the power of Rome was a political ghost surviving its economic death.²²

These were the symptoms of the disease that destroyed Rome. If they are symptomatic also of what troubles modern America we do well to pay them heed. The United States cannot be saved from terrorism by expanding the powers of the central government. It can be saved only by setting individuals free to deal with the concrete reality of actual situations. □

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2. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Modern Library) I, p. 254.

3. Carl Roebuck, *The World of Ancient Times* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1966), p. 690.

4. Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), p. 641.

5. Paul-Louis, *Ancient Rome at Work* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927), p. 285.

6. Durant, pp. 642–43.

7. M.I. Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957 [1926]), pp. 530f.

8. Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership* (New York: Wiley, 1960), p. 9.

9. David Mechanic, “Sources of Power of Lower Participants in Complex Organizations,” *Administrative Science Quarterly*, December 1962, pp. 349–65.

10. George Melloan, “Bush’s Toughest Struggle Is with His Own Bureaucracy,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 25, 2002, Sec. A, p. 19.

11. Max Weber, *From Max Weber*, trans. H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 245.

12. Philip K. Howard, *The Lost Art of Drawing the Line* (New York: Random House, 2001), p. 127.

13. Quoted in Milton and Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 155.

14. W. Richard Scott, *Organizations: Rational, Natural, and Open Systems*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1998), p. 161.

15. Gibbon, I, p. 333; the quotation comes from the works of Lactanius.

16. Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), p. 73.

17. Quoted in Durant, p. 659.

18. Howard, p. 1.

19. George McGovern and Alan K. Simpson, “We’re Reaping What We Sue,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 17, 2002, Sec. A, p. 20.

20. Howard, p. 203.

21. Henry Hazlitt, *Economics in One Lesson* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1979 [1946]), p. 119.

22. Durant, p. 668.