



What Happens When Republics Fall?

The meaning of the term “republic” has nowadays become so diluted as to signify in the popular mind any form of government not headed by some type of titular monarch. This is a pity, because it means that only seldom does the average citizen give any consideration to the very different types of non-monarchical government that men have devised, both historically and in the present day.

Roughly speaking, “popular” governments, or governments intended to represent in some degree the will of the people, whatever that may entail, can be roughly divided into two classes, as James Madison long ago observed: democracies and republics. By the former is meant a government in which the people truly govern themselves directly, without any representative intermediary; they legislate at will, according to the ever-changing whims of the majority.

Democracies are therefore unstable, short-lived, prone to spasms of violence and persecution, and prejudicial to all minorities. The Founders were well aware of these fatal limitations of pure democracy, which is why they insisted that republics — popular governments in which some scheme of representation exists for the stability of the state and the protection of minorities — are much to be preferred.

Because the Founders expended so much ink pointing out the flaws of democracy, as evidenced by the transient nature of many of the ancient Greek city-states, Athens in particular, we might be tempted to assume that there are no flaws inherent in that other cardinal form of popular government, the republic. After all, as observers from Polybius to Madison have remarked, well-constituted republics that attempt to strike a balance between reflection of the popular will, with all its vicissitudes, and maintenance of a state capable of perpetuating itself and many of its flaws, have been shown to be the most durable and successful vehicles of human governance. The Roman Republic lasted for many hundreds of years, changing but very slowly over much of that period. Its intricate separation of powers among senators, consuls, tribunes, and other offices discouraged revolutionary innovation until the arrival of the Gracchi and Marius upon the scene, and kept dilute the powers of the state while allowing the Roman people to prosper as no other had before them.





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Much the same could be said of that gem of the Middle Ages, the Republic of Venice, with its doges and senators and Maggior Consiglio. Founded sometime around 600 A.D. as a refuge from Lombard invaders and an attempt to re-create, in miniature, the glories of republican Rome, Venice endured as an independent republic until the time of Napoleon Bonaparte, enjoying for many centuries economic and political hegemony over the entire Mediterranean basin.

The republic birthed at the American Constitutional Convention in 1787 has become the greatest and most successful state the world has yet seen, a modern-day Roman Republic with all of the latter's organizational, technological, and economic precocity and none of its barbaric pagan vestiges. The parallels between the city on the Tiber and its modern-day counterpart on the Potomac are so evident as to be cliché.

It goes almost without saying that, per the examples of Rome and Venice, the danger of a well-constituted republic becoming transformed into an appalling empire is an ever-present peril. But the acuity of that peril is seldom appreciated — and therein lies the problem with republics. The rise and fall of autocratic empires is the defining civilizational pattern since the first city-states arose in lower Mesopotamia. Despots from Sargon and Alexander to Genghis Khan and Hitler have arisen as predictably as the ebb and flow of seasons to inflict misery on the human race in the name of their unappeasable egos.

But most of these empires, awful as their actions have been, have not long outlasted their maniacal creators. The frenetic conquests and spoliation of Alexander and his Macedonian generals soon gave way to the comparatively benign Hellenistic Age after the former's untimely death. The grandchildren of Genghis Khan saw his vast and bloody dominion parcelled out into smaller khanates that quickly evolved into rather ordinary Asiatic states. And Hitler's monstrous Third Reich endured barely a decade; out of the ashes of its ruin arose a modern, comparatively enlightened and liberated German state that became one of the economic wonders of the 20th century. Even the grandest dynastic empires seldom sustain their vitality for more than a few generations.

But with empires that grow out of well-constituted republics, the situation is otherwise. It has been remarked that Rome (the Western Empire, at least) took longer to fall than the entire lifespan of nearly every other state in recorded history. From the first excesses of the Gracchi and Marius to the last emperor's pathetic capitulation in 476 A.D., the "fall" of Rome followed a 600-year trajectory. And during most of those 600 years, Rome was a pageant of bloodshed, conquest, and repression on a scale that would have made even the bloodthirsty Assyrian potentates blanch.

Much the same could be said of the Venetian Republic, which by the time of the League of Cambrai was no longer remotely deserving of its sublime styling, "Most Serene." The late Venetian state morphed into a ruthlessly efficient and repressive police state with an appalling set of laws and draconian penalties. When this miserable scourge was finally stamped out by a greater oppressor, Bonaparte, its passage was scarcely grieved.

Herein lies the deadly peril of republics: The very institutions that they so painstakingly maintain to maximize the liberty of their citizens and the stability of their body politic are susceptible to perversion into the most efficient and sustainable instruments of tyranny. Where most despotism arises as the fruit of some tyrant's arbitrary will, despotism erected on republican ruins is based on the rule of law and long-held customs and institutions. That these institutions have far more durability than the whims of a would-be world sovereign like Alexander or Tamerlane is one of history's sternest lessons.



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Image: painting of the abdication of Ludovico Manin, the last doge of Venice



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