Ten Caesars: Roman Emperors from Augustus to Constantine

(Barry Strauss)

August 8, 2020

The Roman Empire, or at least the western Roman Empire, is a history of decline, as we all know. But not linear decline, and that matters. *Ten Caesars*, the latest offering from the always-excellent Barry Strauss, profiles the ten most consequential Roman emperors, narrating the ups and downs of the empire they ruled. Strauss's book is capsule history, a chapter-by-chapter summary of the profiled emperors, offering facts without many larger explicit conclusions, so there is little new here for anyone with even passing knowledge of the Empire. Think of it, then, as a refresher course.

By coincidence, just recently one Daniel Voshart created, using a machine-learning tool fed portraits and sculptures of the emperors, what he believes to be photorealistic pictures of them, up to A.D. 285. It's impressive, and well worth your time to check out his article (on Medium), and to look at the photos themselves—it helps bring them even more to life when you are reading this book, or, for that matter, this review.

Strauss begins with Augustus, naturally enough. "Few historical figures show better what it takes to win at everything." We live in times that seem they are of consequence, but so far are really pernicious farce. Augustus lived in, and created, times of actual consequence, managing by force of will and luck to turn the decayed Republic into a successful Empire. He even managed his succession effectively, meaning peacefully, despite having no son of his own. No emperor was ever again as successful or beloved; really, the entire history of the Empire from there was downhill.

One key problem facing even the most competent emperors was that changing the form of government didn't change the excessive corruption of the Roman elites, which was irreversible given the impracticality of wholesale replacement (as it is may be irreversible for today's America, which has a far more corrupt ruling class, but wholesale reworking is perhaps more feasible for us). As a result, the main task of an emperor was to handle and balance competing groups of elites, all out for their

own interests, few out for the interests of Rome except secondarily. (The plebeians became irrelevant to the political system, which they were not under the Republic, becoming merely pacified with the famous bread and circuses—also a bad change, since every society should have every level of society invested in it.) Tiberius, far less of a natural politician than Augustus, found keeping this balance harder, yet still managed to keep the empire stable and the military strong, while dialing back Roman expansionism. Even so, the seeds of later fractures were already obvious in his time, in retrospect, and Tiberius came to be viewed as a tyrant—not because he was Emperor, but because of how he ruled.

We get some lurid bad behavior in this book. However, that's not the main focus, so Strauss skips Caligula (with some mention of him to complete the picture, a pattern he repeats for most of the emperors who don't get their own chapters), and moves to Nero, who also behaved badly, but had more consequence. I've always found Nero, the last member of Augustus's family to rule, boring, and Strauss doesn't change my mind, though the presence of some other men in his time, such as Seneca, makes his reign a bit more interesting. Nero rightly gets the blame for beginning the major persecutions of Christians (something not downplayed by Strauss, as it is often downplayed by modern historians); that and his other bad behavior make him remembered. Ultimately, his character simply made him not up for the task of ruling, and so he got what he deserved—and this only in A.D. 68, when Augustus died in A.D. 14. The Empire seemed to be showing instability early.

Or was it? The instability of Nero's time was different in kind from that of the late Republic, which involved near-continuous civil war and great questions of state that required a permanent resolution. The new instability was instead micro-targeted, consisting primarily in erosion of the rule of law as applied to the ruling class. In its operations as an empire, the Empire seemed, and continued for a long time to seem, like a success. The average Roman probably was almost completely unaffected by what happened among the ruling classes, and he was vastly better off than under the late Republic. So, if the rule of law is absent among the ruling class, yet present among the rest of the populace, does that necessarily harm a society? In essence, such a ruling class exchanges the application of the rule of law to itself for the opportunity to participate actively in supreme, arbitrary, power. High risk, high reward. (No society

can survive without the rule of law being generally applicable outside the ruling class; movies that show medieval Europe, or Japan, as a place where nobles regularly went around raping and killing commoners with impunity, or where general anarchy was common, are silly. Medieval England, for example, was a notably peaceful and lawful place, much more so than parts of modern England, and the same has been true for most, or all, successful civilizations. That the Thirty Years War was terrible is not to the contrary.) However, I suspect lack of rule of law among the ruling class does harm a society in the long run. It creates disunity, and ruling class disunity diverts energy that could be used for accomplishment, resulting in members of the ruling class instead focusing on extraction of value, while destroying long-term trust—and as we see around us in America today, a low-trust society cannot ever be successful. Nonetheless, the Romans managed this form of instability longer than might seem probable.

The single biggest problem facing any monarchical system is succession. Without clear succession, not only was power up for grabs upon an emperor's death, but an emperor always had to watch out for those looking to hurry along his death. Thus, weak or fearful emperors got rid of potential threats, which mostly meant successful military commanders. The Romans tried to address this in various ways, early on by adoption and setting up clear succession during the prime of an emperor, and later by divided and tiered power, as in Diocletian's Tetrarchy. Adoption could work, but then the adoptee had to outlive his adoptive father, which often did not happen. And since having a right-hand man on whom he could depend was crucial for most emperors, such as Agrippa for Augustus, but the right-hand man was rarely chosen as the adoptee, not infrequently the right-hand man decided to try to seize power. That's not to mention the frequent poisonings—or perhaps infrequent, since poisoning was often blamed for natural deaths, but that allegations of poison automatically were credible itself says much about the imperial ruling class atmosphere.

The next emperor covered (after three others within a year), Vespasian, was a commoner, a general who came to power by violence, setting the tone for many later successions. He was gruff, competent, and practical, and took measures to expand the ruling class to provincials, as well as stabilize the finances of the Roman state. Only briefly touching

on Titus, Domitian, and Nerva, Trajan gets the next chapter. He, in A.D. 98, began a long turn back to longer, more successful reigns, the "Five Good Emperors." (Actually, Nerva did, but he only reigned for two years.) Trajan was a good politician, balancing among the ruling classes and showing a welcome touch to the masses, while still keeping the army happy. It was Trajan with whom Pliny the Younger, then governor of Bithynia, famously corresponded about how he should treat Christians. It was also under Trajan that Rome finally conquered Dacia; that doesn't matter much to most people, but I have a particular interest in the Danube Basin, and it is interesting to me that echoes of Trajan's conquest persist down to the present day, with Rumanians deciding with the rise of modern nationalism that they were descended from the Roman conquerors, in order to have a prior claim to Transylvania, which the Hungarians had held merely since the ninth century (and which the Rumanians were given by the Allies in 1919).

Next is Hadrian, philo-Hellene and man of culture combined with action, who travelled all over the Empire and had Hadrian's Wall built. He presided over the brutal suppression of the last Jewish revolt (the Bar Kokhba revolt, ending in A.D. 136), and what can variously be interpreted as a cultural revival or the erosion of strong Roman culture by the introduction of alien elements. We then skip to Marcus Aurelius, beloved by moderns for his Stoic writings, which they don't understand or apply, but it feels good to have what feels like a moral framework. Marcus Aurelius was the first emperor to pick a co-emperor, Verus, to help with the burdens of rule, and also the first emperor to face significant military challenges from both the east (Parthia) and the west (German tribes pushing against the Danube)—along with the Antonine Plague, which killed Verus. His reign was thus very challenging, and his son was Commodus (made famous to moderns by the movie *Gladiator*), so he had a lot to be stoic about.

Moving on, into the third century A.D., we have Septimius Severus, the first African (that is, North African) emperor, not surprising given that the Roman ruling class was now spread out over the empire. It was not a diverse ruling class, of course—that would have resulted in the immediate collapse of the Empire. Rather, it was a ruling class that all held to the official Roman ideology of empire, in which incidents such as birth location and background culture were subordinated as

irrelevant. It is hard for us, bombarded with identity politics propaganda, to understand, and perhaps it will be until the modern poisoned gift of leftist ideology is (if it can be ever) exterminated from the world, but it is entirely possible to weld together those of different characteristics if their worldview is informed by reality and coherent goals. Even though that welding will never be as strong as the bond among a smaller, more homogenous society, it can be strong enough to accomplish much. Severus came to power after a brief but intense civil war, a marker on the downward trend of the Empire, though his reign itself was fairly stable.

Things then really went downhill for a while, with twenty emperors in fifty years, turbulent and violent successions and rising external challenges, until limited stability was restored under Diocletian, in 284. Although he has a reputation as violent, which he was, both in his rise and in his attacks on Christians, he was also a first-order politician, in some ways like Augustus, in very different, and declining, times. He extended the co-ruling concept earlier introduced (and then abandoned), creating the Tetrarchy—two emperors, each with a junior counterpart who was slated to succeed him, although, no surprise, Diocletian was the man in charge. He is remembered for this, for his persecution of Christians (who by this time were perhaps ten percent of the Empire, and much more in cities), and for surrendering power voluntarily, choosing to go raise cabbages. Although that's misleading—he retired to his home, Dalmatia, to a grand fortified palace, and if he raised cabbages, he also kept his hand in with Roman politics, which immediately went to pieces again.

Not for long, though—once the other members of the Tetrarchy got done killing each other, Constantine emerged triumphant. Strauss sees Constantine as a sincere Christian convert, although also very much a man of the temporal sphere and of his world. He stabilized the Empire, once again, but modified it almost beyond recognition, most notably by the creation of the once-and-future city of Constantinople. This is not the place for a long disquisition, but it strikes me that what we could use today is a new Constantine. Certainly, we could use a good deal more today of *in hoc signo vinces*. I will get back to you on that.

And that's where Strauss leaves it. Looking backwards, the Roman imperium seems like an obvious institution and the logical continuation of the Republic, but that's just hindsight. At the beginning, they

made it up as they went along. My interest, however, is not just the history, but its application. Given that I reject democracy, and instead favor a mixed form of government, and that getting to a mixed form of government from democracy inevitably requires going through a period of authoritarianism, which in any case might itself be preferable to democracy, was the Roman imperium a success?

This is a very hard question to answer, since it is difficult to separate problems inherent to the system of governance from problems inherent to running an empire. Montesquieu, for example, in his *Considerations on the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline*, saw the Empire itself as a decline. But nothing lasts forever, so that it ultimately failed does not prove it was not a success. I suspect every empire has a shelf life; there is much truth to Arnold Toynbee's view of the "universal state" as a stage toward the end of a civilizational cycle. The Roman switch to imperium did not solve the problems that led to the end of the Republic—diminished virtue most of all, the result of vastly increased wealth and the reality that diversity is the opposite of strength. The more lurid tales of Roman imperial misbehavior, mostly missing from this volume, tend to give a distasteful edge to our view of the imperium, but really those distract from, and are merely a symptom of, deeper problems.

All true. However, I think the Empire, viewed for itself and not in comparison to abstract possible alternatives, knowing that the Republic had reached its end under any possible scenario, should be viewed as a success, spreading what were mostly benefits to the people under its rule, and obviously preferable to what came after in the West, for several hundred years. It's not clear what an American, or post-American, equivalent would look like, but there is a reasonable chance that it'd be a substantial improvement over what we have now, even though pure monarchy is not much better, typically, than pure democracy. But a mixed government only works with a strong society, so our choices are likely to be a renewal of our society through some unknown and unprecedented mechanism, or authoritarianism followed by ultimate collapse, the usual path, and the one Rome took.

My only complaint about this book, other than that capsule history inherently lacks depth and that the writing is a bit choppy by Strauss's usual standards, perhaps showing haste in writing, is that Strauss chose to, or maybe was made to, shoehorn in a strained feminist angle to every

one of his chapters. Given that the Romans did not allow women in public life, but that most great men rely on women in their lives, this does not mean that Strauss offers interesting anecdotes of the great political works of Roman women, because there were none. Instead, over and over, he tells us who each emperor's mother and wives were, and that they were super relevant, don't you know, even though we rarely know any of the details about how they were, or could have been, relevant, and in many cases know nothing at all about them. Phrases like "we can imagine" and "probably" show up constantly. It's boring and tendentious. Oh, I have no doubt that Roman aristocratic women made a big difference to history; this is true of all Western societies, and always has been. (It's probably true of non-Western societies, too.) Some details are known—Atia, the mother of Augustus, was indeed very relevant, though again mostly behind the scenes. But the details are almost always lost to history, and often what details we think we know are simply later attacks trying to show that some important man was unduly or perniciously influenced by women. We should just accept that we don't know, and move on, but Strauss, striving for supposed relevance or to meet some stupid publishing mandate, bores the reader by offering propaganda. Let's hope that next time he just sticks to the history.

Reading this book, especially the sections on disputed successions, makes one think, inevitably, about our own November future. My prediction is that if Donald Trump wins the election by winning the electoral vote but not the popular vote, the result will not be accepted by the Left. Well, that's a cheap and easy prediction—a bolder, but not very bold, prediction is that is the Left will insist the result be overturned, by any means necessary. We can be certain that plans for this are already laid; the entire tactical program of the modern Left is to wait until some event happens that can be mendaciously used to whip up emotion (a school shooting; George Floyd's death) and then cynically use it to implement an existing well-organized and well-funded plan to force through a political change, relying on a massive network of allied groups outside the inner circle to immediately coordinate and amplify when the plan is launched.

Thus, I expect the following to happen, in such a Trump win. The official mouthpieces of the Left, such as Nancy Pelosi, will announce

that Trump's re-election is illegitimate. A hue and cry exceeding that ever seen in America will immediately issue forth from the media, academia, and every other outlet controlled by the Left (which is almost all of them, and all of them that set what the news is, and is not). Massive riots will sweep the nation. The utterly corrupt top ranks of the military, active agents of the Left and globohomo, will issue a coordinated statement endorsing the claim that Trump's election is illegitimate, decrying the disorder caused by Trump, and indicating a readiness to act. The Supreme Court, led by the compromised or simply weak John Roberts, will quickly reinterpret the Constitution, whose inner spirit only they know, to eliminate the Electoral College, a decision not more radical than dozens already made on other topics, and announce that actually, Trump lost. The generals will then announce they are willing to forcibly protect the Constitution, as newly interpreted, if Trump does not step down (to go to prison for the rest of his life, of course). And, at that point, the question is what the middle ranks of the military, and the American people, will do. Regardless, the American republic would be over. But, as this book shows, there is ample precedent for that. Frankly, I can imagine worse scenarios. We might as well get it over with, since something of this sort is inevitable. Perhaps, in two thousand years, 2020 will even get a few books written about it.