



Why America Is Not a New Rome

Vaclav Smil

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America's post--Cold War strategic dominance and its pre-recession affluence inspired pundits to make celebratory comparisons to ancient Rome at its most powerful. Now, with America no longer perceived as invulnerable, engaged in protracted fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, and suffering the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, comparisons are to the bloated, decadent, ineffectual later Empire. In "Why America Is Not a New Rome," Vaclav Smil looks at these comparisons in detail, going deeper than the facile analogy-making of talk shows and glossy magazine articles. He finds profound differences.

Smil, a scientist and a lifelong student of Roman history, focuses on several fundamental concerns: the very meaning of empire; the actual extent and nature of Roman and American power; the role of knowledge and innovation; and demographic and economic basics--population dynamics, illness, death, wealth, and misery. America is not a latter-day Rome, Smil finds, and we need to understand this in order to look ahead without the burden of counterproductive analogies. Superficial similarities do not imply long-term political, demographic, or economic outcomes identical to Rome's.

Why America Is Not a New Rome Details

Date : Published January 29th 2010 by MIT Press (MA)

ISBN : 9780262195935

Author : Vaclav Smil

Format : Hardcover 226 pages

Genre : History, Politics, Nonfiction, Economics, Government

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Vicki Cline says

This was pretty interesting. He backs up his arguments with copious statistics and the endnotes are very good. Unfortunately, ancient Rome comes off looking pretty bad. Not much innovation or inventions, short lives of the people - altogether you wouldn't want to live there.

Brian says

The author has some good points.

1. Neither Rome nor the USA have the power often attributed to them.
2. There are vast differences between them. The author pretty well beats this to death.

Where I think he misses the mark is that he lays out the differences to a ridiculous degree. He tries to calculate the GDP for ancient Rome and compare it to modern USA. This is just silly (and I won't even go into why GDP is a lousy measure). I will grant him that Rome and the USA are vastly different, but he seems to be saying that things are so different that we can never learn anything from history. I would disagree with this.

Compare an elephant to a mouse. Although vastly different you could make a few statements that would be true to both of them despite the massive differences. For example, if you cut off their air supply they both would die. Smil seems to say that the differences are so huge that there is no comparison. I will admit that the metaphor USA the next Rome is a bit over used (he makes a solid case on differences) but to say there are no similarities at all seems trite and also misleading.

I also felt he cherry picked a few things (like only picking history after 1945 for the comparison). If you has the Native Tribes if they thought the USA was acting as an empire after 1492, I am pretty sure they would say it was acting as an empire. It seems the author was tailoring his scope so as to better meet his conclusions.

Keith says

Interesting to compare the two 'empires'. It seems we are in decline. This book tries to contradict that idea. Decently written. The bottom line of the book is that there is no comparison because our worlds are so different. Rome and the U.S. can be related because they project their culture and ideas outside their own state, but that's where the comparison ends.

Venky says

Using hyperbole and a plethora of comparisons, some brilliant, others banal, many political and economic historians have gone out of their way to proclaim the United States of America, the new Rome. The incredible ascent of this modern behemoth as well as the political, cultural, economic and military woes that threaten to imperil such ascent lead to commentators mooted such parallels.

But are such comparisons realistic? Vaclav Smil in this well researched book, proceeds to decimate this parallel by citing thoughtful, provocative and tangential differences splitting the ancient Empire of Rome and the modern super power that is America.

A book to mull over.

Mike Maurer says

While seven years old, at the time I read the book, I thought it would give insight into historical parallels. It is my first time reading Vaclav Smil.

This book comes across as a bit of a sharp tongued academic dissertation. He spends pages and pages pointing out that other academics are incorrect in their assertion of comparing Rome and the United States. Some of the reasons has to do with education and Hollywood movies. He also goes deep into what constitutes an Empire and how the word has evolved.

What I pulled out of the book is the US could be better compared to the early China dynasties, such as Han. Similar in size, but also similar in energy capture and innovation. I was intrigued by the author's assessment the Romans were not very innovative. They could build, but used techniques developed by the Greeks. The Han dynasty was much more innovative around a similar point in history. This reflects the innovation of the US in the post WW2 era.

In the end, the conclusion is to not do comparative analysis of countries and eras. I have read about countries having a century of dominance before shrinking. In the European world, it would be a line from the Spanish, to the Dutch, to the English, to the US. Each came to dominate their era, but never returned to prominence. I feel the US is following the English, which allows the Chinese to ascend. Like the old saying about history repeating itself, it surely does.

Denis says

Smil offers a good discussions of Roman Empire and current American state (he argues it is closer to hegemony, rather than traditional empire), but the comparisons he draws between the two societies seem a bit forced. For instance, does it really make sense to compare somatic machines of Romans to the modern electronic and combustion engine-driven machines used in the USA.
