**Sources** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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| **Document A:** Trump, Donald. (January 20, 2017) 2017 Donald Trump Inauguration Speech. <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/01/full-text-donald-trump-inauguration-speech-transcript-233907>  Chief Justice Roberts, President Carter, President Clinton, President Bush, President Obama, fellow Americans, and people of the world, thank you. We the citizens of America are now joined in a great national effort to rebuild our country and restore its promise for all of our people. Together we will determine the course of America, and the world, for many, many years to come. We will face challenges. We will confront hardships, but we will get the job done.  Every four years, we gather on these steps to carry out the orderly and peaceful transfer of power, and we are grateful to President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama for their gracious aid throughout this transition. They have been magnificent. Thank you.  Today’s ceremony, however, has very special meaning, because today we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another, or from one party to another, but we are transferring power from Washington, D.C., and giving it back to you, the people.  For too long, a small group in our nation’s capital has reaped the rewards of government, while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished, but the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered, but the jobs left and the factories closed. The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country. Their victories have not been your victories. Their triumphs have not been your triumphs, and while they celebrated in our nation’s capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land. That all changes, starting right here and right now, because this moment is your moment --- it belongs to you. It belongs to everyone gathered here today, and everyone watching, all across America. This is your day. This is your celebration, and this, the United States of America, is your country.  What truly matters is not which party controls our government, but whether our government is controlled by the people. January 20th, 2017 will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again. The forgotten men and women of our country, will be forgotten no longer. Everyone is listening to you now. You came by the tens of millions to become part of a historic movement, the likes of which the world has never seen before. At the center of this movement is a crucial conviction, that a nation exists to serve its citizens. Americans want great schools for their children, safe neighborhoods for their families, and good jobs for themselves. These are just and reasonable demands of righteous people and a righteous public, but for too many of our citizens a different reality exists. Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities, rusted out factories, scattered like tombstones across the across the landscape of our nation, an education system flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of all knowledge, and the crime, and the gangs, and the drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential. This American carnage stops right here and stops right now.  We are one nation and their pain is our pain. Their dreams are our dreams and their success will be our success. We share one heart, one home, and one glorious destiny. The oath of office, I take today, is an oath of allegiance to all Americans. For many decades, we’ve enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry, subsidized the armies of other countries, while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military. We’ve defended other nation’s borders while refusing to defend our own. And spent trillions and trillions of dollars overseas, while America’s infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay. We’ve made other countries rich while the wealth, strength and confidence of our country has dissipated over the horizon. One by one, the factories shuddered and left our shores, with not even a thought about the millions and millions of American workers that were left behind. The wealth of our middle class has been ripped from their homes and then redistributed all across the world.  But that is the past, and now we are looking only to the future. We assembled here today our issuing a new decree to be heard in every city, in every foreign capital, and in every hall of power, from this day forward: a new vision will govern our land, from this day forward, it’s going to be only America first. America first.  Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs will be made to benefit American workers and American families. We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies and destroying our jobs. Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength. I will fight for you with every breath in my body, and I will never, ever let you down. America will start winning again, winning like never before. We will bring back our jobs. We will bring back our borders. We will bring back our wealth, and we will bring back our dreams. We will build new roads and highways and bridges and airports and tunnels, and railways, all across our wonderful nation. We will get our people off of welfare and back to work, rebuilding our country with American hands and American labor.  We will follow two simple rules: buy American, and hire American. We will seek friendship and goodwill with the nations of the world, but we do so with the understanding that it is the right of all nations to put their own interests first. We do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone, but rather to let it shine as an example. We will shine for everyone to follow. We will reinforce old alliances and form new ones, and you unite the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the Earth.  At the bedrock of our politics will be a total allegiance to the United States of America, and through our loyalty to our country, we will rediscover our loyalty to each other. When you open your heart to patriotism, there is no room for prejudice. The Bible tells us, how good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity. We must speak our minds openly, debate our disagreements, but always pursue solidarity. When America is united, America is totally unstoppable. There should be no fear. We are protected, and we will always be protected. We will be protected by the great men and women of our military and law enforcement. And most importantly, we will be protected by God.  Finally, we must think big and dream even bigger. In America, we understand that a nation is only living as long as it is striving. We will no longer accept politicians who are all talk and no action, constantly complaining but never doing anything about it. The time for empty talk is over. Now arrives the hour of action. Do not allow anyone to tell you that it cannot be done. No challenge can match the heart and fight and spirit of America. We will not fail. Our country will thrive and prosper again.  We stand at the birth of a new millennium, ready to unlock the mysteries of space, to free the Earth from the miseries of disease and to harness the industries and technologies of tomorrow. A new national pride will stir our souls, lift our sights and heal our divisions. It’s time to remember that old wisdom our soldiers will never forget, that whether we are black, or brown, or white, we all bleed the same red blood of patriots. We all enjoy the same glorious freedoms, and we all salute the same, great American flag. And whether a child is born in the urban sprawl of Detroit or the windswept plains of Nebraska, they look up at the at the same night sky, they fill their heart with the same dreams and they are infused with the breath of life by the same almighty creator.  So to all Americans, in every city near and far, small and large, from mountain to mountain, from ocean to ocean, hear these words. You will never be ignored again. Your voice, your hopes, and your dreams will define our American destiny. And your courage and goodness and love, will forever guide us along the way. Together, we will make America strong again. We will make America wealthy again. We will make America proud again We will make America safe again, And yes, together, we will make we will make America great again. Thank you. God bless you. And god bless America. Thank you. God bless America. |

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| **Document B:** Levick, Barbara. (1982) “Morals, Politics, and the Fall of the Roman Republic.” Greece & Rome, vol. 29, no. 1, Cambridge University Press, pp. 53–62, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/642930>.  See next page!  A black and white photo of a document  Description automatically generated with low confidence |
| **Document C:** Steven L. Tuck , "Falling for the Fall of Rome" , *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective* February, 2022 https://origins.osu.edu/read/falling-fall-rome?language\_content\_entity=en.  If your social media accounts and email inbox have been anything like mine the past few years, you are familiar with discussions drawing parallels between contemporary political matters in the United States and ancient Rome.  Everyone seems to have an opinion on whether the United States is in the beginning, middle, or end of a decline and fall. Opinions of course vary about this and about \*which\* Roman decline and fall is the best parallel. Some commentators prefer the fall of the Roman Republic as the model for our current crises while others select the fall of the western [Roman Empire](https://origins.osu.edu/connecting-history/roman-government-disaster-response) in the fifth century.  A number of particularly astute emails I’ve received have asked about lessons we can draw from the siege of the Roman Capitol under the Flavians in the first century. All of these have been—and continue to be—discussed by interested, engaged people seeking historical precedents for recent events. Not all of the discussions are fully informed by the historical precedents though. And that brings us to the purpose of Watts’ book and the larger question of decline and fall.  In The Eternal Decline and Fall of Rome: The History of a Dangerous Idea Edward Watts provides the background to all our current discussions and debates. As he makes clear in the introduction he wants the reader to draw connections between [Rome and modern politics](https://origins.osu.edu/historytalk/classicists-and-white-supremacists%20alt-right%20trump%20western%20civilization%20culture). The introduction, after all, starts with Donald Trump’s inaugural address and his promise to “Make America Great Again” before broadening out to consider the concept of decline and renewal in wider contexts, eventually leading back to Rome, his main topic.  The book is a bit of a rhetorical bait-and-switch, at least as far as the title goes. While the title proclaims it is about [decline and fall](https://origins.osu.edu/review/political-economy-late-roman-empire)— and that’s true up to a point—the real topic is the use of asserted decline and fall to launch programs of proclaimed renewal. That’s the reason for the hook in the introduction beginning with Trump’s inaugural address. And a survey of that concept of proclaimed renewal throughout Roman history dominates sixteen of the seventeen chapters.  By Roman history, I should clarify that Watts does not restrict himself to ancient Roman history. He includes what is often referred to as [Byzantine](https://origins.osu.edu/connecting-history/covid-justinianic-plague-lessons) history and, in fact, covers material up to the sixteenth century. The bulk of the book, therefore, is an understandably simplified survey of Roman history with particular emphasis on periods of proclaimed renewal and the historical consequences of those.  So, what does the book cover and how successful is it? As you might imagine Watts’ thesis is more persuasively applied to some of the occasions than to others.  Among the more persuasive cases he analyzes are Cato in the Roman Republic and his calls for renewal of Roman culture against [Greek](https://origins.osu.edu/review/history-athens-beyond-decline) cultural incursion and the corrupting effects of luxury and [Augustus](https://origins.osu.edu/milestones/august-2014-celebrating-roman-emperor-augustus?language_content_entity=en)’ proclamation of a Golden Age, which frankly I had never considered in terms of making Rome great again and will be teaching using that framing in the future. One of the best examples of his analysis is in Chapter 7 and his retelling of the reign of Julian the Apostate (r. 361-363 CE) and his attempt to return Rome to greatness through a return to pagan worship.  Watts takes this occasion as an opportunity to remind readers of one of his key points by noting astutely, “Five centuries of Roman history had shown that the claim that one is restoring Rome’s idealized past does not mean that past ever existed.” Such signposting of his theme is appreciated in the sometimes-dizzying articulation of names and dates.  One of the most surprising periods covered is in Chapter 16 where Watts explores the conflict between the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I and Charles VIII of France and their immediate heirs to proclaim for themselves the Roman legacy following the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453.  It is an effective concluding point prior to his last two chapters of more contemporary analysis. The final line leads directly to the crisis of the present, “[Rome] had become a powerful metaphor to speak about the present and future that was now open to all who wished to evoke it.”  Those last two chapters summarize the book’s contents and arguments and rather quickly resolve the history, taking it through the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries before reflecting on the role of the theme of decline and renewal in the twenty-first century.  Overall, I found the book thoughtful, well-written, and instructive. I learned some new facts about periods that are not in my specialties but more importantly gained new insights into the use and meaning of calls for renewal from antiquity to the present. Of those, the most significant was the idea that calls for renewal carry with them inherent dangers for the state and its citizens.  Finally, it is worth noting that the subtitle “The History of a Dangerous Idea” seems to owe its phrasing—and I suspect its concept—to Christopher B. Krebs’ A Most Dangerous Book: Tacitus’s Germania From the Roman Empire to the Third Reich (2012), which examines the misuse of the Germania to provide support for a number of [nationalist movements](https://origins.osu.edu/article/beware-greeks-bearing-gifts-how-neo-nazis-and-ancient-greeks-met-charlottesville) including Nazi ideology. I imagine that I see the inspiration of that book throughout this one.  That inspiration is seen most directly in the statements of decline and fall that regularly blame others, especially outsiders or the disenfranchised for the decline. Whether those are Greeks, Christians, Muslims, or illegal immigrants the concept is the same and fairly consistently applied by those calling for renewal. The lesson of the book for the contemporary world is effectively made. |

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| **Document D:** Watts, Edward J. (December 15, 2018). “ The Fall of Rome and the Lessons for America” The New York Times. https://time.com/5478197/the-fall-of-rome-and-the-lessons-for-america/  The Roman Republic inspired many of the delegates who traveled to Philadelphia to design an effective federal government for the new United States in the summer of 1787. There was good reason for this. Not only did Rome’s Republic endure for nearly 500 years, but it also offered consensus-building tools like the separation of powers, a system of checks and balances, and veto power. The Roman Republic also provided an important caution. While it had been extraordinarily successful, the Founders also knew that Rome degenerated into autocracy in the first century BC. Fearing such an outcome, Benjamin Franklin once told a concerned citizen that America would be “a Republic, if you can keep it.”  The concern that the young Republic would quickly die proved unfounded. Despite a civil war and profound regional differences, our Republic has endured for more than 200 years. But now, as the US faces a deepening political crisis, we are again looking to history to try to imagine our future. For the past two years many have turned to Germany’s Weimar Republic and other failed European states of the 1930s to understand our current political crisis. But the Roman Republic is the more relevant model. Not only is the American republic the daughter of Rome’s, but, like first century Rome, it is now an old country whose citizens know no other form of government.  Old republics like Rome differ from young ones like Weimar Germany because their citizens have learned to value the freedom, political norms, and constitutional checks that defend against a rapid descent into autocracy. Ancient Romans celebrated Brutus the elder (the man who overthrew Rome’s last king in 509 BC) and Servilius Ahala (a fifth century politician who assassinated an aspiring Roman king) in much the same way that Americans revere George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Romans were taught to expect annual elections, respect the choices voters made, and accept that elected officials would represent the interests of all Romans. Perhaps most importantly, they believed politics to be a peaceful process that required representatives to compromise with each and build broad consensuses around difficult policies. This culture kept Rome stable even as it grew into what would eventually become the world’s largest state.  The most significant danger old republics like ours face is not the sudden assault of an aspiring autocrat but the slow erosion of their cultural and institutional defenses. In Rome, this degeneration began gradually and almost imperceptibly in the middle of the second century BC. As in the US now, mid-second century Rome confronted the emergence of a huge gap between its wealthiest citizens and everyone else. During these years much of the wealth plundered from Rome’s newly conquered provinces concentrated around an emerging class of super rich families while the living standards of middle-class Romans stagnated. For more than a generation, Roman politicians tried to address the resentments that this growing inequality had created by proposing voting reforms and crafting schemes to distribute public resources to poor Romans. But most of their proposals were blocked. Then, in 133 BC, the populist politician Tiberius Gracchus proposed a modest redistribution of Italian land in an attempt to support some of Rome’s poor. As with similar laws proposed in the late 140s, Tiberius failed to build the necessary consensus to pass his proposal. Undeterred, Tiberius mobilized crowds of threatening supporters and successfully removed a magistrate from office who had threatened to veto the law—the first time in Roman history such a thing had happened. Tiberius then paid for the reform with funds traditionally controlled by his opponents in the senate. This broke another long-standing Roman political norm. While Tiberius’s supporters applauded these breaches of tradition, his opponents responded violently and murdered Tiberius before he could win re-election. This was the first act of political violence in Rome in more than 300 years.  Calm soon returned to Rome, but the lessons of 133 BC could not be unlearned. Norm breaking, violence, and even assassination had proven useful political tactics. Ambitious Romans began to adopt them with greater regularity and more sophistication. Despite the growing political dysfunction that pushed Rome into a civil war in the 80s BC and another that lasted from 49-46 BC, Romans still believed that their Republic survived. Some Romans, like Brutus the younger, imagined the Republic could be restored even after Julius Caesar had himself named perpetual dictator in 44 BC. But Brutus’s assassination of Caesar only provoked a third, much more horrifying series of civil wars in the 40s and 30s BC. These battles finally revealed to Romans what objective observers could already see. Romans had allowed their Republic to die.  The ancient Roman story offers a chilling lesson to modern Americans. The robust defenses that protect older republics slowly erode if they are not regularly reinforced. This degeneration often starts with something like a spike in wealth inequality that, if unaddressed, eventually frustrates citizens. Even so, it may still take decades before citizens turn to men like Tiberius Gracchus or Donald Trump who promise that they will do whatever is necessary to address voters’ frustrations. An old Republic can endure this type of crisis for a generation or a century. It can even emerge from this danger if politicians build a consensus around specific ways to address the concerns of their voters. But no republic is eternal. It lasts only as long as its citizens want it. This is the moment when we must again heed Franklin’s warning: Our state is a Republic—if we can keep it. |
| **Document E:** Murphy, Cullen (March 11, 2021). “No, Really, Are We Rome?”. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/04/no-really-are-we-rome/618075/>  The scenes at the capitol on January 6 were remarkable for all sorts of reasons, but a distinctive fall-of-Rome flavor was one of them, and it was hard to miss. Photographs of the Capitol’s debris-strewn marble portico might have been images from eons ago, at a plundered Temple of Jupiter. Some of the attackers had painted their bodies, and one wore a horned helmet. The invaders occupied the Senate chamber, where Latin inscriptions crown the east and west doorways. Commentators who remembered Cicero invoked the senatorial Catiline conspiracy. Headlines referred to the violent swarming of Capitol Hill as a “sack.”  Outside, a pandemic raged, recalling the waves of plague that periodically swept across the Roman empire. As the nation reeled, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in the role of a *magister militum* addressing the legions, issued an unprecedented advisory that put the sitting ruler on notice, condemning “sedition and insurrection” and noting that the inauguration of a new ruler would proceed. Amid all this came a *New York Times* report on the discovery and display of artifacts from the gardens of Caligula, an erratic and vengeful emperor, one of whose wives was named Milonia.  Ever since Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the prospect of a Rome-inflected apocalypse has cast its chilling spell. Britain’s former American colonies, which declared their independence the year Gibbon’s first volume was published, have been especially troubled by the parallels they discerned. The Founders feared the stealthy creep of tyranny. Half a century later, the narrative progression of *The Course of Empire*, Thomas Cole’s allegorical series of paintings, depicted the consequences of overweening ambition and national hubris. Today, as ever, observers are on the alert for portents of the Last Days, and have been quick, like Cato, to hurl warnings. And of course there are some Americans—including the January 6 attackers—who would find national collapse momentarily satisfying. “Sack Rome?” a barbarian wife says to her husband in an old *New Yorker*cartoon. “That’s your answer to *everything*.”  The comparisons, of course, can be facile. A Roman state of some sort lasted so long—well over a millennium—and changed so continuously that its history touches on any imaginable type of human occurrence, serves up parallels for any modern event, and provides contradictory answers to any question posed. Still, I am not immune to preoccupation with the Roman past. A decade and a half ago, I published a book called *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America*, which [looked closely at the age-old Rome-and-America comparison](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/06/as-the-romans-did/306048/). The focus was mainly on themes that transcend partisan politics, but it was also written at a particular moment, and reflected certain brute realities: The country was mired in Iraq and Afghanistan; fear and suspicion of foreigners were on the rise; and public functions of all kinds (maintaining highways, operating prisons, providing security) were being privatized. All of this had echoes in Rome’s long story.  It’s not as if the themes I wrote about then are obsolete. But they have a new context. The comparisons that come to mind now are not only about realities on the ground but about unrealities in our heads. The debasement of truth, the cruelty and moral squalor of many leaders, the corruption of basic institutions—signs of rot were proliferating well before January 6, and they remain, though the horde has been repelled.  If i were writing *Are We Rome?*today, one new theme I’d emphasize emerges from a phrase we heard over and over during the Trump administration: “adults in the room.” The basic idea—a delusion with a long history—was that an unfit and childish chief executive could be kept in check by the seasoned advisers around him, and if not by them, then by the competent career professionals throughout the government. The administration official who anonymously published a famous op-ed in *The New York Times*in 2018 offered explicit reassurance: “Americans should know that there are adults in the room.” Various individuals were given adult-in-the-room designation, including the White House counsel Don McGahn and Chief of Staff John Kelly. I sometimes imagined these adults, who included distinguished military veterans, wearing special ribbons. The obvious flaw in the arrangement was that the child could summarily dismiss the adults with an intemperate tweet.  For long periods in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, the Roman empire was literally in the hands of children, as reigning emperors died unexpectedly and sons as young as 4 and 8 ascended to the most exalted rank. Adults in the room were appointed to serve them—often capable generals such as Stilicho (who served Honorius) and Aetius (who served Valentinian III). The idea was to acknowledge imperial authority as sacrosanct but at the same time have people in charge who could handle the job. And often it worked, for a while. The diplomat and historian Priscus described what happened when Valentinian grew up. The emperor’s intemperate tweet took this form:  As Aetius was explaining the finances and calculating tax revenues, with a shout Valentinian suddenly leaped up from his throne and cried out that he would no longer endure to be abused by such treacheries … While Aetius was stunned by this unexpected rage and was attempting to calm his irrational outburst, Valentinian drew his sword from his scabbard and together with Heracleius, who was carrying the cleaver ready under his cloak (for he was a head chamberlain), fell upon him.  There is no substitute, it turns out, for actual leadership at the top. Even so, when the adults are gone, the next line of defense is bureaucratic heroism. A civil service is one reason entities as large as the Roman empire—or the British or American one—have had staying power. Watch the behavior of imperial functionaries in the fifth century, when much of the Roman world was falling apart, and you see the ability of bureaucratic procedure and administrative competence—food goes here, gold goes there—to hold bits of the rickety scaffolding together when no one seems to be in charge. I’m not aware of ancient references to a *civitas profunda*, but the “deep state” is neither a modern nor a malevolent invention.  Yet these behind-the-scenes efforts at preserving normalcy do eventually falter, and a second new theme might be the dangers that apparent continuity, including symbolic continuity, can conceal. Corrosive change—in values, behavior, infrastructure—is often hard to observe; things look the same, until they don’t. Even before January 6—or November 3—many worried that the outward forms of American democracy might prove more robust than the thing itself. Inaugurations lift the spirit, but among Millennials in the U.S., fewer than a third believe that it is “essential” to live in a democracy (this from findings reported by the political scientists Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk). Congress has ceded authority to the president across a wide front, preserving mainly its capacity to hinder, acclaim, and conspire. The power to declare war survives only as an artfully arranged fig leaf; it was in fact relinquished decades ago. For all that, the Capitol is still reverenced as “the people’s house.”  Octavian, Julius Caesar’s adopted son, made himself Rome’s first emperor, ruling under the name Augustus. But he understood the utility of make-believe, maintaining the fiction that he had preserved republican government. Augustus did not proclaim himself an autocrat; the title *princeps* would do—the “first man.” In the manner of Donald Trump’s 1776 Project, but adroitly, he invoked the blessing of ancient sentiment to conceal radical intentions. The Senate would go on meeting, enjoying what the Roman historian Tacitus called “pretenses of freedom” long after it ceased to play any important role; in fact, it went on meeting after the empire was gone. Tacitus is always a delight:  This was a tainted, meanly obsequious age. The greatest figures had to protect their positions by subserviency; and, in addition to them, all ex-consuls, most ex-praetors, even many junior senators competed with each other’s offensively sycophantic proposals.  Form endures when substance is gone. In time, the city of Rome became as much a fiction as the vestiges of the old republic. Augustus adorned the capital not only with temples but also with election facilities. (And he showed up in person to vote, though the process was a charade.) Centuries later, Rome continued to look like an imperial capital, and extract wealth like one, even after becoming an empty shell. The real action and power had shifted elsewhere. Generals and armies roamed the provinces, responding to emergencies (and the ambitions of one another). Rival cities rose. But grain shipments to Rome continued. Monuments were cherished as touchstones of enduring greatness. Distinguished families lived in splendor. Senators plotted.  There were truth-tellers throughout Roman history, but as the centuries wore on, the telling of official lies became a recognized art form.  A third new theme might take up the idea of “alternative facts.” The term was coined by the Trump counselor Kellyanne Conway to put a gloss on one set of lies; it soon became shorthand for all of them. The administration’s reliance on falsehood needs no belaboring. It gave life to conspiracy theories, undermined faith in a national election, and stoked acts of insurrection. Allies on television and on social media helped all of that along. The Romans had a word for such allies: *panegyrists*.  Social media in ancient Rome was of the old-fashioned kind—word of mouth. While serving overseas as a provincial governor, Cicero designated an associate named Caelius to keep him up-to-date about rumors back home. Caelius informed Cicero that he was paying special attention to the *susurratores* (“whisperers”), the political gossips who lurked in the Forum. There were truth-tellers throughout Roman history, but as the centuries wore on, the telling of official lies became a recognized art form. Panegyrists were paid performers, subsidized by those they celebrated. The narrative arcs—about the prosperity of the empire, about success in battle—bend toward glory. The panegyrist Mamertinus evokes the glowing nimbus of Maximian’s hair. The panegyrist Claudian describes how Honorius will make Rome great again:  Oak groves shall drip with honey; streams of wine well up on every side, lakes of olive oil abound. No price shall be asked for fleeces dyed scarlet, but of themselves shall the flocks grow red to the astonishment of the shepherd, and in every sea the green seaweed will laugh with flashing jewels.  We will be tired of so much winning. The fulsome phrases of the panegyrists made Edward Gibbon squirm. But by empire’s end, giving praise to the ruler was the dominant form of rhetoric. And to many eyes, Gibbon knew, the portrait painted by the panegyrist was synonymous with history.  Isubscribe to an academic news feed that drops research about Rome into my inbox—a history-book version of the beer-of-the-month club. Scholars engage in heated arguments about the Roman empire, but one thing we know for sure is that it is gone. And, unlike Brexit, no one was aware of the “end” as it was happening. Rome was sacked, as were other cities, and armed conflict at times brought turmoil, but decay occurred over centuries, and for many the transition from one thing to another was not stark. The human life span puts blinders on perception.  But that same life span concentrates human concerns in a useful way. Think of it as the inertia of the ordinary, a final new theme. For all the images of Roman calamity, the makings of a quieter set of images sit on a table near my desk—mundane odds and ends from the ancient world, given to me over the years. Most of them are from imperial Rome: a clay oil lamp, a delicate glass vase, colored marble from a villa’s floor, curved white limestone from a window’s arch, a grinding stone, a writing stylus, a key in the shape of a ring, a votive figurine. And coins—a silver denarius from the reign of Marcus Aurelius, for instance, and another from the reign of his unfortunate son, Commodus.  What the antiquities represent are not triumph and glory, but basic human needs—food, shelter, safety, knowledge, commerce, beauty, the life of the spirit—and the organized activities that secure them. These activities have, so far, always survived calamity—a bridge from every past to every future. Human society is resilient. And tending to basic needs can be a source of aspiration. America’s Constitution defined the promotion of “general welfare” and “domestic tranquility” as part of the country’s very purpose.  But resilience does not prevent calamity. And being blindsided in slow motion is the hardest fate to avoid. The historian Ramsay MacMullen once distilled the long arc of the Roman empire into three words—“fewer have more”—but only the time-lapse perspective of a millennium and a half allows us to understand such a thing with brutal clarity. The sack of Washington unfolded suddenly, in a way no one could miss. The greater dangers come in stealth. |