

# A REPUBLIC AND ITS NATURAL DISEASES

*Who (or What)  
Killed Roman Freedom?*



—Bettmann.

*We are all more-or-less agreed that shadowy psychological forces—rather than a neat gearworks—are the secret masters of history. It seems to be more accurate to regard fears, lusts, sudden anxieties that sweep across whole populations like the flu as responsible for social disasters like depressions, wars, and tyrannies rather than—as the Victorians thought—the vagaries of a quasi-mechanical system. If we are right, then the sound emotional health of a society is indispensable to its enlightened government. It is just the sicknesses of spirit which eroded away the Roman Republic, and which might attack any republican form of government under pressure, that are analyzed here by F. R. Cowell, well-known British classicist and Foreign Office official.*

By F. R. COWELL

**T**HE Republic is merely a sham." Julius Caesar, whose assassination 2,000 years ago was commemorated last year, is supposed to have made this statement the explanation of his ruthless liquidation of the ancient and honored Roman Republic which had given him birth and success. Caesar was not unique among Roman public men. Cicero, the staunchest defender of the Republic in its last days, said himself. "We have preserved the word Republic but there is no doubt that we have long since lost the thing itself." They were right. There had been no plague or

pestilence, no military defeat; Rome's imperial eminence was more spectacular than ever. But the Republic had died.

How had this come about? The Roman Republic originally came into being about 500 B.C. after the expulsion of a despised foreign dynasty. Over the centuries the Republic had waged many victorious wars and had constructed an empire out of the whole Mediterranean world. By Caesar's day, though there was of course very considerable economic inequality, the political balance between poor and rich was comparable to that of eighteenth-century England. Lastly, there existed no alternate ideology

for intellectuals and malcontents, such as Communism provides today. The Roman people knew and desired only republicanism. To the day of the East Roman Empire's demise 1,500 years later the emperors were forced by sentiment to retain at least some of the trappings of the old Republic. How then had this tough institution, with triumphs in the Punic, Macedonian, and innumerable other wars to its credit, having overcome the Sullan and Gracchan and innumerable other internal crises, come to mean so little to its own people that they permitted adventurers to carve it up like a roast?

## FAITH AND POLITICS

The most important resource of any government is the faith of the people. Once the people are thoroughly disillusioned, once they have permanently identified "officeholders" and "politicians" with graft and corruption, there is no use in patching up forms. Louis XVI was the best-hearted Bourbon of them all; near the start of his reign he agreed to the most far-reaching constitutional reforms. Yet the injuries his two predecessors



"Nope. Nobody in Capetown, nobody in Port Elizabeth, Zanzibar, Mozambique, Monrovia, Accra . . . Whoever lined up these dames always went through the Canal, too!"

had wrought on the public trust had gone too deep; the immemorial mysteries and intricacies of the French monarchy at last left the French people cold. They were no longer willing to reform; they wanted out, and they chopped off Louis's head. The Weimar Republic, possessing a constitution to which was applied centuries of study and experience, never came alive in German hearts. Germans looked upon it as a toy-machine for lawyers, or an alien outrage, and they threw it out without remorse at the first sign of a positive alternative. Now we are close, to the secret of the death of the Roman Republic, for by Caesar's day the most forceful and skilful politicians of his time had lost interest in it. It no longer seemed a proper vehicle for the long-range interests of the Roman State. From being the virile and patriotic comity of Cincinnatus's day it had become—to the minds of men like Caesar—a wearisome jumble of obsolete taboos and inefficient bureaucrats.

To some extent, of course, any Republic runs risks of this kind of infection all the time. Some of the worst damage is inflicted by men of good will who are in such haste to inaugurate drastic reforms that they terribly wound the total structure—like bad surgeons who wildly cut through a dozen complexly organized membranes and organs to get to one small tumor. Most of us think of the Gracchi brothers as heroes of the Roman Republic, for they were farseeing, selfless patriots desiring to put the state on a sound agricultural and political basis. But in pursuing this objective—in the heat of fiercest controversy—the Gracchi broke down

some of the traditional safeguards of Roman republicanism: the sanctity of the tribuneship and the courts. In another era, fifty years later, these safeguards no longer existed to guard against merciless power-grabbers who appropriated the entire state.

Without forcing the comparison, we note that there is no doubt of the patriotism of the modern individuals who were determined some years ago to blast all Communists out of responsible jobs in government and elsewhere; but there is also no doubt that the jerrybuilt apparatus of investigation, publicity, and prosecution which they established for this purpose seriously compromised many fine and necessary American traditions. The courts were bypassed; innocent people lost their jobs; an atmosphere of fear descended on huge areas of American life—all because the obsession to expose a tiny number of secret Communists overrode good sense.

Fortunately, Americans have reconsidered their position, and most of the harm seems to be in the past.

#### FAITH AND POLITICIANS

One of the worst convictions for the people of a republic to possess is that "all politicians are crooks." This one attitude, thrown out so casually every day by unthinking people, is incalculably dangerous. We free men must never forget that politics is the arena of our communal life, the place where communal compromises and communal ideals are hammered out for all of us to live by. Politics is one of the highest callings a man can enter; great politicians like Abraham Lincoln and

Elizabeth I are among the few most important geniuses which the human race has produced, using wonderful skill and insight to bring hope and justice into the lives of millions of human beings unborn as well as living. How tragic it is to see the poison of distrust seep through a nation's political life as it has in modern France, where it is all too frequent for politicians to become the objects of contempt and suspicion and to be exposed in consequence to the temptation to become corrupt and myopic time-servers.

Of course, Rome had plenty of unsavory specimens. There were Romans who stooped very low to win votes and political office. They anticipated many of the tricks of later demagogues: their entertainments and pageantry; their vulgar jokes and anecdotes; their emotional appeal; their affectation of being "just plain folks"; their patriotic ardor; their scorn of honest, public-spirited opponents whom they contrived to depict as enemies-of-the-people, all this combined with their resolute determination to keep eyes on the main chance and to secure the largest possible share of the loot, the richest "gravy," for themselves. Occupational diseases of this description were sufficiently notorious in the Roman Republic to provoke the remark that "they say it is very often the worthless men who enter politics, men with whom it is degrading to be associated and with whom it is a difficult and dangerous business to get into conflict, especially when they have stirred up the mob."

This is perfectly true, of course, and has been so for thousands of years. But the lesson is always the same: the main fault lies with honest citizens who are too lazy or selfish to play their proper, positive role in political life, and who by not playing it leave a vacuum into which thieves and fanatics naturally move.

#### THE STRENGTH OF THE REPUBLIC

The survival of ordered republican constitutional government is a hazardous affair. Its security has been attributed to such unifying factors as common racial characteristics; a common language; life within a given climatic or geographical zone; partnership in wars or in common agricultural, industrial, or commercial enterprises; reverence for national institutions, national heroes, and devotion to national insignia such as the Roman Standard or the Stars and Stripes.

Potent as these influences undoubtedly are, and indispensable as they

may well be, they do not serve to secure more than what has been aptly described as an external conformity or the objective conditions of social solidarity. Rome had them all and yet the Roman Republic perished.

Devotion to the Republic in the United States, like devotion to the Crown in England, may, on a somewhat more subtle-seeming but nevertheless superficial view, be considered a sublimated form of what in its historical or prehistorical essence was little more than fetish worship. But it will not do nowadays to try to account for what is perhaps something of a mystery by invoking something yet more remote and mysterious to explain it.

Neither will it do to beg the question of the true source of social cohesion by assuming the reality of some already existing uniformity of national character or of national types as its sufficient explanation. Indeed, unity and loyalty to republic or monarchy can often exist despite strongly marked local differences. States'

rights, the standing challenge to the American Republic, would have been a far more serious source of difficulty had they not been overborne by the stronger influence of loyalty to the Republic.

Essential as a nation's traditions are, those who do nothing but look back to their ancestors are not likely to get ahead very fast. It is the ends and objectives which lie ahead that matter. Tradition can give confidence and momentum to those steering the ship of state, but they will not make port without sailing directions and a destination. Nothing can so damage or paralyze the republic as continual hesitation, uncertainty, and conflict over the nature of the future ends or values which the community exists to realize.

Nothing gives greater strength to a state than singleminded devotion to values shared in common. They need not always be shared consciously or proclaimed daily as an article of a creed. They may be as vague as a faith in undefined "American way of

life." They may be as false and as vicious as the gospel of the class-war or the Nazi dogmas and yet, under the powerful stimulus of ruthless demagogic leadership, they may serve temporarily to bemuse and ensnare millions as Hitler and Goebbels were notoriously most successfully able to do.

Whether doctrines like the Nazis' ever could prevail in a nation whose Constitution has stood and prospered for 170 years—which did not suffer the moral disasters of foreign occupation, dynastic collapse, and economic chaos in the first generation of its existence, as did Germany—is very doubtful. Certainly American life is full of variety, and some performers like Senator McCarthy make foreigners apprehensive once in a while, but the instincts of common decency and common sense have so far been more than strong enough to nip in the bud any large-scale demagogic movement.

When a republic is a going concern it derives clear strength from the willingness of all its members to work for the success of their respective undertakings in self-forgetfulness and in the belief that they, their neighbors, and fellow-citizens are also all working together for a common worthy purpose. The operative words here are work and self-forgetfulness. Ensure their realization and social cohesion and the strength of the republic follow as it were automatically, for it is no new promise and no new experience that all these things shall be added unto those who devote themselves selflessly to the service of the true values of life.

#### NEMESIS OF PURE INDIVIDUALISM

If this is true, then the republican spirit is an inspiration, a state of mind, a prevalent attitude which institutions and procedures, however magnificent, however venerable, however revered, cannot alone be safely trusted to preserve, to foster, and to transmit. Correspondingly, when the members of a republic begin to discover that the values they are supposed to serve are no longer capable of commanding their unquestioning loyalty and devotion, times of trouble and of peril are at hand.

The Romans encountered this fate after they had begun to concentrate their energies upon the contrary principle that everyone should have a free hand to enjoy all the selfish satisfactions he could grab. Pompey and Caesar were only two examples of politicians and candidates who shamelessly tampered with the principles of

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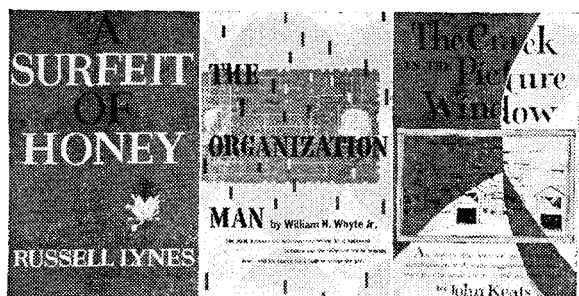


**TWO CONTEMPORARIES:** During its last free days Rome gave birth to two men each of whom in his own way serves as a sure symptom of a sick republic. Although a brilliant and sophisticated patrician, Julius Caesar (102-44 B.C.), spending years in the provinces, came to charm and sympathize with commoners like soldiers, pirates, and peasants. His original ambition was to benefit these classes by forcing reform on the corrupt Roman state, but this ideal became increasingly mixed with a yen for personal glory. In enthusiastic impatience he struck down the traditions and constitutional checks-and-balances of the Republic. To a mastery of intrigue Caesar added a towering military genius; alternating these skills he managed at last to compel every institution and personality in Rome to submit to his will. By a dying spurt of Senatorial resolution he was assassinated, but not before his machinations had made it impossible for anyone but an Emperor to rule the Roman Empire.

Cicero (106-43 B.C.) was born into a middle-class country family and came to Rome to make his fortune. His academic idealism and style were impeccable; but, first as a lawyer, then as a party politician, he found it impossible to reconcile his words with his passion for security and ease. Inconsistencies crept into his record; the nobles ceased to trust him, and realists like Caesar deceived him effortlessly. After a career of trivial successes, pocked with vacillations and ineptitude, Cicero backed Pompey against Caesar. Caesar, who was big enough to be merciful, forgave him, and Cicero retired to his books, but after the Ides of March Caesar's more intolerant disciples soon rounded him up and executed him.

Caesar is the model of a man of marvelous gifts, with all the "right" ideas, who is so tempted by power and the pettiness of his opponents that he breaks the pot he is trying to mend. But Cicero is perhaps an even more common and dangerous type: the man who does not relate his ideals to his acts, the half professor-half party hack who, extolling the "straight and narrow" while gathering in all possible wealth and power, becomes, in the end, merely a disastrous incompetent.





## Three Books on Modern American Society

Authors: Russell Lynes, John Keats, and W. H. Whyte, Jr.

Commentary  
by Thomas E. Cooney

THE decade since the end of World War II might well be called the time of the Second American Revolution. In that period, while permitting ourselves an occasional glance and one prolonged excursion into the outside world, we Americans have so energetically built houses, automobiles, electric dishwashers, and TV sets and lent each other so much money to buy them that we seem to have achieved that goal of modern revolutions, the greatest good for the greatest number.

But recently, from the mortgage-papered suburbs, the traffic-clogged streets, and the air-conditioned offices in which the stenographers call the executives by their first names a doleful lamentation and a wailing have arisen. We are aware that we hurt somewhere in the region of the psyche, but we are unable to tell the doctor precisely where. Housewives

feel trapped by houses that vibrate to the whine of labor-saving devices and resound to the screams of children who have never been spanked; husbands face the world of business with an alert and gregarious front that masks the equal parts of job-worry and time-payment worry that corrode the lining of the stomach and thicken the walls of the arteries.

There has been no shortage of writers willing to hazard a diagnosis, and perhaps even a treatment of these ills. Herman Wouk in "The Caine Mutiny" and Sloan Wilson in "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" have suggested ways (some of them not very attractive, to be sure) in which the mid-twentieth century American can come to terms with his social environment. A little over a year ago A. C. Spector concentrated on one of our more favored and most anxiety-ridden types in "The Exurbanites" (SR, Oct. 29, 1955). Now in the past few weeks three books have appeared which deal in lively and conscientious fashion with the great American prob-

lem: "What is our new society doing to us?" They are:

- Russell Lynes's "A Surfeit of Honey" (Harper, \$3), which tries to define our new class structure.

- William H. Whyte, Jr.'s "The Organization Man" (Simon & Schuster, \$5), which concentrates on the young managerial class.

- John Keats's (not a pseudonym!) "The Crack in the Picture Window" (Houghton Mifflin, \$3), which views the mass-produced suburban housing situation with passionate alarm.

Russell Lynes, whose previous excursions into the definition of social classes have marked him as a quick man with a metaphor, claims that American society has become increasingly divided vertically. "Instead of broad upper, middle, and lower classes that cut across the nation like the clear but uneven slices on a geological model, we now have," he says, "a series of almost free-standing pyramids, each with its separate levels and each one topped by an aristocracy of its own." These pyramids correspond to the fields of business, education, law, communications, and so on.

One group, the most colorful of Mr. Lynes's types has an autonomous status. These people are the "Upper Bohemians," who "live in a twilight zone in our society. They are neither below the new aristocracies nor above what we conventionally think of as the middle class. In recent years they have become a reasonably constant element in a social structure that is not, as we have remarked, notable for its stability. They have dug themselves into the soil of our democracy and, if they will forgive the figure of speech, they perform the useful function, like earthworms, of aerating and fertilizing our topsoil. . . . In his professional or in his extra curricular life, Mr. U.B. often moves in and out of the arts or near them, but in any case he calls them by their pet names and is alive to their latest alarms and excursions. . . . His discriminating taste in paintings and books and furniture

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**TEST FOR GRAY FLANNEL MAN:** In "The Organization Man," William H. Whyte, Jr., gives examples of test questions in the personality tests given by many large corporations to those seeking employment. *Typical self-report question:* Have you enjoyed reading books as much as having company in? The sex act is repulsive. Do you agree, disagree, or are you uncertain? *Opinion question: Degree of conservatism:* Modern art should not be allowed in churches. Agree or disagree? *Word association question:* Underline the word you think goes best with the word in capitals: UMBRELLA (rain, prepared, cumbersome, appeasement). *Opinion question: Policy type:* A worker's home life is not the concern of the company. Agree. . . . Disagree. . . . *Opinion question: Value type:* When you look at a great skyscraper, do you think of: a) our tremendous industrial growth; b) the simplicity and beauty of the structural design.

If you're going to try to cheat on such a test, the important thing to recognize is that you shouldn't try to win a good score, but rather avoid a bad one. By and large, however, your safety lies in getting a score somewhere between the 40th and 60th percentiles, which is to say, you should try to answer as if you were like everybody else is supposed to be. Stay in character. Be empathic to the values of the test maker. When you're being questioned about neuroses, be sure to pick a mild one. Don't be too dominant. Incline to conservatism. Know how the company you're applying to appraises esthetic, economic, religious, and social values.