

How Rome Fell: Death of a Superpower. By Adrian Goldsworthy. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009. 544 pages. \$32.50.
Reviewed by Dr. J. Boone Bartholomees, Jr., Professor of Military History, US Army War College.

Adrian Goldsworthy, the prolific young Oxford-trained classicist, has produced yet another great book about the Roman empire, this one focused on its decline and fall. The subtitle, “Death of a Superpower,” is somewhat awkward, if not misleading. One expects a thesis—probably radical—on superpower demise using Rome as an example with perhaps advice (if only implied) for modern US policymakers; however, Goldsworthy expressly rejects that model. He believes the situations of ancient Rome and the modern United States are so radically different that lessons from Rome’s decline have little direct applicability today. In fact, as if to downplay the topic, the subtitle is not shown on the dust jacket or spine, although it is on the inner dust jacket flap and the title page. Likewise, it is significant that the title is *How Rome Fell*, not *Why Rome Fell*.

Instead of offering advice, the author explains in some detail the decline and fall of the western Roman empire. He dismisses debate regarding the utility or precision of terms, such as ‘decline’ and ‘fall,’ as academic nitpicking (my term, not his), and instead offers a fairly comprehensive review of the Roman empire in the third through fifth centuries. In that review Goldsworthy finds no single cause for the fall of Rome. Like George Pickett, who is reputed to have responded to a question about why the South lost the Civil War that he always thought the Yankees had something to do with it, Goldsworthy recognizes the barbarian invasions of the fifth century as the ultimate proximate cause. He is quick to point out, however, that Rome had faced barbarians for centuries, and that the invasions of the fifth century were no more threatening than earlier ones. Rome just could not respond as she had before. The reason for the fall of Rome is much more complicated than any single cause can explain.

Goldsworthy’s account in brief is that after the heyday of the empire in the first and second centuries, the internal political structure based on senatorial power that had sustained the republic and had been retained at least in form during the early empire began to change. As members of the equestrian class gained power they made conscious moves to limit the power of the senatorial class. Emperors became senators after becoming emperor, and later did not bother with the formality. They reduced the size of provinces so no governor controlled more than two legions and appointed equestrians more and more often to governorships. Eventually the senatorial class was marginalized to the point of impotence. This weakening was done primarily to place men the emperors trusted in positions of power, but limiting the power of the few in favor of the many had disastrous consequences.

In time, anyone who could win or buy the support of a couple of legions could have himself declared emperor, a significant expansion from the 10 to 12 senators who typically competed for the position. There was a series of civil wars as multiple usurpers and emperors vied for power. Many conflicts were very local and of short duration, but several lasted for years and ranged across the empire. In every case, Romans were killing Romans and foraging off Roman territory. Also in every case, the protagonists recognized that their Roman opponent was more formidable than any threat that might develop on the borders and reduced border security to fight the civil war. All this combat weakened the political and leadership base of the empire.

Rome’s advantage in the ancient world was its size in every respect: population, army, economy, etc. It never faced a serious external threat when it could tap that

advantage. In the fourth and fifth centuries, Rome nullified its advantage—note that Rome nullified the advantage, not some action by an adversary. Division of the empire, first informally as three or four emperors ruled simultaneously and later formally into two distinct entities, reduced the ability to tap the total potential power. Simultaneously, bureaucracies grew up that were not especially efficient at anything except ensuring their own survival. Coupled with a cultural tradition of struggling for power through patronage, this led to corruption and sinecures without duties. Mature, experienced emperors could often offset the weaknesses of the bureaucracies, but young emperors, who were in the vast majority during the critical fifth century, became pawns of competing factions attempting to influence policy for their own reasons. All this turmoil led to a climate of paranoia, violence, and “ruthless personal ambition” that left the government too weak and too worried about internal problems to take external threats as seriously as it should.

Additionally, the empire became hollow. Many of the military units reflected on contemporary rosters probably were nonexistent; the ones that existed were greatly understrength. No Roman commander was willing to accept heavy casualties due to the difficulty of replacing losses. There certainly were not enough forces to handle multiple threats. As the Romans pursued one invasion, other tribes sensed weakness and exploited the situation. The result was that tribes that should have been easily handled roamed at will across Roman territory for years until they settled down and claimed what had been Roman for themselves. A downward spiral resulted; loss of land to barbarians led to loss of revenue, which led to a smaller army and thus to further loss of land. The western empire’s resources were never sufficient to guard its long borders against multiple barbarian threats. It could not afford losses; the system failed.

Goldsworthy’s book is a system analysis—parts of the system are related and actions have consequences for other parts of the system. It is very well researched and consequently convincing. As important, Goldsworthy exploits his ability as a storyteller to make it readable and interesting. The combination makes *How Rome Fell* essential reading for anyone with an interest in the ancient world.