***Reipublicae Romanae Americae***

America’s Roman Republic

The American Founders were intellectually incubated within the nursery of the Roman Republic. They were well-educated in both classical and Christian scriptural education. They did study the Greeks, but their primary foci were the Roman Republic and the Bible. Their heroes were the Roman republicans, the defenders of liberty. The founders’ paladins were primarily the Roman sentinels of republican virtues who lived when the Roman Republic was being threatened by demagogues, want-to-be despots, and usurpers. The founders especially venerated Roman statesmen like Cicero, Cato the Younger, Cassius, Metellus Scipio, and Brutus. These martyrs for Roman liberty and republican morality all had sacrificed their lives in unsuccessful efforts to save the Republic from tyranny.

The founders often used Roman pseudonyms such as Publius, Cicero, Cincinnatus, Cato, Brutus, Candidus, Helvidius Priscus, Centennial, Marcus, Plebian, Senex, Tullius, Caesar to hide their identities so as not to incite personal bias against their arguments due to contemporary political allegiances. Founders were often associated with and patterned themselves after famous Roman figures. George Washington, for example, modeled his military strategy after Fabius Maximus’ approach against the Carthaginian invader of Italy, Hannibal (207–203 BC). Like Fabius, Washington engaged in a war of attrition, wearing down an enemy force. He mastered retreating to fight another day without losing his army. The American general would look to attack British supply lines and isolated outposts, such as Trenton, NJ. Washington captured patrols and forage parties rather than engage in pitched battles unless the odds were in his favor.

After the war, the Patriots called George Washington the American Cincinnatus. Like the 5th-century BC Cincinnatus, Washington stepped down from the pinnacle of power after the war to return to his farm. Both champions longed to live as virtuous and productive citizens. Nonetheless, both had answered their fellow citizens’ call to civic duty. Washington followed the Cincinnatus model but preferred to think of himself as the modern Cato the Younger.

The great American orator John Adams, who, more than any other man, moved the 2nd Continental Congress to declare independence, was called the American Cicero. He embodied the most outstanding attorney of the ancient world. Adams modeled his law career after the 1st century BC statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero and would use Cicero’s orations in the courtroom and his political speeches.

Another American founder, also called the “American Cicero,” was likewise called “The Last Roman.” Marylander Charles Carroll had endured as the longest-surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence. Most considered him the wealthiest and most educated founder, with a deep understanding of classical history and philosophy. He also was the only Catholic to sign the Declaration, despite living in the most viciously anti-Catholic colony in America. Ironically, Maryland had been founded as a refuge for English Catholics escaping Anglican and Protestant persecution in England. His cousin John served as the first Catholic bishop in America. The brothers earnestly worked to legitimize Catholicism in the new American Republic.

Carroll was the first among the founders to recognize the necessity for American independence from Britain. He made many of the original and brilliant arguments for separation. Interestingly, Carroll’s fellow Cicero aficionado, John Adams, more than any Founder, argued for independence.

Carroll is also remembered for inspiring the Constitutional Convention with the idea of a “Senate,” which he had earlier established in Maryland. His arguments were deeply rooted in Roman and Western tradition. Those arguments demonstrated a profound understanding of Natural Law, Natural Rights, and Human Nature, leading him to warn about the dangers of democracy voraciously. The Marylander’s distrust of democracy greatly influenced the 19th-century French observer Alexis de Tocqueville’s famous work, *Democracy in Ameri*ca. Fellow Ciceronian John Adams believed Charles Carroll would be considered among the greatest of the American founders. Sadly, Adams’ prognostications never materialized, and Carroll remains largely unknown to most Americans.

The younger generation of founders were equally enthralled with the classics. Often considered the Father of the Constitution, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay used the *nom de plume* of the Roman Publius(Valerius Publicola) to convince Americans to ratify the Constitution at the states’ ratifying conventions. Publius was one of four Roman aristocrats who led the overthrow of King Lucius Tarquinius Superbus or Tarquin the Proud. After the successful revolt, Publius became co-consul with Lucius Junius Brutus in 509 BC, which was considered the Roman Republic's first year.

Publius, Brutus, and the Roman rebels had usurped power from the King to set up a new republican government. This inspired the founders of Federalist No. 39, titled "The Conformity of the Plan to Republican Principles,” an essay by James Madison. It was the 39th issue of *The Federalist Paper*s but the first one published by New York’s *The Independent Journal* on January 16, 1788. Madison explains to the readers how a republican form of government works, and he also considers whether the nation is federal (or national), confederal, or a mere consolidation of states. Madison then theorized that the use of a republic and the first form of a republic, the Roman model, must be evaluated. Rome was heavily monopolized at the top, almost aristocratic in a sense. It cared only about the upper classes (patricians). The patricians

treated the commoners (plebians) as outcasts, not as members of society. Plebians initially were so politically immature and illiterate they could not even talk at public meetings. The Madisonian republic, however, did not create the same society, though many today label his government an elite republic. He advocated that citizens must be treated equally under the law and have a say in government operations. Nevertheless, he rejected direct democracy.

Madison asserts three rules that must apply to consider a government republican. First, only the republic's citizens would decide who leads the government. Citizens’ consent creates the foundation of the republic. Second, the man chosen by the people to lead cannot break any rules or abuse his power. Third, the man chosen to lead should have power for only a prescribed, limited period. However, he may be impeached and removed by the people before the term of office expires for bad behavior or incompetence.

The Madisonian Republic created a system of government in which the citizens of the nation elected a representative legislature to make laws for the state. They indirectly elected the executive branch to enforce the laws, and there was a judicial branch to interpret the laws and decide disputes.

One of the other men who used the alias Publius, Alexander Hamilton, was a brilliant student of classical history. In his contribution to the *Federalist Papers*, he warned against despots or “men who have overturned the liberties of republics, commencing as demagogues and ending as tyrants.” His education aided his understanding of history and facilitated the creation of a new political system. The resemblance between the ancient Roman Republic and America’s political system is uncanny. America’s advent of the executive, judicial, and legislative branches was directly derived from the ancient Roman model.

The founders did not just study and memorize classical writings. They participated in dialogue and debate with the ancient authors and orators. American colonials looked at themselves as equals with their Roman predecessors, as they endeavored to use the ancients to help create a viable, new Republic. The founders’ vocabulary was rooted in ancient Latin, the language of Rome and Italy. The English words republic, virtue, president, capitol, constitution, Senate, veto, and sine die, among others, have Latin origins. Founders also incorporated many Roman political symbols, such as the eagle, the fasces, and the image of a leader on a coin, into the American political culture. The Latin words *E Pluribus Unum* were often considered the motto of the United States. They, along with *Annuit Coeptis* and Novus Ordo Seclorum, are inscribed on the American dollar bill.

More than just adopting Roman political philosophy and symbols, from its foundation, the nation also showed a preference for classical aesthetic style. The earlier capital city of Philadelphia was known as the Athens of America. There were ancient Greek-style buildings all over the city. When the capital moved to Washington, DC, in 1800, the classical style remained, with a more Roman design. The buildings and monuments across the National Mall in Washington, D.C., remind tourists of the robust stately architecture of the Roman government and religious temples.

The U.S. Capitol is located on Capitol Hill. They renamed Jenkins Hill Capitol Hill after the Capitoline Hill in Rome. The ancient Romans built many of their essential temples on the Capitoline, notably the Temple of Jupiter (king of the gods), Optimus Maximus Capitolinus, the Juno (queen of the gods) Moneta, and the Temple of Virtus (virtue). The Capitoline Hill and the Temple of Jupiter became the symbols of Rome as the capital of the world and Roman power.

Thomas Jefferson believed that the Capitol Building would become a republican “temple” dedicated to the rule of the governed. An amateur architect, William Thornton, won the contract to create a neoclassical building. Jefferson favored the central dome, which he thought reminded him of the dome of the Pantheon in Rome, Italy. Earlier, the third President had designed the Virginia State Capitol Building in Richmond with a similar Roman dome.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Roman motif continued. Union Station railroad terminal was built as another Roman Temple. Architect Daniel Burnham looked to Rome for inspiration and took examples from several ancient buildings. He used elaborate sculptures, ionic columns, gold leaves, and large marble corridors. He included large arches at entryways. Union Station’s arches copied the Arch of Constantine. The grand vaulted spaces used the Baths of Diocletian as their model. Near the entrance, Louis St. Gaudens built six massive columns now called “The Progress of Railroading.” The columns all represent a Greek or Roman god, a creature, or an ancient philosopher. The figures all represent ancient ideas that inspired the construction and development of railroads.

The U.S. Supreme Court building continued modeling Roman temples in the capital. The robust staircase, high podium, and columns would not be out of place in the Roman Republic. Its 24 columns are Old Convent Quarry Siena marble from Liguria, Italy. Similarly, the white marble on the Supreme Court and throughout Washington, D.C., was deliberately chosen to reflect the architectural glory of ancient Rome. Roman architect Vitruvius appreciated that the delicate Corinthian design of columns “was produced out of the two other orders,” the Doric and Ionic orders. He explained the Roman type of Corinthian column as “an imitation of the slenderness of a maiden; for the outlines and limbs of maidens, being more slender on account of their tender years.”

Any study of the creation of the United States must illuminate the solid Roman influence. The United States is a child of the ancient republic and the ancient Italian people.

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