IN A WORLD OF ever expanding empires—the Egyptian, the Babylonian, the Assyrian, and the Macedonian—the ancient empire of Rome was territorially the largest and temporally the most enduring. From west to east it stretched over some three thousand miles, an extent comparable to the breadth of the continental United States, and lasted for almost a millennium, from the revolutionary birth of an aggressive Roman Republic in 509 B.C. to the abdication of a teenage emperor to barbarians in 476 A.D. Though the Eastern half of the Empire would continue to be ruled from Byzantium, the collapse of the Empire’s Western half triggered a centuries-long period of Dark Ages and sent cultural shock waves through the later history of Europe. The decline and fall of the Roman Empire also inspired one of historiography’s grandest literary works, an epic study by Edward Gibbon, the first volume of which appeared in 1776, the very year that signaled the birth-throes of our own American nation.

Following in Gibbon’s footsteps, later historians have explored the causes for Rome’s spectacular fall even as ancient eye-witnesses to history like St. Augustine once speculated on the reasons for its downward spiral. The most obvious explanation for Rome’s fall is external: a succession of devastating barbarian invasions. But less obvious, yet more instructive, are explanations that look for causes from within. The internal factors that have been proposed by scholars over the years are many and varied, but can be categorized under five basic headings: administrative, economic, biological, moral, and systemic.

The administrative causes include Rome’s failure to provide sound constitutional guarantees for legitimate and orderly succession, a pattern of military coup and peremptory rule by soldier-emperors, the enlistment of barbarians into military and government service, and a breakdown in military leadership and discipline. Numbered among economic causes are a decline in the productivity of the Empire’s labor force, a stagnation in the overall demand for goods and services, an unfavorable balance of trade brought about by the shifting of productivity from Italy to its outlying provinces, an oppressive system of taxation that severely reduced people’s spending power, a debasement of currency designed to aid the government in meeting its own expenses, and finally an extravagant style of consumption by those who
were wealthy and privileged. Among the proposed biological causes are a reduction in the birthrate of native Romans (perhaps caused by lead poisoning), a decrease in the fertility of Italy’s soil (perhaps exacerbated by climatic change), and the ravaging effects of epidemic disease. Added to these are moral factors: the corruptive influence of autocratic power (Caligula, Nero, and their ilk), the corrosive effects of sensualism (private orgies and seductive spas), the dehumanizing effects of institutionalized slavery, the disappearance of former virtues (chiefly self-reliance and self-sacrifice), and the enervation and distraction induced by Christianity’s influence on brotherly love and other worldly hope. Lastly, there are possible systemic causes: the Spenglerian cycle of youth, maturity, old age, and death to which all living entities—including human institutions—are subject, and the vulnerability of a megastructure to catastrophic World-Trade-Center collapse.

Indeed, under the combined weight of so many factors, it is a wonder that any institution could long stand. Perhaps, rather than speculating on the possible causes for the Roman Empire’s fall, we should—as Gibbon himself suggested—marvel instead at how long Rome stood! Who are we, who measure our own nation’s history by barely more than a couple of centuries, to fault a civilization that prospered for ten: five under the Republic and another five under the Empire?

If, in fact, the Roman system did prevail for so long, what principles were responsible for its phenomenal success? The first of these dynamic principles was the concept of materialism as a basis for the good life. Though materialism may be denigrated as the philosophy of superficial minds, such criticism is a luxury the affluent can best afford. To those who lack sufficient food, clothing, and shelter, or who are denied the pleasures life could otherwise provide, materialism justifiably has powerful appeal. Earlier empires than Rome’s had concentrated wealth in the hands of the few: the ancient Egyptian masses, for example, were more familiar with mud than gold. What the Romans did was invert the economic pyramid, making a higher standard of living for the masses a respectable social goal. Indeed, more than military force, it was the popular distribution of wealth combined with the Empire’s material success that persuaded the peoples of foreign lands to accept Roman authority in exchange for a participatory share in global peace and prosperity.

To achieve their imperialistic ends, the Romans practiced pragmatism, doing what actually worked rather than philosophically speculating on what might be best. Never filled with Greek-style introspective self-doubt, the self-assured Romans confidently projected their sense of themselves on the world they conquered, remaking that world and its inhabitants in their own image. Rather than committing themselves to the exploration of man’s internal nature, they dedicated themselves to the mastery of the external world through the application of force and the imposition of law. They believed, as their epic poet Vergil asserted, that their mission was “to spare the submissive, and crush in war the proud” in order to civilize the uncivilized. Combined with an innate respect for authority and a capacity for disciplined subordination, their talent for organization enabled them to govern an ethnically and politically diverse and complex world.

That very complexity led the Romans to replace the old and cumbersome constitutional machinery of the Republic with the streamlined efficiency of one-man rule, first under Julius Caesar and then, following his assassination, under his heir Augustus and the later emperors of Rome.

America’s Founding Fathers, who knew their Roman history well, saw in the des-
That appetite, and the actions the barbarians took to gratify it, was incited by a second ultimately destructive principle of Roman civilization: the concept of materialism as the basis for the good life. To put it simply, Rome became a victim of jealousy over its own success. But the materialistic success Rome long enjoyed had internal as well as external ramifications. An emphasis upon sensual gratification and individualism eroded the principles of self-sacrifice and communal dedication which had characterized the early Republic and had made empire-building possible. The word Vergil once used to signify those missing qualities was *pietas*, a word from which our own word “piety” is derived but which meant far more to the traditional Roman: a patriotic willingness to subordinate one’s own needs and desires to the higher purposes of the state.

The spiritual core of traditional Roman culture was further eroded by the very growth of Rome’s empire, which made its citizens—once dwellers on a mere Seven Hills—feel small and insignificant within the parameters of a worldwide state. Because Roman religion, always cold and authoritarian, offered them little psychological comfort, many turned to increasingly popular Near Eastern cults that promised a better life in a world beyond. One of those cults, Christianity, became the most popular because it also spoke of a God who, unlike remote Jupiter, knew and loved each individual soul in an increasingly impersonal world. Materialism, as it turned out, had lacked the necessary nutrients to satisfy the deepest cravings of the human soul. As the centuries wore on, time itself contributed to Rome’s decline, intellectually distancing and spiritually alienating people from civic virtues that their forebears had readily comprehended and held dear. Indeed, as the size of the empire grew and the number of its citizens increased, ethnic diversity challenged even the most basic definition of what being a Roman meant.

potic excesses of one-man rule an historic flaw they were determined to exclude from their constitutional design for a new nation. As the nineteenth-century English historian Lord Acton wisely observed: “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” However, a less well known observation of his, inspired by Plato, bears even more scrutiny if we are to understand the fall of Rome: “Every institution tends to perish by an excess of its own basic principle.”

If that is true, if all institutions are in fact undone by an excess of those very principles that first bring them into being, what were the formative principles that precipitated Rome’s fall? First was the hunger for power. Originally a collection of mud and thatch huts overlooking a pre-Forum swamp, prehistoric Rome was raided by early barbarians and later dominated by Etruscan kings. From their culturally advanced Etruscan masters, the primitive Romans learned two lessons: the meaning of affluence and the means to achieve it: imperialistic conquest. Overthrowing their Etruscan overlords in 509 B.C., the Romans went on to become the rulers of Italy until by the middle of the Second Century B.C. they had become the political and military masters of the Mediterranean. With each successive conquest, the Romans felt more secure from external threats, but each successive conquest confronted them with new and potentially hostile neighbors who had to be defeated if Rome was to remain secure. The psychological need for control to compensate for a sense of insecurity conditioned by their earlier history led them to precarious heights of global domination from which they eventually fell, in part from what historian Paul Kennedy has termed “imperial overstretch,” in part from the corruptive concentration of power that ruling such territory required, and in part from the appetite of barbarians living at the edges of the Empire who hungered to partake in the feast.
Thus the quest for military dominance and the drive for materialistic gratification ultimately led to Rome’s defeat.

Since the days of Rome’s Golden Age under Augustus, two thousand years have passed. Today, though it is not technically an empire, the United States stands as the world’s preëminent superpower, both militarily and economically. But how long will that preëminence last? It would be naive to imagine America will be exempt from that universal law of history that to date has dictated the decline and fall of every great power, including Imperial Rome. The only relevant questions are these: when will that fall take place, and for what reason or reasons?

The advantage of studying ancient history is that it is closed-ended and offers the historian the opportunity to analyze events long-ago completed. But the disadvantage is that the passage of time has eliminated so many of the sources such an analysis requires in order to be valid. For the historian of modern times the situation is reversed: sources are abundant (indeed, sometimes too abundant), but perspective can be absent because the historian is often enmeshed in the very events he or she is trying to understand. In effect, it is easy to “predict” the fall of Rome since we already know when it happened! It is far harder to predict an American tomorrow.

Thus it would be facile to point to America’s present national debt or current trade imbalance or latest unemployment figures as sure signs of impending national decline. Economies can turn around, for the worse or for the better. After all, America survived a Great Depression. Nor must we be too quick to point to today’s terrorist hordes as the modern equivalent of the barbarians of old. They may well be, but it is too soon to tell. (The historians of 4006—assuming there are any—will surely know.) Besides, as we have already seen, empires are more truly felled by internal weaknesses than by forces that are external.

Let us therefore look within, searching—as Lord Acton would have us do—for those formative principles that, if carried to excess, might someday cause the institution of the United States to perish.

Though our quest could take us in a number of directions, surely one of the most direct would be the route to America’s founding document, The Declaration of Independence. There we read: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” By declaring that God meant man not only to live but also to be free, the Declaration identified freedom as a fundamental principle of our nation, a principle that would be commemorated a century later in New York harbor by a Statue of Liberty that—in the words of poet Emma Lazarus—greeted oppressed “masses yearning to breathe free.”

Freedom, however, is by definition a condition, not an end in itself, for an individual can be free to do anything (including evil) or free to do nothing at all. Liberty carried to excess becomes license, and license, if widespread, can undermine a nation’s future. With this thought in mind, philosopher Viktor Frankl once proposed that a matching statue be erected on America’s West Coast, a Statue of Responsibility, because without an abiding and equal sense of civic responsibility no freedom-loving nation like ours can survive.

After Life and Liberty, the Declaration of Independence cited the pursuit of Happiness. Yet by what means is happiness to be pursued, and by what means attained? Thanks to the abundant natural resources of America and the talents of its people, the answer history gave was one the ancient Romans would have quickly understood: material progress.

Energized by the Industrial Revolution,
America’s inventiveness soon fulfilled its promise, giving its citizens the highest standard of living of any nation in the history of the world. But in gratifying personal desires, prosperity simultaneously threatened the instinct to sacrifice for something higher than oneself. Today, some might cynically argue that the ultimate loyalty of Americans is not to God or country but to consumption itself. Indeed, it is no accident that “the economy” rather than national character is currently taken as the truest indicator of our country’s political health. Moreover, just as Roman emperors used “bread and circuses” to keep their masses submissive, today’s self-serving leaders can use the addiction to material comfort for their own advantage by manipulating the hopes and fears of the electorate.

The engine of the Industrial Revolution was technology, and technology embodied something else the Romans would have readily grasped: power, the power to transform the quality of everyday life even as it enhanced military capabilities. The nature of technology, however, is intoxicating, for it can delude us into thinking we have more control over our lives than we actually do, while at the same time it subtly directs our desires and narrows the range of our options. To paraphrase Thoreau, we unknowingly become the tools of our tools.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, advanced technology was primarily located in factories, but today it is present in our homes and on our very persons. Unlike the technology of an earlier era that operated at mechanical speed, contemporary technology is largely electronic and operates at a velocity approaching the speed of light. In response to technology’s electronic demands, we now struggle to survive in an atmosphere of artificially induced urgency. In consequence, American culture has become a “hyperculture,” a society warped by stress and pathologically addicted to speed. And as individual lives spin out of control, the centrifugal force also tears at the structure of families. Meanwhile, electronic media have made Americans the most entertained culture in history. Yet as critic Neil Postman cogently argued, the citizens of the United States may in fact be “amusing themselves to death” by allowing seductive images to distract them from the urgent issues that demand their undivided civic attention.

Moreover, just as the ancient Romans were alienated from the founding values of their nation by the passage of centuries, so are we diminished by the passing decades. Like the objects in the rear-view mirror of a speeding car, the facts of American history are rapidly becoming tinier and tinier in our minds. Survey after survey has revealed how little the graduates of America’s high schools and colleges know about the history of their nation and the sacrifices that that history required, in part because even the finest schools no longer require courses in American history and in part because our culture focuses on the present rather than the past. In short, due to “the power of now” we have become victims of cultural amnesia, the social equivalent of Alzheimer’s disease. Yet just as an individual needs memories to retain a sense of personal identity, so does a nation need them in order to survive. As historian Bruce Catton wisely observed: “The great American story is above all other things a continued story. It did not start with us and will not end with us.” But if we allow the cord of that continuity to be broken, our national future will surely be imperiled.

The internal weaknesses of our nation, and its susceptibility to collapse from within, are effectively summed up in the report of the United States Commission on National Security/21st Century, chaired by former U.S. senators Warren Rudman and Gary Hart. In part, the report states:
The upshot of the changes ahead is that Americans are now, and increasingly will become, less secure than they believe themselves to be. The reason is that we may not recognize many of the threats in our future.... They may consist, too, of an unraveling of the fabric of national identity itself.... Compared to the present, everything will be hurled into relative motion.... As a consequence, we may be headed for a considerably more stressful cognitive environment.... Democracy may be hollowed out from the inside.... The growing sense of power that will accrue to many individuals...could corrupt moral balances and erode moral discipline.... It could threaten the balance of healthy civic habits that have long sustained democratic communities.

Such words might well have been written in Latin fifteen or more centuries ago, and indeed echo the sentiments another senator, Cicero, expressed during the dying days of the Roman Republic.

Optimists might inject at this point that if it took the Roman Empire five centuries to fall, America still has about three centuries to go.\footnote{For a more detailed discussion of the fall of Rome with excerpts from the conflicting theories of distinguished historians, see Mortimer Chambers, ed., The Fall of Rome: Can It Be Explained?; Donald Kagan, ed., The End of the Roman Empire; Richard M. Haywood, The Myth of Rome’s Fall; Peter Heather, The Fall of the Roman Empire; A New History of Rome and the Barbarians; and Bryan Ward-Perkins, The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization. For two perceptive analyses of America’s own potential transformation, see Robert Nisbet, Twilight of Authority, and William Van Dusen Wishard, Between Two Ages: The 21st Century and the Crisis of Meaning, Ch. 14-19.} But such optimism fails to take into account the technologically induced acceleration of history itself within the context of an electronically connected world that instantly relays events and demands instant decisive reaction. It also fails to take into account modern technology’s awesome destructive capabilities. The dramatic changes that once took centuries might require only years or, perhaps, only seconds.

Remote as it is from our times, the biography of the ancient world can offer us instructive lessons that may prove critical in shaping our own nation’s future. Of these lessons perhaps the most important is the one cited by cultural historian Will Durant: “A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself within.”