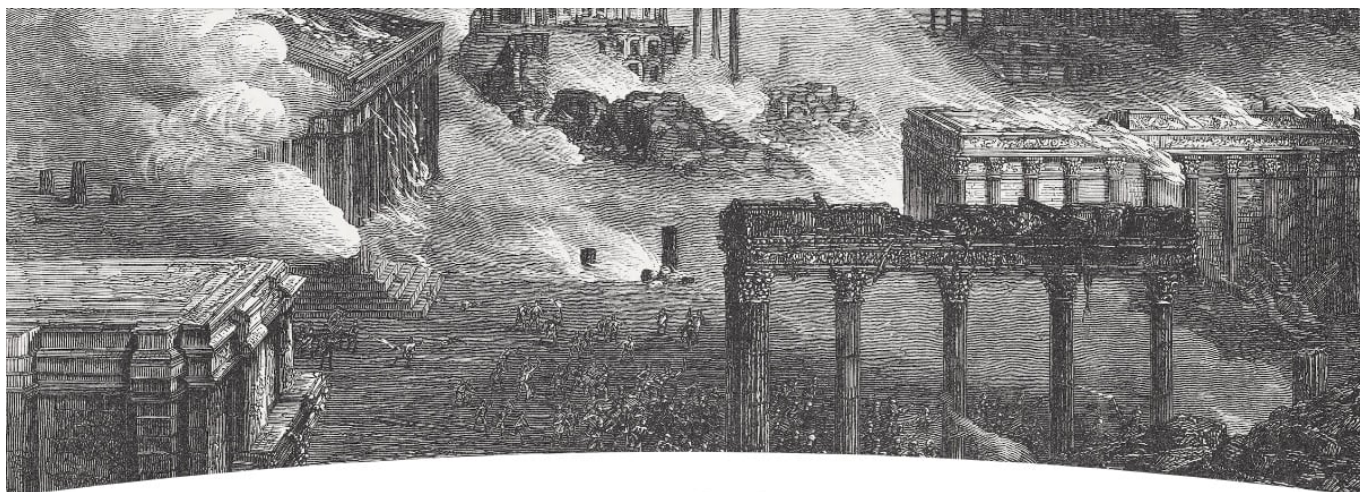


Can the Dark Ages Return?

By Victor Davis Hanson

Western civilization arose in the 8th century B.C. Greece. Some 1,500 city-states emerged from a murky, illiterate 400-year-old Dark Age. That chaos followed the utter collapse of the palatial culture of Mycenaean Greece.



But what reemerged were constitutional government, rationalism, liberty, freedom of expression, self-critique, and free markets—what we know now as the foundation of a unique Western civilization.

The Roman Republic inherited and enhanced the Greek model.

For a millennium, the Republic and subsequent Empire spread Western culture, eventually to be inseparable from Christianity.

From the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf and from the Rhine and Danube to the Sahara, there were a million square miles of safety, prosperity, progress, and science—until the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century AD.

What followed was a second European Dark Age, roughly from 500 to 1000 AD.

Populations declined. Cities eroded. Roman roads, aqueducts, and laws crumbled.

In place of the old Roman provinces arose tribal chieftains and fiefdoms.

Whereas once Roman law had protected even rural people in remote areas, during the Dark Ages, walls and stone were the only means of keeping safe.

Finally, at the end of the 11th century, the old values and know-how of the complex world of Graeco-Roman civilization gradually reemerged.

The slow rebirth was later energized by the humanists and scientists of the Renaissance, Reformation, and eventually the 200-year European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries.

Contemporary Americans do not believe that our current civilization could self-destruct a third time in the West, followed by an impoverished and brutal Dark Age.

But what caused these prior returns to tribalism and loss of science, technology, and the rule of law?

Historians cite several causes of societal collapse—and today they are hauntingly familiar.

Like people, societies age. Complacency sets in.

The hard work and sacrifice that built the West also creates wealth and leisure. Such affluence is taken for granted by later generations. What created success is eventually ignored—or even mocked.

Expenditures and consumption outpace income, production, and investment.

Child-rearing, traditional values, strong defense, love of

country, religiosity, meritocracy, and empirical education fade away.

The middle class of autonomous citizens disappear. Society bifurcates between a few lords and many peasants.

Tribalism—the pre-civilizational bonds based on race, religion, or shared appearance—reemerge.

National government fragments into regional and ethnic enclaves.

Borders disappear. Mass migrations are unchecked. The age-old bane of anti-Semitism reappears.

The currency inflates, losing its value and confidence. General crassness in behavior, speech, dress, and ethics replaces prior norms.

Transportation, communications, and infrastructure all decline.

The end is near when the necessary medicine is seen as worse than the disease.

Such was life around 450 AD in Western Europe.

The contemporary West might raise similar red flags.

Fertility has dived well below 2.0 in almost every Western country.

Public debt is nearing unsustainable levels. The dollar and euro have lost much of their purchasing power.

It is more common in universities to damn than honor the gifts of the Western intellectual past.

Yet, the reading and analytical skills of average Westerners, and Americans in particular, steadily decline.

Can the general population even operate or comprehend the ever-more sophisticated machines and infrastructure that an elite group of engineers and scientists creates?

The citizen loses confidence in an often corrupt elite, who neither will protect their nations' borders nor spend sufficient money on collective defense.

The cures are scorned.

Do we dare address spiraling deficits, unsustainable debt, and corrupt bureaucracies and entitlements?

Even mention of reform is smeared as "greedy," "racist," "cruel," or even "fascist" and "Nazi."

In our times, relativism replaces absolute values in the eerie replay of the latter Roman Empire.

Critical legal theory claims crimes are not really crimes.

Critical race theory postulates that all of society is guilty of insidious bias, demanding reparations in cash and preferences in admission and hiring.

Salad-bowl tribalism replaces assimilation, acculturation, and integration of the old melting pot.

Despite a far wealthier, far more leisured, and far more scientific contemporary America, was it safer to walk in New York or take the subway in 1960 than now?

Are high school students better at math now or 70 years ago?

Are movies and television more entertaining and ennobling in 1940 or now?

Are nuclear, two-parent families the norm currently or in 1955?

We are blessed to live longer and healthier lives than

ever—even as the larger society around us seems to teeter.

Yet, the West historically is uniquely self-introspective and self-critical.

Reform and Renaissance historically are more common than descents back into the Dark Ages.

But the medicine for decline requires unity, honesty, courage, and action—virtues now in short supply on social media, amid popular culture, and among the political class.

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