

5: OUR RISE AND FALL?

The Fall of the Roman Empire can be attributed to many factors, not the least of which were internal corruption, political division, currency manipulation and outside intervention (money and influence from other countries).

As Rome grew, in size and population, the rulers of Rome became very corrupt (sound familiar?). Rather than serving the interests of the Empire, its rulers, generals, and politicians were more concerned with protecting and enriching themselves (also sound familiar?). Greed, power and control became the order of the day.

Character Counts

In the USA today, many people who are striving to serve in government are well-meaning individuals who want to contribute to the overall well-being of our country and the American people. On the other hand, there are far too many people in elected offices who are out for themselves. The sweet smell of money, greed, power and control apparently tainting their original intent to represent their constituents honorably. Instead of serving selflessly, they change their positions, policies and politics on a moment's notice in order to enrich themselves and to continue to stay in office. We need to be more discerning when it comes to who we allow to run for office in all sectors of our government ... state, local and national.

If an individual is a convicted felon, he or she cannot join the military without a special waiver. The waiver is usually only granted when there is only one felony on record and favorable extenuating circumstances support the waiver application. Persons with multiple felonies are virtually never granted a waiver. Bottom line, it is almost impossible to serve in the military if you are a felon with multiple convictions while, on the other hand, convicted felons are not prevented from running for office and becoming elected to serve in our government, even if they are running for President of the United States where they would be acting as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. Think about it. A convicted felon cannot serve in the armed forces but can serve as Commander of those same Armed Forces and/or become elected to Congress. Does that make sense to you? Convicted felons should not be allowed to run for federal offices, period (a few states have enacted laws prohibiting felons from holding elected offices in their state). This could promptly be enacted by passing new federal legislation (although the convicted felons in office probably would not vote for it!).

Even in cases where someone seeking office is not a convicted felon, we need to do a far better job when it comes to vetting potential candidates. Most employers require a thorough application process and a background check before hiring a prospective employee. Our political parties should also require a comprehensive vetting process prior to allowing just anyone to place their name on a ballot and run for office. A system that opens the door to elected officials holding

office, such as George Santos, Bob Menendez, Ted Stevens, Spiro Agnew, Mark Robinson (and a host of other questionable characters) or gives the American people the choice between two elderly, inept candidates for President (one who reneged on his promise to “build a bridge to the future” and one who has been convicted of 38 felonies and indicted for a host of others) is not much of a system at all. Any democratic government that is run by liars, cheats, scoundrels and even criminals is not one that can withstand the test of time. Those who want to lead us should be held to a higher standard.

Political Opportunism

Our politicians will shamelessly change their points of view, and even their party affiliation, if they feel that it will benefit them personally in the long run.

I live in Hawaii, home of former Congresswoman, Tulsi Gabbard. Hawaii is a Democratic State within and without. There has been only one Republican U.S. Senator elected to Congress since its inception into Statehood in 1959 (Hiram Fong) and there has only been one Republican Member of the House elected in a general election since Statehood (Pat Sakai). The current makeup of the Hawaii State Legislature is 44 Democrats and 6 Republicans. In short, there is no realistic road from Hawaii to the Capital in Washington D.C. unless the candidate is a Democrat.

Back to Tulsi. Tulsi’s father is Mike Gabbard who has been a Democratic Hawaii State Legislator since 2006. While it seems as though Tulsi might have likely decided to follow in her father’s footsteps, she opted instead to follow another path by deciding to run for the U.S. House of Representatives (as a Democrat). There are many here in Hawaii that feel that she did not go to Washington to serve as a loyal member of the Democratic Party and that she has always had an alternative agenda from the beginning of her political career.

Step 1 was to run for the U.S. House of Representatives as a Democrat (some would say that she has always been a Republican in a Democrat’s clothing). Step 2 was to gain national recognition once she was elected and ensconced in Washington. Step 3 was to run for the Presidency of the United States (conceivably knowing full well that she did not have a snowball’s chance in hell of winning the nomination). Step 4 was to abandon her run for President and

subsequently accuse the Democrats of being “elitist warmongers” and later declaring herself to be an Independent instead of a Democrat (couldn’t possibly have gone to Washington had she made that decision earlier-on in her career). The 4th and final step was to gravitate towards the Republican Party (possibly thinking that she would have a shot at becoming Vice President under Trump) and then ultimately endorse him for President in 2024. Dedicated Representative of the people or strictly a political opportunist looking for a cabinet position and another future run at the presidency? Only Tulsi knows for sure!

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. (RFK Jr.) is the son of the famous, revered, late Robert F. Kennedy (Bobby Kennedy). Having been raised and educated in Boston, I have a strong affinity for the Kennedy Family and their political history. Yes, the Kennedy’s were a strong and powerful presence in the political arena; however, they were also known for their contributions to humanity and commitment to endearing public service. Flawed? Yes, but aren’t we all, to some extent? There is a world of difference between being somewhat flawed versus being totally self-serving without regard to the consequences of one’s actions that result in harm to our country.

RFK Jr. decided to break from his family’s longtime connection to the Democratic Party and, instead, march to the beat of his own drum. He left the Democratic Party and became an Independent with the hopes of running for, and becoming, President of the United States. I refer to my “snowball in hell” comment earlier in this chapter!

What is more apparent than the obvious likelihood that RFK Jr. will never become President of the United States (thank you Lord!), is the fact that he purportedly has been shopping around his endorsement for our future President to the highest bidder! After approaching Vice President Harris, allegedly in search of a quid pro quo deal for a position in her potential administration and then being turned away, he fled to the open arms of Donald Trump who quickly accepted his offer and made him a part of his political Transition Team (along with Tulsi Gabbard!). Now, RFK, the infamous anti-vaxxer, is purportedly in line for a position in Health and Human Resources should Trump become elected. The great Bobby Kennedy must be turning over in his grave, watching his son put his thumb in the eye of the Kennedy family and making political deals that are only in his own selfish interests, not the interests of the American people.

Cornel Ronald West is an American philosopher, theologian, political activist, politician, social critic, and public intellectual. The grandson of a Baptist minister, West's primary philosophy focuses on the roles of race, gender, and class struggle in American society (Wikipedia). While he claims to be championing the causes of the downtrodden and victims of social bias, he never shies away from having his face in front of as many cameras as possible. In a recent interview in 2024, he was asked if he was concerned about his candidacy for President influencing the outcome of the election in favor of Trump or Biden. He shamelessly replied that he did not care whether or not he would upset the results of the election (paraphrasing here). His goal was to help the weak, indigent and victims of our society. How nice of him!

To quote Donald M. Suggs (publisher of the St. Louis American), *"I respect him (West) as a pioneering theorist, but I think he is making a poor political choice with his quixotic third-party presidential campaign. West and many other Black political figures seem to think that because they have every right to run, they should run campaigns that satisfy their personal aspirations and/or needs at the expense of the greater good of their communities."*

But that is not the issue here. Rather it is the damage his third-party candidacy could do to the presidential election and the future direction of the country. The only possible impact of West's vain, selfish candidacy is to take some votes away from Biden (now Harris) that might allow Trump or some likeminded far-right wing Republican to return to the White House.

I have a suggestion for Cornell West. If you are that concerned about those who are needy, and disaffected, why not spend more of your time and effort on social-media, mainstream media, and non-profit activities that would not directly impact the results of a presidential election in our country (I refer you to the previously mentioned snowball's chance!). Why not think about what is best for the people of this country without jeopardizing their voice in our free and fair electoral process. Step in front of as many cameras as you like to champion your causes but leave our presidential election process off your personal agenda! Ditto for Libertarian candidates Chase Oliver and the Green Part's Jill Stein. Get behind a major candidate that supports your views, goals and objectives to some reasonable degree and then help them to prevail. Let that snowball melt away!

Our Culture

Many people question why our country is so politically, philosophically, and socially divided today. Additionally, many Americans can't understand how it is that so many of us are unhappy when we live in a time when the stock market is at an all-time high, unemployment is at an all-time low, wages are finally outpacing the rate of inflation (which has consistently been in decline), and we have the strongest economy in the world. If you don't agree with that last statement, just travel to any other country in the world and see for yourself what the value of the American Dollar is abroad. China's growth is almost all internal, Russia's economy is as fragile as a porcelain teacup in a steel factory and the Middle East is a quagmire of failing political, social and economic infrastructures and ideals.

So why is it that so many Americans feel disaffected and disadvantaged? What is the reality of the "kitchen table issues" that are so often referred to by those seeking change in the direction that we have successfully been moving in since the demise of the worldwide Covid pandemic? Why do so many Americans feel that they are living from "paycheck to paycheck?" Note to all of these "disaffected" Americans ... the large majority of our population has always lived from paycheck to paycheck. The difference today vs. yesterday is that we now have access to credit cards to quench our thirst for wanting more from what life has to offer. The Americans of today want more than the Americans of yesterday ... and they want it NOW!

The truth is that we spend more, we don't save as much as we used to, and we travel. If we can't afford it, we just charge it:

- Travel spending is returning to pre-pandemic levels

In 2022, Americans spent \$1.2 trillion on travel, which is similar to pre-pandemic levels.

- International travel is on the rise

In 2024, Americans are expected to spend more than \$221 billion on summer vacations, which is a record-breaking amount. This is a 118% increase from 2019 and a 40% increase from 2020.

- Americans are spending more on experiences, such as concerts and sporting events, which they were deprived of during the pandemic.
- Americans are saving less. The personal savings rate in the US has declined, falling to 3.6% in February of 2024.
- Americans are traveling abroad more (thanks to the strong dollar previously referred to).
- More and more consumers are upside down on their credit card debt than ever before. It should be noted that massive credit card debt in our country is one of the largest contributing causes of increasing inflation rates.

We have become spoiled. We have become fat, dumb and unhappy ... easy targets for those politicians who want to spew hatred of our government while fanning the flames of fear instead of the promise of what our faith in our country will bring us (as it always has). We have not one iota of the pain and sacrifice that our predecessors endured in the past. It is that very sacrifice that has made us the greatest country in the world.

Yes, there are too many of us who must work harder than we would like to in order to keep our heads above water. The reality is that that is part of life. As comedian Steven Wright once said, "We can't have it all. Where would we put it if we did?"

My mom had a system of weekly budget envelopes and worked two jobs to make certain that we would continue to survive. We didn't have a car. We didn't have a television. There was no social media to constantly remind us of what other things we didn't have. There were no credit cards. There was no healthcare insurance. When the doctor came to our trailer, we had to pay cash. We actually couldn't afford to get sick!

Times change but challenges always remain. A sign of the changing times is the impact of rising costs, some of which are attributable to the rate of inflation. Consider the following:

- Population - 1992 = 254,383,000 – 2024 = 333,300,000
- Average cost of a 3-bedroom home - 1992 = \$99,800 – 2024 = \$300,000
- Average Income - 1992 = \$30,056 – 2024 = \$63,795

- Price of a new Ford - 1992 = \$13,500 – 2024 = \$45,000
- Price of a gallon of gasoline - 1992 = \$1.18 – 2024 = \$3.50
- Loaf of Bread - \$.73 – 2024 = \$2.50
- One gallon of milk - \$2.72 – 2024 = \$3.32
- Postage stamp - \$.29 – 2024 = \$.73

Now, I ask you, do you think that the providers of all these goods and services make more money today than their counterparts did in 1992? Did our country prosper more or prosper less over the past 32 years? Progress has a price, but most reasonable people would say that it is worth it. Yes, we need to do our very best to keep inflation under control, while remembering that it is largely a sign of the times.

Not only that, but we now live in a global economy where the impact of inflation is worldwide, not just here in the USA. That having been said, I will take my chances on solving our problems and working towards continued prosperity here, rather than any other country in the world.

There will always be those who earn more and those who earn less. That is the very nature of a true democratic society. If we want more, then we work harder and smarter to achieve our goals and objectives in life. What we don't do is demand that our government or some political party become responsible for giving us what it is that we feel that we don't have in life. I have seen far too many people complaining about the cost of goods and their lack of income while driving around in new Dodge Ram pickup trucks, watching their 60-inch televisions at home and partying heartily on the weekends. Is this really a sign of tough times? Getting what they want is only a credit card away. This truly sounds like the beginning of the "Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire."

I would also point to the countless number of countries that have fallen into the hands of dictators (outside influencers) who stirred up the masses by telling them everything that they did not have and then pointing to everything that they would have if they simply put those dictators in power and followed their every word while turning a blind eye to their every evil deed.

What happened to our resolve when times get tough?" What happened to our commitment to hold hands and work together to raise a neighbor's barn, to stand strong for our democratic views and ideals, to agree to disagree without becoming disagreeable, or worse yet, espousing violence as an answer to counter those that we disagree with.