

Ancient Lessons

by James A. Maccaro

In a Nov. 14, 1996, article entitled “Study to Probe American Anger”, the Washington Post announced that, “Twenty-five prominent citizens are going to try to find out why Americans distrust the government and each other and what can be done about it. Retiring Sen. Sam Nunn, D-Ga., and former Education Secretary William Bennett have created a National Commission on Civic Renewal to conduct a yearlong study. Bennett noted polls pointing to a decline in trust among Americans and toward government and explained that the Commission’s purpose will be to discover why Americans are “so cynical, so distressed, so angry, so ticked off about so many things.”

The Commission will conduct hearings in Washington, collect studies on the breakdown in civic trust, and issue a report on what government and civic organizations can do.

Sen. Nunn cited turnout in the presidential election, the lowest in 72 years, as an indication of a decline in “the quality of public and civic life. . . . We as Americans cannot remain cheerfully neutral on fundamental questions of right and wrong.”

Um-hmm.

I can’t wait to see the results of their survey. Given that it will all take place in Washington D.C., I wonder if the results can be anything other than “po-

litically correct”.

In truth, you don’t need another commission or another study to discover why Americans are angry and what this anger may precipitate. All you need are a few facts and a little ancient -- and persistent -- history

Fact 1: Government now consumes about 55% of every worker’s income. We pay over half our earnings to support local, state, and federal governments that produce nothing -- not one grain of wheat, not one shingle for home, not one wiper blade for a car -- in return.

Fact 2: A government study indicates that 75% of all divorces are caused by financial stress.

Since government consumes more of our income than all our other costs combined, it’s obvious that government is the single biggest cause of financial stress, and therefore divorce and all its social consequences -- fatherless homes and the associated problems of teenage violence, gangs, drugs, promiscuity and suicide.

Fact 3: A Rand Corporation study indicates that out of every \$100 we send to Washington as taxes to help a particular cause (women, minorities, children, foreign aid, the elderly), only \$25 reaches the intended beneficiaries; \$75 is consumed by government and government-approved middlemen. It’s not enough that

government takes over half our money, they waste nearly three-quarters of what they take supporting themselves and their friends in the style to which they’ve become accustomed.

We are being systematically impoverished, our families fragmented, our children crippled, and our future condemned to penance -- all by a government that is at best overly large, inefficient, unaccountable, and insatiable. Do we need another commission, another study, to tell us our government is a primary cause for our collective anger and not merely infuriating, but dangerous?

What happens when government takes too much . . . when government serves its own welfare rather than the welfare of the people? History offers a clue:

The history of ancient Rome repeatedly demonstrates the connection between low taxes and prosperity. It also shows the connection between confiscatory taxes and political and social unrest.

As the Roman empire expanded, so did the emperors’ appetites for revenue. Taxes reached the point that most people could not meet their tax burdens out of their incomes and had to liquidate capital assets. They consequently became less productive, which reduced their

income and caused them to fall further and further behind.¹

Government confiscation of property to pay taxes was common. In Egypt during the reign of Nero, some farmers found the burden of taxation so great that they abandoned their farms.² Entire villages were depopulated. Abandonment and confiscation became so widespread that one of the most frequently asked questions of temple oracles about a perspective groom was whether he would eventually run away or have the State take all of his property. The middle class was systematically destroyed as commerce ground to a halt and small landowners gave up their property to work under the protection of the politically connected owners of great estates.³

To relieve the economic pressures, successive emperors debased the currency, which made matters worse because it caused inflation.⁴ Diocletian, emperor from 284 to 305 A.D., at-

tempted to counter the economic instability caused by his policies of high taxation by the unprecedented act of setting fixed prices for all goods and wages. Wheat, barley, rye, pheasant, and even sparrows and mice were among the goods under price control. The penalty for producers who disobeyed the price edict was death. The resulting damage to the economy was disastrous. In the words of Lactantius, a historian who lived during the era of Diocletian, "nothing appeared on the market because of fear, and prices soared much higher."⁵

Diocletian's ruthless policies were continued and even expanded upon by his successor, Constantine. According to Libanius of Antioch, a writer contemporary to the time, "those for whom the work of their hands scarcely furnishes a livelihood are crushed beneath the burden." He continued:

"The lowest cobbler cannot

escape from it. I have seen some who, raising their hands to heaven . . . swore that they would pay nothing more. But their protests did not abate the greed of their cruel oppressors, who pursued them with their threatening shouts and seemed quite ready to devour them. It is the time when slavery is multiplied, when fathers barter away the liberty of their children, not in order to enrich themselves with the price of the sale, but in order to hand it over to their prosecutors."⁶

To extract money, the authorities routinely tortured and beat taxpayers. Constantine eventually addressed this abuse by issuing an edict banning the use of the rack and scourges to "persuade" reluctant taxpayers to provide additional money; he also reduced some taxes. However, the tax system continued to routinely employ such punishments as beatings and imprisonment, and rates were much higher than most people could afford.

Historians agree that these foolish fiscal policies greatly contributed to the collapse of the Roman empire. Indeed, some historians consider it to be the primary factor for the fall of Rome. In the words of Michael Grant, "it was a crushing tax system, which ultimately defeated its own purpose, because it destroyed the very people (farmers and merchants) who had to pay the taxes."⁷

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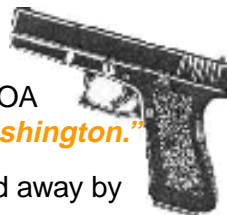
As the late Sen. Everett Dirksen used to say,

"When I feel the heat, I see the light."

Congressman Ron Paul (R-TX) has called GOA

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¹ Arthur E.R. Boak and William G. Sinnigen, *A History of Rome to A.D. 565* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p.371.

² *Ibid.*, p.373.

³ Michael Grant, *Constantine the Great* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994), p.90.

⁴ Boak and Sinnigen, p.372.

⁵ Moses Hadas, *Imperial Rome* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1965), p.145.

⁶ Grant, pp.11, 88.

⁷ Grant, p.93.