

Rise and Decline: Where We Are and What We Can Do about It

Bruce D. Thatcher

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These are commendably clear and concise histories of expansive topics.

Is there anything that can be done to reverse cultural and political decline? Maybe. That is the conclusion that historian Bruce D. Thatcher reaches in his excellent historical overview titled *Rise and Decline*.

This five-hundred-plus-page behemoth may look daunting at first, but Thatcher's clean and simple writing style can be consumed by anyone. Furthermore, the history that is presented in *Rise and Decline* is not the occult or opaque history produced by the modern academy, which usually focuses on a very specific topic or a highly selective group. Rather, *Rise and Decline* examines six different societies in order to chart the rise, apex, and eventual fall of history's greatest civilizations.

In commendably clear and concise histories, Thatcher's study begins with ancient Athens and Rome, two of the most important cities in history insofar as modern politics, philosophy, law, and religion are concerned. They were, however, also susceptible to war, imperialism, and the consequences of an elite class that disliked both demagogic democracy and populist tyranny.

The endings of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the French Third Republic, and the British Empire are also examined—their rises credited to uniformity of purpose, their endings to war and political corruption.

Most societies have a shelf life of only two hundred years, Thatcher shows, and yet absolute decline is not necessarily mandatory. However, the United States, which does not face an imminent threat of military invasion, is indicated to be on the verge of collapse.

Rise and Decline has both the approach and the consistency of a college-level textbook. With its summary and questions sections in each chapter, it stands to serve either as assigned reading or as a staple of the book club circuit. In either environment, the book would work well; it names and identifies the trajectories of most societies, regardless of how wealthy or safe they believe they are.

A tendency toward repetition mars this otherwise impeccable synthesis. Some sections are barely rephrased versions of earlier chapters, and the first two chapters of each case study could be easily condensed into one. Still, *Rise and Decline* would be an excellent addition to the library of any historian, whether amateur or professional.

Any American worried about the state of the nation should snap this book up immediately, for Thatcher warns that sociopolitical apathy, political street violence, and the misuse and abuse of individual rights are capable of bringing down America. We have been warned.

BENJAMIN WELTON (July 17, 2017)

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