



Written by [Fr. James Thornton](#) on September 3, 2021

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Hope's Foundation

General Robert E. Lee, one of the greatest of Americans, wrote the following words: “My experience of men has neither disposed me to think worse of them, nor indisposed me to serve them; nor, in spite of failures, which I lament, of errors, which I now see and acknowledge, or of the present state of affairs, do I despair of the future. The march of Providence is so slow, and our desires so impatient, the work of progress is so immense, and our means of aiding it so feeble, the life of humanity so long, and that of the individual so brief, that we often see only the ebb of the advancing wave, and are thus discouraged. It is history that teaches us to hope.”



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It is believed that the general wrote these words during the last years of his life, when he felt compelled to bear a large measure of responsibility for the defeat of his beloved homeland. This burden was a heavy one to shoulder, and it was reflected on his face, which, writes Southern philosopher Richard Weaver, “took on a look of settled sadness.” Heartache for a lost dream and grief over the tremendous suffering left in the wake of war were certainly there, but bitterness, hatred, and surrender to despondency were not. To those who thought that there was no future worth living, General Lee responded that “human virtue must be equal to human calamity.” Hope remained very much alive in Lee’s heart. Indeed, Weaver declares that Lee’s cardinal message, that “history teaches us to hope,” is his final legacy to his countrymen, a testament that is “a profession of faith which for courage and spiritual hope deserves to rank with the noblest utterances.”

We live in a time when day-to-day events give powerful motive for despair about our beloved country, about its future as an independent nation, and about our future as a free and unique people. The fattening of the federal leviathan continues; internationalism as a political force still appears ascendant; an anti-American trade policy masquerading as “free trade” wreaks havoc on the foundations of our economic and political independence; we are awash in a flood of malodorous muck emanating from the Hollywood-New York entertainment axis; massive third-world immigration threatens to overwhelm the social, political, and cultural underpinnings of our land; our military grows weaker by the day; traitors are honored and loyal Americans mocked; and patriots make little visible headway despite many years of sacrifice and heroic effort. It is not an encouraging picture. Some would even say that our defeat is inevitable. Let us see if that impression can be justified.

The Future Is Not Determined

Many men down through the centuries have treated history as if it were made up of sets of iron laws, and so treated the future as if it were composed of processes that are inexorable. That outlook is called historical determinism. Peoples and nations sufficiently culturally advanced to have a true history are



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seen by determinists to be locked onto their paths, to be fixed in their journeys through time. Karl Marx, the most famous of these theorists, postulated an historical system wherein nations went through consecutive economic phases, each an advance on its antecedent. Thus, feudalism gave way to mercantilism, which gave way to capitalism, which *inevitably* must give way to socialism and communism.

Oswald Spengler's reading of history suggested to him a different scheme in which nations passed through life cycles similar to that through which living organisms pass: birth, childhood, youth, middle age, old age, and death. According to Spengler, there is no escape from destiny for any nation, any more than there is for an individual human being. Men and women pass through the phases of life and eventually die, and so it is, he surmised, for nations and civilizations. We note here, parenthetically, that the philosophies of Marx and Spengler are radically dissimilar, with very different roots. Their only similarity is that both are deterministic.



“Molon labe”: When the Spartans at Thermopylae were ordered by the Persians to lay down their arms and surrender, they replied, “Come and take them.” Such courage led to an eventual Greek victory over Persia.

Marx and Spengler were not the only ones to envision the course of history as something fixed and preordained by inflexible laws. Indeed, such thinking — that the record of history is set in stone, that history is blind and grants no favors, and that there is no turning around its inevitable march — can be traced back to the ancient Greeks. Spengler, in a famous quotation from his *Man and Technics*, illustrates this outlook: “We are born into this time and must bravely follow the path to the destined end. There is no other way. Our duty is to hold on to the lost position, without hope, without rescue, like that Roman soldier whose bones were found in front of a door in Pompeii, who, during the eruption of Vesuvius, died at his post because they forgot to relieve him. That is greatness. That is what it means to be a thoroughbred. The honorable end is the one thing that can *not* be taken from a man.”

Though that passage has a certain beauty and nobility when judged from the standpoint of literary elegance, the underlying thought is altogether fatalistic, even self-defeating. Were the Spenglerians correct, there would be every reason for despair. Hope would be foolishness.

However, the error made by men who believe in historical inevitability is that they confuse certain



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societal propensities with iron laws of history. It is evident that groups of human beings tend to react to certain situations in more or less predictable ways. Overwhelm a society with too much luxury, and emphasize the commercial in preference to the spiritual and moral, and that society will likely become debased. Dishearten an army by subjecting it to continual evidence of its enemy's unbeatable superiority, and it will often turn and run. Such are the ways of people considered *en masse*, the behavior of which can be predicted with a fair degree of success. But these are not iron laws. Exceptions abound. Let us explore some of these.

Enemy at the Gates

In the fifth century B.C., Greece was threatened by Persian invasions. Persian power was vast, while Greece was weak and fragmented, and it stood to reason that the Persian armies would be victorious. All evidence pointed to this. Under Darius the Great, and again under Xerxes, successive invasions were launched. Even the Oracle of Delphi seemed initially to predict doom for the Greek cause. Yet, though a Persian triumph was thought to be inevitable, such was not the case. At Marathon, and later at Thermopylae, sheer courage, resoluteness, and unquenchable hope saved the day.

The Persian threat, this time under Darius III, was decisively smashed in the following century by Alexander on a plain near Gaugamela. Though the Persians again had amassed overwhelming strength on their side, with nearly double the cavalry as their enemy, numerous formations of mercenaries, and ostensibly irresistible weapons such as masses of scythe-wheeled chariots and huge and terrifying war elephants, those who believed in the inevitability of history were mistaken again. A combination of courage and brilliance on the part of Alexander's forces shattered Persian military might for centuries thereafter.

Those historical encounters not only preserved the independence of the Greek people, but they preserved the incomparable jewel of Greek learning and culture, and thereby safeguarded a worldview that was to form the basis for the whole of Western culture and civilization, right down to the present day. One cannot begin to estimate how different life for each of us would be had we lost that treasure.

Not So Invincible

A 19th-century author once declared, "It is in Rome that all ancient history loses itself; it is out of Rome that all modern history takes its source.... The history of Rome is in truth synonymous with the history of the world." That statement is unquestionably accurate. In nearly every area of public life, in statecraft, in foreign affairs, in military matters, and in social policy, the examples offered by Rome so often remain an endless source from which to draw. That is no less true with respect to a source of examples showing how peoples can overcome dire circumstances to survive, recover, and flourish.

Almost 2,000 years ago, the Roman Empire sought to extend its frontiers northward to encompass what is today Germany. In the year 9 A.D., the Roman Emperor Augustus sent his legions on a campaign to subdue the German tribes across the Rhine and to conquer all territory as far as the River Elbe. Roman Legions, led by their commander Varus, marched east, determined to rid Rome once and for all of the bothersome Germanic tribes. Now we must remember that Rome at that time still possessed the most modern army in the world, and military and economic power that was simply gigantic. Rome was, even as late as the days of Augustus, the colossal "super-power" of the age, and her resources very nearly limitless.



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By way of contrast, the Germans were disorganized, primitive, and wretchedly poor. Historian Sir Edward Creasy writes that they were “ill armed and undisciplined,” while the Roman troops “consisted of veterans in the highest state of equipment and training, familiarized with victory, and commanded by officers of proved skill and valor.” The Romans should have cut through the Germans with ease. Roman victory, and Roman dominion over the German tribes, by any rational estimation, was “inevitable.” But that was not to be, and this had to do with the internal psyches of the people involved in this struggle.

Creasy pays tribute to the integrity and uprightness of the Germans, to “their bravery, their fidelity to their word, their manly independence of spirit, their love of their national free institutions, and their loathing of every pollution and meanness.” A century before, the Romans too could have boasted of such things, but no longer. Rome was controlled by an “oligarchy of wealth,” quite unlike its old, austere aristocracy of honor. In Creasy’s words, Rome’s cities were filled with “the chance sweepings of every conquered country” and her citizens mostly “a degraded mass of poverty and misery” infected with the “foulest profligacy of manners.”

German culture was, at that time, still in its infancy, yet the way of life cultivated by the tribes of Germany embodied certain features which eventually would contribute to the invigoration of European civilization, which had been corrupted by the decay of late-pagan antiquity. Among these were a fierce passion for freedom and a strong sense of individuality. If these sound familiar to Americans, it is because they come to us from the ancient Germans, by way of our English ancestors. Creasy mentions that “the main stream of our [English] people was and is Germanic.” So that element stands out in modern America, through the agency of the Germanic Anglo-Saxons, who conquered the Romanized Celts of Britain, and who passed their love of freedom eventually down to us.



Defeating the invincible army: Though the Germanic tribes were massively outclassed and outnumbered by the Romans, their character and honor allowed them to deal Rome a crushing defeat at Teutoburg Forest.

And so it was that in a thick wood known as the *Teutoburger Wald*, near where today exists the modern city of Detmold, the Roman Legions of Varus were confronted by German warriors led by Herman (also known by his Latin name, Arminius). The Romans were cut to ribbons, and the Roman commander Varus and his fellow commanders killed themselves rather than risk capture.



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The Roman historian Suetonius recalled that Augustus, upon hearing of the catastrophe, struck his head repeatedly against the wall and exclaimed, “Varus, Varus, give me back my legions!” The truth is that Imperial Rome had received a blow from which she would recover only with tremendous difficulty. The myth of Roman invincibility had been shattered, and the days of pagan Rome were numbered. Men seemingly doomed to live as ignominious chattels won the day and saved their freedom, because they refused to abandon hope, because they refused to bow before the “inevitable,” and because they exhibited the relentless determination that comes from loving liberty, decency, and dignity more than life itself.

The Empire was seriously threatened, so much so that all thoughtful men within the Empire concerned themselves about the future of Rome, the only established order that they knew or could imagine. The Germans did not follow up their victory with an assault on Italy and Rome, though little stood in their way. Rome did not again attempt to capture the whole of Germany, but she did regain her strength adequately to defend the northern frontiers for a while longer. Yet the decomposition was not halted. The Roman people found themselves in an ever more “hopeless” state.

End of an Empire

The Roman Empire, in the third century A.D., was a huge geopolitical entity surrounding the entire Medi-terranean, covering Egypt and North Africa, the Near East, Asia Minor, and much of southern and parts of central Europe. Nevertheless, it was an empire in a state of sharp decline. The most obvious sign of this deterioration was the quality of those at the very pinnacle of the pyramid of imperial power. One writer comments, “Roman emperors — once men of stature, power, and an aura of being larger than life — were now ephemeral creatures, succeeding one another to the throne of Rome in a depressing series of incompetent or helpless characters. For every new emperor there seemed to be two or three pretenders to the crown proclaimed by various legions in scattered parts of the empire.” Moreover, both ephemerality and incompetence were united with a system designed to confer upon these rulers enormous powers. A Roman emperor initially ruled at the behest of, and with at least the nominal approval of, the Senate. But by the third century it was the army, above all else, to whom he owed his high office. In his decisions he answered only to the army. His power, furthermore, was derived from, and position secured by, military power. And the Roman army proved a fickle master.

From the end of the reign of Septimius Severus, near the beginning of the third century, to the accession of Diocletian in 284, some 25 men rose to the purple, for the most part at the instigation of the military. A few of these were men of some wisdom, energy, and potential, but it was all for nothing. A number of the third-century emperors held their tenuous threads of power for only a few days, and many met violent and inglorious deaths at the hands of the very legions that had granted them the throne. The fabric of the Empire unraveled. Popular unrest, riots, and clashes between various branches and units of the military became the order of the day. In the meantime, all this internal discord allowed the once formidable barriers guarding the Empire against numberless enemies to deteriorate, and the torrent of barbarian invaders poured in. It is no exaggeration to say that with regard to its government, Rome’s situation was “hopeless.”

Morally, too, Rome was in a very bad place. “Never,” writes historian J.F.C. Fuller, “had the rabble sunk so low. Bereft of religion, morality, and all social virtues, the dole-fed masses wallowed in every vice. Luxury begot brutality and brutality licence ... childlessness became more and more prevalent. Whilst to



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these degenerates licence spelt liberty, to the plutocrats liberty spelt power, profit, and an unlimited scramble for wealth, until money became the sole link between man and man.”

Fuller remarks elsewhere that “exotic luxuries, which flooded in from Egypt and the Orient, rotted the morality of low and high. Marriage was turned from procreation to recreation, [and] a differential birth-rate was established.” Romans had been a sturdy, tenacious race of men who had conquered the world. However, Fuller writes, “the spirit of the wild-boar petrified into the gluttony of the farmyard pig” because “gold had curdled the Roman blood: it was no longer red, but thin and yellow.”

Triumph Among Tragedy

For Christians, this period was marked by a number of persecutions. Almost from the beginning, Christian Romans had endured periodic persecution at the hands of the state, but they had nonetheless grown steadily in numbers over the decades. In the third century, under Decius, a new persecution broke out that proved to be a difficult challenge. Church property was confiscated and hierarchs, other clergy, and huge numbers of the faithful went to their deaths. Decius was a genuine disappointment, for at the time of his elevation he was thought to be the “heroic figure” who would lead Rome back to greatness. Instead, he was merely another blood-drenched despot. After a short reign, he was killed in battle.

Valerian succeeded to the throne in 253. His name, too, is associated in Christian history with persecution. Initially somewhat friendly toward the growing Christian Church, in 257 he suddenly changed course and launched a campaign of repression that increased in intensity throughout that year and the first half of 258. At that time all clergy were arrested. Wealthy Christians had their property confiscated and were, if recalcitrant, executed. Christians in the lower strata of society were sold into slavery. Valerian’s end came soon, when he was captured in battle and languished for a time in captivity before his death. Valerian was followed by a succession of short-lived mediocrities. Then, in 284, Diocletian took command.



He would not abandon hope: Though the situation of the Continental Army led by George Washington looked dire, and defeat appeared inevitable, Washington would not give up, and eventually led his men to victory.

Diocletian was responsible for one of the worst of the attacks on the early Christians. Commencing in



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February 303, during the pagan festival of Terminalia, a campaign of burning, looting, beatings, imprisonments, and executions was launched which continued for a decade. That great numbers suffered death is testified to by the fact that the Christian calendar contains more names of martyrs from that period than from any previous persecution.

We see then how chaotic and hopeless everything seemed in the Roman world of that time. A world order several hundred years old, apparently as durable as the mountains and as unalterable in the minds of most people as the rising of the sun and the moon, was actually visibly collapsing; universal anarchy threatened, cataclysm appeared a certainty, overwhelming disaster seemed unavoidable. Furthermore, the Roman state had sullied itself by participating in the mass slaughter of its own citizens who adhered to the Christian faith.

What Romans of the last years of the third century did not suspect and could not know was that a new era was about to dawn. Not only would the best of the Roman way of life survive and undergo rejuvenation, but, in one of the most amazing reversals in all of history, this would happen under the aegis of a religion only recently harshly abused and oppressed by the state: Christianity. Moreover, the Gospel of Christ would rise triumphant and begin its transformation of the world, all because of a dramatic change of policy under a new emperor, Constantine.

As is often the case today with the treatment of historical events in the distant past, there is considerable controversy about the conversion of Constantine to Christianity. On this matter, the traditional view has always been based on ancient accounts, especially that of Eusebius in his *Life of Constantine*. Questions as to the precise motives of this emperor in showing favor to the Christian religion — whether he indeed was influenced by a miraculous vision and whether his conversion was wholly sincere — occupy many pages in nearly all modern histories. Because they have little bearing on our overall theme, we will not enter into these controversies.

The fact remains, however, that Constantine did bring great benefit to Christians and to Christianity and, thereby, to his Empire. It is not true, as is often believed in the popular mind and asserted by certain polemicists, that Constantine elevated Christianity to the status of a state religion. In fact, during his reign Christianity enjoyed equal status with the old religion. Constantine personally sponsored the building of numerous churches, it is true. Yet the old temples remained open throughout the Empire, as would be expected, since a huge majority was still pagan. Under Constantine, people of both high and low station were completely free in religious matters. The important point is that the Church was given freedom to preach and to teach, and to work its “revolution of the heart” among the people. That “revolution of the heart” not only outlasted the Roman Empire, but provided the moral underpinnings for future societies and survives to this day.

We see in the story of Rome’s revitalization in the early fourth century how apparent doom can be averted and how society can renew itself. Of course it did not last forever, for few things in this world endure. The Western Empire was given another 150 years, while its Eastern sister lived on for another thousand years, preserving the legacy of the ancient world until such time as it could take root among the younger peoples of Europe, until they had matured sufficiently to grasp the import of that inheritance. An earlier collapse would surely have meant the utter destruction of the wisdom of the ancient world. So, Greco-Roman thought lived on, as it lives on today even in our own American Republic, modeled as it is on the experiences of the ancients.



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Hope was not lost: Though France was convulsed by a bloody, godless revolution in 1789, the 19th century was a time of great cultural, industrial, and spiritual revival for the West.

Changing the Course of History

An inner, spiritual metamorphosis on the part of a people or a nation can change the direction of history. The continuation of a plunge downward to calamity is not inevitable, despite the ominous nature of certain trends. Truly, history teaches us to hope.

History offers many other instances of startling turnarounds: the sudden and inexplicable retreat of Attila the Hun and his hordes, the victory of Charles Martel over the Moors at Poitiers, the victory over the Turks at the Battle of Lepanto, and the ruin of the Spanish Armada, to mention only four.

We see some splendid instances of the triumph of hope and determination in our own American history as well, one of which comes from our War for Independence. During the winter of 1778-79, when Washington gathered his troops at Valley Forge, the condition of our army was desperate. There was little food or supplies, there was practically no shelter from the vicious cold, the uniforms of our soldiers were in tatters, and boots or shoes were at a premium. Many of the troops wrapped their feet in scraps of cloth to try to stave off frostbite. Thousands of men deserted and returned to their homes, and hundreds of officers resigned their commissions. By all appearances, the army of General Washington was about to dissolve before his eyes.

But that did not happen. Washington, who shared the hardships of his men, was uncompromisingly determined to hold his cause together. Despite the fact that he and his men faced the combined forces of Great Britain and that any table of comparison between American and British forces demonstrated that defeat was “inevitable,” hope burned brightly in Washington’s heart, and in the hearts of the stalwarts who stood by him, and never stopped burning until victory was theirs.

When Lord Cornwallis surrendered his sword and his army to Washington at Yorktown nearly four years later, the hope that General Washington had placed in his just cause was fully vindicated. Hope and firmness once again made the difference between success or failure.

Let us review one last example. In 1789, the world was convulsed by the French Revolution, as violent an offensive against traditional virtues and ways of life as has ever reared its head. In Paris and throughout much of France, Christian worship was discouraged, and in some churches a so-called



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Goddess of Reason was enshrined in place of Christ and the Saints. Looting, arson, and terrible public disorder became commonplace. Approximately one million people were murdered by the revolutionaries, and bloodthirsty tyrants of the worst stripe rose to power. If ever there was a time to lose hope, that was it. And yet hope was justified, for it happened that throughout the Western World, the 19th century, totally unexpectedly, became a time of magnificent revival and renaissance, both in the religious sense and with regard to culture and civilization in general.

Not Inevitable

Pitirim Sorokin, the renowned Russian-American philosopher and sociologist, wrote, “The facts of history offer endless evidence of the impossibility of an accurate knowledge of forthcoming events.... The cup of history has been filled to the brim by the unforeseen, and ‘improbable’ surprises.” How true! The study of history tells us that the future is most frequently unpredictable, that people and nations consigned by conventional wisdom to defeat and oblivion sometimes experience dramatic revivals and spectacular reversals. The greatest developments in the lives of nations are, invariably, unanticipated and are beyond the abilities of human beings to prophesy. The Soviets once proclaimed that their “planned economy” was destined to overtake that of the West, that they would “bury us.” They were wrong. Karl Marx insisted that the triumph of communism is “ineluctable,” that a communist world is foreordained by the forces of history. Modern Marxists still believe that. Marx was wrong and his followers were and are wrong.



Down with tyranny: Karl Marx believed that the triumph of communism was inevitable. These demonstrators tearing down a statue of Vladimir Lenin in Ukraine show that he was wrong, as long as people are willing to fight and do not give up hope. *(Photo credit: Flickr/UrCameras)*

Modern American liberals believe that a one-world government, led by a transnational elite, is historically and economically certain to rule the whole of the world, and that the many cultures and peoples of the planet will be replaced by a single universal culture, making us all citizens of the “global village.” Despite superficial appearances, they too are wrong. If the lessons of history mean anything, then Marxists, liberals, and others of similar stamp should prepare themselves for some very unpleasant surprises.

One of the most powerful weapons in the arsenal of communism and liberalism is this notion of



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determinism, the idea that the tides of history are flowing in *their* direction, that victory for them is inevitable. By means of that clever propaganda device, they have ever sought to paralyze all opposition. But history does not support their view. In battles between armies, as we have seen, it is often the case that the larger and better equipped of the two antagonists is defeated because the externally frailer combatant, though weaker in the physical sense, is stronger in the moral sense, and is thereby stronger in its vitality, ardor, character, spirit of sacrifice, and love of the things for which it is contending. Anyone who reads history knows that this has happened over and over again since men began to inscribe the records of human events for the edification of their posterity. What is incontrovertible to the careful reader is that history is not a record of currents of “inevitability,” but of startling surprises and astonishing turnabouts. And thus it shall be until the end of time.

The only thing irretrievably fixed about the history of this world is that God Himself will ultimately decide its outcome. As a renowned Christian theologian has expressed it, “History is divine,” and “the story of the manifestation of the divine.” History is finally a record of the eternal plan of God, though He demands decisiveness, a turning in His direction, and human labor. He acts in concert with us. All of the victories over adversity in history have been won by struggle. So let us take heart, redouble our efforts, and never forsake hope.

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