

Our Chattering Classes

These days it's always easy-- perhaps a little too easy -- to prompt a frisson about this country's condition by citing Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. But when I need to encapsulate my apprehensions about our commentariat, I can't resist:

“It was scarcely possible that the eyes of contemporaries should discover in the public felicity the latent causes of decay and corruption. This long peace, and the uniform government of the Romans, introduced a slow and secret poison into the vitals of the empire. The minds of men were gradually reduced to the same level, the fire of genius was extinguished, and even the military spirit evaporated.

[T]hey no longer possessed that public courage which is nourished by the love of independence, the sense of national honor, the presence of danger, and the habit of command. They received laws and governors from the will of their sovereign, and trusted for their defence to a mercenary army..... The most aspiring spirits resorted to the court or standard of the emperors; and the deserted provinces, deprived of political strength or union, insensibly sunk into the languid indifference of private life.

“The beauties of the poets and orators, instead of kindling a fire like their own, inspired only cold and servile imitations: ...[T]he provincials of Rome... were engaged in a very unequal competition with those bold ancients, who, by expressing their genuine feelings in their native tongue, had already occupied every place of honor. ... A cloud of critics, of compilers, of commentators, darkened the face of learning, and the decline of genius was soon followed by the corruption of taste

“The sublime Longinus... laments this degeneracy of his contemporaries.... ‘In the same manner,’ says he, ‘as some children always remain pygmies, whose infant limbs have been too closely confined, thus our tender minds, fettered by the prejudices and habits of a just servitude, are unable to expand themselves, or to attain that well-proportioned greatness which we admire in the ancients; who, living under a popular government, wrote with the same freedom as they acted.’

Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Chapter II

Many writers in Washington and New York deserted the provinces of their youth to flock to the standard and court of the emperor, only to become “the provincials of Rome.”

Since America isn't ancient Rome, there are complexities and ironies in the trajectories of most members of our chattering classes that Gibbon's characterization didn't suggest. Yet many of his tropes ring true in the odysseys of William Kristol, Sam Tanenhaus, Leon Wieseltier, Howell Raines, Eric Pooley, George Packer, David Brooks, Chris Hedges, Jeffrey Goldberg, and others whose work I've rudely interrupted as follows, each time prompted by what struck me as a telling miscarriage of the civic-republican discourse he wants to think he upholds.

With few exceptions, I tend not to probe or dwell on these writers' personal backgrounds. A few of them were born and brought up in “Rome” and are all the more provincial for that. Occasionally I do use what they've said about themselves to try to understand the turns their writing has taken. But generally these sketches are remonstrances, not investigations.

1. WILLIAM KRISTOL, *New York Times* and ARTHUR SULZBERGER, JR. (2 Columns, "[Arthur Sulzberger's Cracked Kristol Ball](#)," and "[At Times Op Ed, the Plot Sickens](#)." (Kristol's hideous column was discontinued after a year, during which time his most noteworthy contribution to electoral politics was his "discovery" of Sarah Palin while on a Weekly Standard cruise to Alaska. Kristol commended her to John McCain, adding to a string of electoral accomplishments that included his promotion of the black conservative impresario Alan Keyes for President and his employment by Vice President Dan Quayle.)

2. [LEON WIESELTIER on MARTIN AMIS and Post 9/11 America](#) How scars and a bad conscience do the work of wounds in this man's sometimes brilliantly scourging but often convolutedly self-indulgent prose. WIESELTIER turns on Norman Podhoretz and neoconservatism. But who benefits?
3. SAM TANENHAUS and THE NY TIMES BOOK REVIEW (3 Columns: [A](#) and [B](#) and [C](#))
4. [TIME MAGAZINE'S ERIC POOLEY on RUPERT MURDOCH](#) A shockingly fawning profile of Murdoch on the event of his takeover of the Wall Street Journal exemplified the kind of decay Gibbon described in the passage quoted above
5. HOWELL RAINES, 1994 AND 2003 ([Daily News column in 1994, Hartford Courant, 2003](#)) The former New York Times editorial-page editor and executive editor met a fate I saw coming in 1994 and reflected on sadly when it caught up with him.
6. GEORGE PACKER and some penitential war hawks (2 Columns: This one, from [The Nation](#), discusses Packer's and others' boosterism for the Iraq War, and [a second, and more telling column in TPM](#), takes Packer to task for easing David Brooks' attempt to come in from the cold after years of shameless conservative propagandizing.
7. DAVID BROOKS: [Intellectual Usury Feels Good, at First](#), TPMCafe, July 20, 2008. Punditry, perversity, and the foreclosure crisis. [The Neo-con on Your Shoulder](#), TPMCafe, August 26, 2008. Commentator Brooks has become the Vladimir Posner of American neo-conservatism, especially during presidential elections. As the 2008 election approached, Brooks, liberal editors' favorite onservative, [parried](#) and then [ducked](#) the truth that John McCain had proven himself unstable and incompetent as commander-in-chief of his own campaign. Serious conservatives such as [Christopher Buckley told it like it is](#).
8. SEAN WILENTZ: A promising historian becomes a political hitman in his eagerness to become Hillary Clinton's presidential historian, I argue, concerning two of his articles along those lines [The New Republic](#) and [Newsweek](#).
9. CHRIS HEDGES AND JEFFREY GOLDBERG: "How and How Not to Assess Israel's Moral Self-Destruction. [Two writers approach the same subjects and sources](#).
10. [SHELBY STEELE'S RACE TRAP](#). In the 2008 election, the scourge of liberal racial stereotyping and racial bargaining trapped himself as did some of his counterparts on the left.