

2020 May 22



Diametheus

DONALD "SULLA" TRUMP ROME 88 BC / WASHINGTON 2017 AD

In ancient Rome Sulla was an impulsive and controversial politician and high commander of the Roman army. By breaking taboos Sulla triggered a series of civil wars, which decades later led to the replacement of democracy by the Roman Empire. Could lessons be learned from then for the present United States with its current president Donald Trump, with his high commandship of the army, who is adored by many, but a very controversial figure all the same time?

ROME 750 BC – 88 BC

From its foundation around 750 BC until 509 BC Rome was a kingdom. In that year having enough of the arrogance and arbitrariness of the kings, Roman civilians, mostly hard working farmers, succeeded in taking over power from the last king Tarquinius and making the governing of Rome into a public affair, a Res Publicum, turning the kingdom into a republic. The aversion of the Roman civilians against kings would last for centuries. The republic was governed by the Senatus and two or more Tribunes, all chosen for a limited time. Every person had the right to present himself as a senate or tribune candidate; the Tribunes had the power to organise assemblies of the people, with the authority to hold the Senatus accountable and to introduce new laws. Senatus and Tribunes chose 2 consuls, who functioned for a couple of years and who were the executive leaders of the republic, one consul for Rome's internal affairs, the other one for foreign affairs. The Roman republic was thus governed by two parties: the Senatus and the Roman People, in Latin: "Senatus PopulusQue Romanus" or SPQR. Both consuls as well as Senatus and Tribunes held each other in balance, in order to prevent one of them from gathering too much power. Romans were hard-working independent farmers, honourable and sober, but also keen to compete with each other for the greater good and glory of the republic. This democratic system was successful in that it allowed to call the people into military service for short wars abroad, controlling possible enemies and expanding the territory and influence of Rome. During 4 centuries hundreds of consuls and tribunes made the Roman republic a success. Such was the situation around 100 BC and Rome was still far from reaching its biggest size. Driven by the longer distance threats by the Gauls and other Kelts, Germans, Parths and Numibians, the consul Marius succeeded in organising an army consisting of professional soldiers, able to stay away from home for longer periods of time, rather than of temporary farmer soldiers, who had to return soon for farming their fields; after a military service that lasted decades, the professional veterans were paid with farmland. Thanks to the successes of Rome it became an open society attracting people from all around the conquered tribes, applying for Roman citizenship. In 112 BC the Senatus sent Marius as a general with his army, and with Sulla as one of the commanders to the Jugurthine war, far away from home in Africa. Rome was once again on its mission reinforcing itself as the centre of power of the whole world, as known by that time. After that war Sulla, once elected as a consul himself, was shaking the republic on its foundations by breaking taboos and eliminating his fellow consul.

WASHINGTON DC 1789 AD – 2017 AD

From 1607 to 1733, 13 British colonies were founded on the east coast of Northern America. In 1775 these colonies revolted against the British Empire and declared themselves independent. In 1786 a constitution was signed by the Founding Fathers, turning the 13 colonies into the Federal Republic of the United States of America, hence the 13 stripes. From then on the USA expanded their territory

2020 May 22



Diametheus

westwards as far as half the continent. A civil war between the northern and southern states was fought between 1861 – 1865, after which the territory expansion to the west continued until the Pacific Ocean. The last states to join the USA were New Mexico and Arizona [1912] and Alaska and Hawaii [1959], bringing the number of states to 50, hence the 50 stars. These United States are ruled by the Senate and the House of Representatives, together the Congress. Both senates and representatives are democratically chosen for several years by means of free elections. Although the USA are a free democracy where any independent individual can profile him- or herself as a candidate for a seat in the Senate or in the House, and even for the presidency, the country has developed a two-party democracy, where candidates are backed by either the conservative Republican Party or the Democratic Party. This American democratic republic system has been successful for over two centuries. Although the USA tended to be isolationist, it has been an open society that successfully has expanded its influence worldwide since WWII. Since then Washington has been the centre of global power. Forced by perceived threats from long-distance enemies such as by the Vietcong, Chinese, Soviets, Russians, North Koreans, Islamic State and Taliban, the USA have formed a large, technically superior professional army that like the Romans has been sent to far away countries. There is now an unconventional new president, high commander, seems to challenge, with the consent of many, the limits of the presidential power, in *his* turn of shaking a democratic republic on its foundations.

ROME 88 BC to WASHINGTON 2017 AD, a comparison

As in Rome the Patricians and the People formed the two-party system of *Senatus* and *Tribunus*, so do the Republicans and the Democrats in the USA. The chosen Roman *Senatus* and *Tribunus* could be compared with the chosen American Senate and the House. Both republics have lasted for centuries. Both republics have exported their democratic values, curtailing foreign kings and dictators and installing chosen chambers, not in the least for self interest and safety. Both Rome and Washington are the centres of an open society and of global power. This justifies drawing parallels between the Roman and the American republics.

Of course, it is history that will judge the presidency of Donald Trump, shaking blankets may refresh old folds and firm negotiating will certainly yield a number of successes. For the time being many people approve and firmly support his actions, but many others, both in and outside the USA, are very critical. It is really exciting to attempt to forecast the effects the unconventional actions of the current president of the USA could have in the future, by looking back at what happened to the Roman republic of the unconventional actions by Sulla around 100 BC.

Comparing Trump to Sulla

Before drawing a picture of what could happen to the USA in the future, it is useful to compare the personalities of Sulla and Trump. In their books, Plutarchus and Sallustius describe Sulla's personality as a manipulating teenager with no respect for any convention. Sulla and Trump show similar behaviour by creating alternative facts, by intriguing and creating confusions, by ruling by decretes, by self rewarding [in Trump's case gerrymandering], by creating fear with their adversaries, by agitating their fans, by ignoring obvious crimes for political reasons, by self promoting regardless circumstances such as a pandemic, by taking impulsive decisions, by snapping at political opponents, by demanding - not giving loyalty. According to the Roman writer Sallustius Sulla has reached his top position more by using intrigue, violence and money, rather than by his merits for the Roman republic

2020 May 22



Diemeteus

According to Plutarchus, then-consul Censorius started an impeachment against Sulla, charging him for corruption and for breaking the law by taking away money from a befriended ally in the Middle East. Strikingly similarly opponents of Trump, headed by Pelosi, started an impeachment against him for the same reasons regarding Ukraine. Sulla got away with it, as did Trump. As Tim Holland describes it, Sulla organised a victory march through Rome for himself, not only because he had defeated Rome's enemy Mithridates, but for defeating his opponent Marius too, a Roman. A victory march for celebrating a triumph over a co-citizen was unprecedented. Trump, too, crow's victory by tweeting about what he believes are the greatest results by him of all US presidents ever, by defeating his democratic and republican opponents.

However the one most destructive action by Sulla was breaking the taboo, in 88 BC, of crossing the Pomerium with his armed soldiers for a march on Rome, attacking same and its democracy. Sulla entered Rome with his soldiers, burning down houses and killing in blind rage even family and friends, thus starting the first of a series of civil wars; the Pomerium was the virtual border, a furrow ploughed by Romulus when founding Rome 750 BC, circling largely around the town, forbidding any armed soldiers to ever enter this area; breaking this taboo shocked the Romans much more than the crossing of the Rubicon did several decades later by Caesar for *his* march on Rome. For centuries the Pomerium had been respected, and never before a Roman attacked a Roman. Similarly, from his side, Trump has broken a taboo [it was in February 2017 Jim Acosta] by calling independent reporters "the enemy of America", which is a war declaration. As is the call in April 2020 by Trump to "liberate" certain states from Corona lockdown by their governors. Trump wanted to cross a Pomerium type of line by his intention to make use of the Insurrection Act, if not McCarthy of the Pentagon had refused. Never before has an American president directly attacked Americans and American democratic institutions, and some fear civil war. Both Sulla and Trump backed by their respective fans broke taboos, shocking and polarising instead of unifying their people.

Taken the above similarities between Sulla and Trump it looks justified to conclude that Sulla and Trump have similar personalities in similar political and societal circumstances. Both Romans and Americans evolve towards a more diverse population with growing social unrest and with increasing polarisation between groups of society, reinforced by their leaders, resulting in increasing anger, rage, fear, humiliation, uncertainty and discrimination. And with decreasing willingness to accept the vote of the majority. So, what happened with the Roman republic after Sulla?

Rome 88 BC – 27 AD

By crossing the Pomerium in 88 BC Sulla started a civil war against Marius that took until 87 BC; but this war did not bring satisfaction and was followed by a second civil war from 82-81 BC between the same two generals. Social unrest, fear, uncertainties, polarisation of the population did not disappear and a third civil war was fought between Caesar and Pompeius in 49-45 BC; and still another one in 44 BC, this one between Caesar's murderers, accusing him of becoming a king, and the new triumvirum that succeeded him, and finally the last civil war [32-30 BC] between Antonius and Octavianus [formerly called Octavus], which was won by the latter. In the course of the half century between 88 and 30 BC Roman society had drastically changed from a society of hard working, honourable local farmers to a fearful and uncertain society of Romans and immigrants, when the Roman writer Sallustius [86-35BC] is asking himself: "Is there anybody left who competes with his ancestors in integrity and hard work, instead of in richness and profligacy? Even political newcomers, who in the past always tried to outdo

2020 May 22



Diametheus

the aristocrats by their qualities, prefer climbing in a stealthy way towards higher positions, rather than by honourable hard work.” When in 27 BC Octavianus offered to the Senatus to take control again over the Roman republic, the Senatus deemed itself no longer adequate [due to change of nature of the Romans in the past half century] and hence refused, instead installing Octavianus as the “Princeps” [“the Principal One”] of Rome. Octavianus was renamed “Augustus” [“The Most High”] and called himself caesar [emperor]. After having been a republic for more than four centuries, Rome became an empire with the emperor in full control. Democracy had been replaced. Had Roman society become too diversified to be able to rule itself? Under Augustus’ firm lead during several decades the Roman empire expanded and flourished and, not being a democracy, developed its own dynamics. It became clear that the actions of *one* [1] individual, driven by uncontrolled emotion based ambitions, can change the direction in the history of mankind. The actions of Sulla, chosen himself as a consul, ended with the Roman Empire ruled by non chosen emperors.

Washington from 2017 AD onwards .

Is the USA, an open society, changing by its own successes since WWII? Like Sulla, Trump too seems to consider his action as a correction of the direction in which the USA is developing, too far away, he believes, from the “original” USA, with too many immigrants from around the globe. **Donald “Sulla” Trump** getting 97% of votes in primary elections could be a symptom of the increase of fear and of the decrease of democratic values within the Republican party, where multicultural democracy seems to be felt by many as a threat. Decades after Sulla the Roman writer Lucanus [39-65 AD, during Nero’s time] analysed the situation that led to the Roman civil wars and to the empire as follows: “in times of many uncertainties, fear and rage, people will come to a point that only war will offer a solution to a majority.” No one at the time realized that the Roman republic itself was at stake by Sulla’s actions, but, with Trump’s USA not even being in the top 20 of strongest democracies, the Roman lesson is clear: even after an existence of centuries democracy is not self-evident.

Maybe a historical perspective can help thoughts.

© Diametheus, Europe The Netherlands May 2020

Sources: Public domain wikipedia several searches | Sallustius [86 – 35 BC], “Jugurthine war”, “The conspiracy of Cataline” | Plutarchus [46 – 120 AD], “Biographies IV, Sulla”, “Marius” | Lucanus [39 – 65 AD], “On the civil war” | Jim Acosta, “The enemy of the people” | Tom Holland, “Rubicon, the end of the Roman Republic” | Suetonius [69 - >122 AD]: “Lives of the Caesars” | Democracy Index by The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU).