Document Packet: “Ruling an Empire”

Document #1

Skillful in administration, military organization, and law, Rome was able to impose peace, order, and prosperity throughout its empire from the reign of Augustus (63 B.C.E.-14 C.E.) to the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 C.E. The following speech by a Roman official reveals some of the best features of this period, which historians call the Pax Romana, the Roman Peace.

If one considers the vast extent of the empire, he must be amazed that so small a fraction of it rules the world, but when he beholds [Rome] and its spaciousness, it is not astonishing that all the habitable world is ruled by such a capital...Your (Rome) possessions equal the sun's course...You do not rule within fixed boundaries, nor can anyone dictate the limits of your sway...Whatever any people produces can be found here, at all times and in abundance. Egypt, Sicily, and the civilized part of Africa are your farms, ships are continually coming and going.

Vast as it is, your empire is more remarkable for its thoroughness than its scope... The whole world prays in unison that your empire may endure forever....

But the most marvelous and admirable achievement of all, and the one deserving our fullest gratitude, is this... You alone of the imperial powers of history rule over men who are free. You have not assigned this or that region to this [tyrant] or that [autocrat].

But just as citizens in an individual city might [select officials], so you, whose city is the whole world, appoint governors to protect and provide for the governed, as if they were elective, not to lord it over their charges. As a result, so far from [regarding] the office as if it were their own, governors make way for their successors readily when their term is up....

But the most notable and praiseworthy feature of all, a thing unparalleled, is your magnanimous conception of citizenship. All of your subjects (and this implies the whole world) you have divided into two parts: the, better endowed and [the stronger], wherever they may be, you have granted citizenship and even kinship; the rest you govern as obedient subjects. Neither the seas nor expanse of land bars citizenship... Careers are open to talent... Rich and poor find contentment and profit in your system... Your [administration] is a single and all-embracing harmony.

You have not put walls around your city, as if you were hiding it or avoiding your subjects; to do so you considered ignoble and inconsistent with your principles, as if a master should show fear of his slaves. You did not overlook walls, however, but placed them round the empire, not the city. The splendid and distant walls you erected are worthy of you; to men within their circuit they are visible, but it requires a journey of months and years from [Rome] to see them.

The cities you filled with colonists; you introduced arts and crafts and established an orderly... Your military organization makes all others childish. Your soldiers and officers you train to prevail not only over the enemy but over themselves. The soldier lives under discipline daily, and none ever deserts the post assigned him.

You alone are natural rulers... You have measured out the world, bridged rivers, cut roads through mountains, filled the wastes with posting stations, and introduced orderly and refined modes of life... Be all gods and their offspring invoked to grant that this empire and this city flourish forever and never cease until stones float upon the sea and trees [cease] to sprout in the springtide.

Document #2

The Hebrews rose in holy war against their Roman masters (66 C.E.). Led by fiery religious extremists, for months the Jews withstood a Roman siege of Jerusalem, although a terrible famine and plague destroyed a large part of the population. Finally the Romans, commanded by Titus, broke through the walls, burned the holy Temple of Jerusalem, and massacred the citizens. The following is an account by Flavius Josephus, C. 37-100 C.E.), a Hebrew who went over to the Romans.

The Fall Jerusalem

Pouring into the streets sword in hand, [the Romans] massacred indiscriminately all who fell in their way, and burned the houses with all that had taken shelter in them. In many instances, . . . when they entered [a house] in search of plunder, they discovered whole families dead, and the apartments filled with victims of famine. Then, shuddering at the sight, they retired with empty hands. Yet notwithstanding their pity for those who had perished, they felt no like compassion for the living, but, by stabbing everyone that fell in their way, they blocked up the streets with the dead and deluged the whole city with blood, so that in numerous instances it extinguished the flames. Towards evening the slaughter [lessened], but in the night the fire gained the mastery....

The soldiers at length growing weary of slaughter, though the number of survivors who were still to be seen was considerable, Caesar∗ issued orders to put to the sword those only who were found in arms and offered resistance, and to make prisoners of the rest. The troops, however, in addition to those to whom their instructions referred, slew the old and feeble. . .

Those above the age of seventeen were sent in chains to... Egypt; though Titus distributed very many of them through the provinces to be destroyed . . . in gladiatorial contests and by wild beasts. Those under seventeen years were sold. . . . The soldiery having now none either to slaughter or plunder, . . Caesar ordered the whole of the city and the [Temple] to be [leveled] to the foundations. . . . So fell Jerusalem, a victim of revolutionary frenzy: a magnificent city, and celebrated throughout the world.

* The title used by Roman emperors. Here, it refers to Titus.

SOURCE: Flavius Josephus, The Jewish War, translated by Rev. Robert Traill (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1858), Bk. VI, Chs. 8, 9; Bk. VII

Document #3

The governors sent to rule the most important . . . provinces were Roman senators. . . . They belonged to the inner circle of people and families who shared the control of Rome's destinies. When the East had received its first Roman governors in the second century B.C...; their ability to keep their hands off public funds was noted to exceed that of the Greeks. A famous example and model of such integrity [honesty] was Cato the Elder. . . . As Cicero* said: The most eminent men in the country, during the best period of our history, counted it among their most honorable and splendid achievements to protect from injury and to maintain in prosperity those . . foreign nations who had been received as friends into the Roman Empire. That wise and distinguished man Marcus Cato Sapiens, made many and lasting enemies by standing up for the unfortunate Spaniards, among whom he had served as consul [195 B.C.].

In the first century B.C., on the other hand, . . . the standard of honesty and responsibility among governors was very low; they were mostly corrupt and used their year of office as a period for making large, illegitimate profits. . .

During the second and first centuries B.C., the Roman government initiated and elaborated laws aimed at limiting and controlling the improprieties of its representatives in the provinces. But
the Extortion Court that was established was too often totally incapacitated by bribery; and Cicero, in his courageous attack upon one of the most unscrupulous and best protected governors, Verres, in Sicily (70 B.C.) did so to protect the good name of Rome.

The provincials suffered also from the onslaughts of Roman financiers .... In the immensely wealthy province of Asia, corporations directed by knights, with their own couriers, banks, and probably shareholders, were authorized by the Roman authorities to collect the taxation. . . . The corporations of tax collectors made bids to the Roman government for four years' income, and the successful bidders guaranteed an agreed sum to the treasury; what more they collected was their margin of profit. The state itself could not have collected this money since it did not yet possess a civil service capable of doing so...Cicero wrote;

You must know that my arrival in this province, which is in a state of lasting ruin and desolation, was expected eagerly. I got here on July 31. . . . Everywhere I heard the same tale. People could not pay their taxes: they were forced to sell out their investments; groans and lamentations in the towns, and awful conduct of one who is some kind of savage beast rather than a man. All the people are, as you may suppose, tired of life...

Even with Cicero, however, the overriding consideration was, too often, the effect of his actions on his Roman career. . .During the later Republic, governors were generally bad; from the time of Augustus onward they were generally conscientious. When Tiberius told them that a good shepherd “shears his flock but does not flay them,” he was instructing them to maintain what had already...become current practice.

* The Cicero mentioned in this passage was a lawyer and statesman of the late Roman Republic. During civil war and in the face of tyranny, he staunchly defended republican institutions. With compelling oratory he spoke out for honest government. His successful prosecution of Verres, a notoriously corrupt governor of Sicily, won him much popular acclaim.


Document #4

In the following selection, historian Edward Gibbon describes the extent of commerce in the Roman Empire.

Agriculture was the foundation for most people, since the productions of nature are the materials sustain life. Under the Roman Empire, the labor of an industrious and ingenious people was . . . employed [for] . . . the rich. In their dress, their table, their houses, and their furniture, the favorites of fortune united every refinement of convenience, of elegance, and of splendor. The most remote countries of the ancient world were ransacked to supply the pomp and delicacy of Rome. The forests of Scythia [southern Russia] afforded some valuable furs. Amber was brought overland from the shores of the Baltic to the Danube. There was a considerable demand for Babylonian carpets and other manufactures of the East; but the most important branch of foreign trade was carried on with Arabia and India. Every year, about the time of the summer solstice [the longest day of the year], a fleet of 120 vessels sailed from [Egypt to] . . . the coast of Malabar [western India] or the island of Ceylon. . . The return of the fleet of Egypt was fixed to the months of December or January; and as soon as their rich cargo had been transported on the backs of camels from the Red Sea to the Nile, and had descended that river as far as Alexandria, it was poured, without delay, into the capital of the Empire(Rome). . . . The objects of oriental traffic were splendid:...silk, a pound of which was esteemed not inferior in value to a pound of gold; precious stones, among which the pearl claimed the first rank after the diamond; and a variety of aromatics that were consumed in religious worship and the pomp of funerals. The labor and risk of the voyage [were] rewarded with almost incredible profit.
