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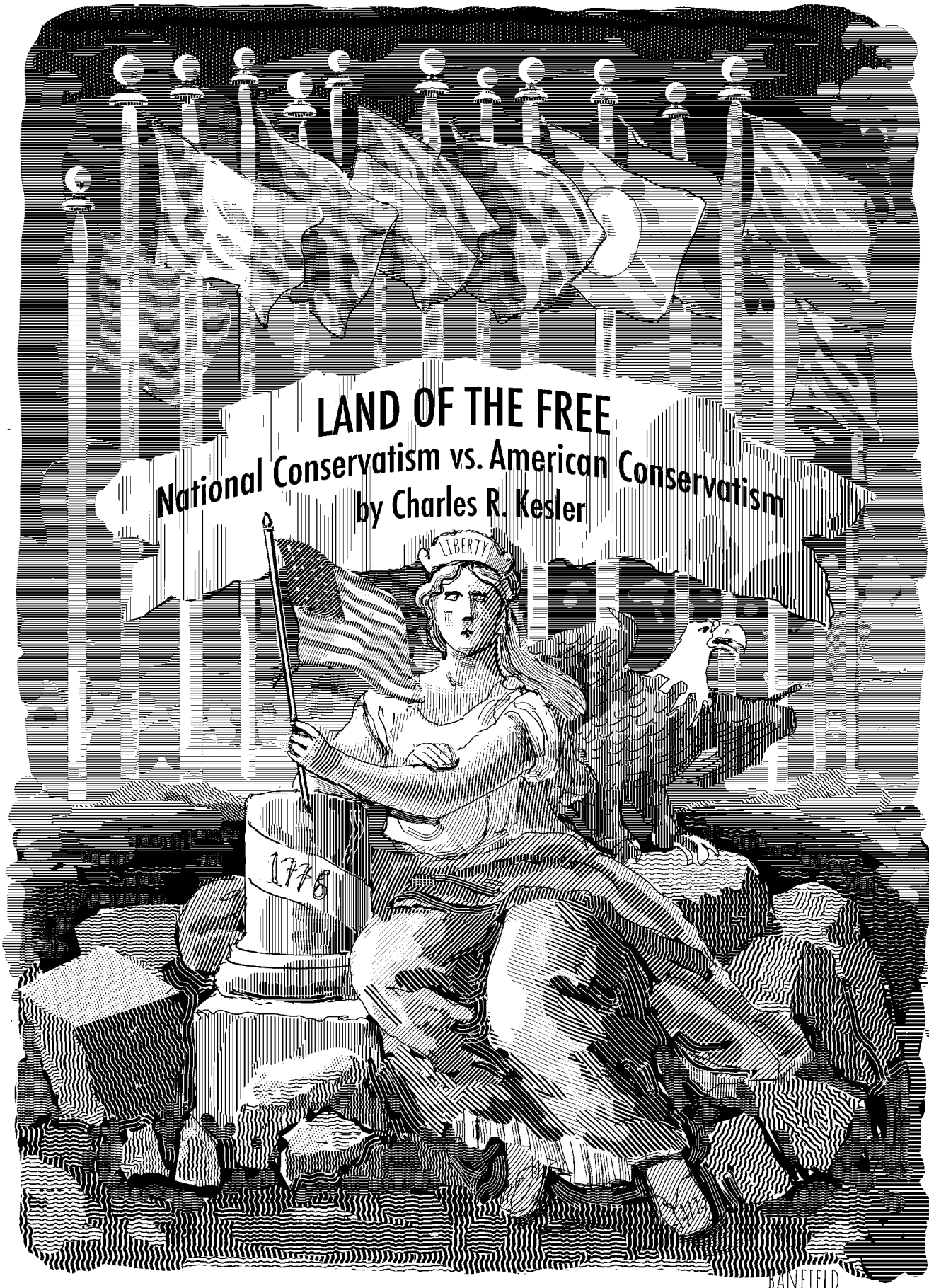
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Book Review by Joseph Epstein

PEACE THROUGH STRENGTH

Pax: War and Peace in Rome's Golden Age, by Tom Holland.
Basic Books, 480 pages, \$32.50



I thought that I had formed an idea of ancient Rome but I had done nothing of the kind. I had not a notion of such magnificence.

—George Gissing, in a letter to his sister Margaret

WE KNOW A VAST DEAL ABOUT THE history of Rome and yet there remains so much we do not know. Mary Beard reports in her new book, *Emperor of Rome*, that the teenage emperor Elagabalus—who ruled from A.D. 218 to 222, his reign ending with his assassination at age 18—may have invented the whoopee cushion. He is said to have married one of the Vestal Virgins. He was also apparently a cross-dresser

who, according to the Roman historian Dio Cassius, “asked doctors to give him female private parts by means of an incision.” “May have,” “is said to,” “apparently”—without such qualifications respectable Roman history could not be written. As the popular English historian Tom Holland put it in his debut book, *Rubicon: The Last Years of the Roman Republic* (2003), “Write so much as a sentence about the ancient world and the temptation is immediately to qualify it. Even when the sources are at their most plentiful, uncertainties and discrepancies crop up everywhere.”

Yet in his new book, *Pax: War and Peace in Rome's Golden Age*, which, along with *Rubicon* and *Dynasty: The Rise and Fall of the House*

of Caesar (2015), constitutes his trilogy about Rome during its great days, Holland notes that our knowledge of the era of the Pax Romana “has improved by quantum leaps. Archeological sites have been excavated, inscriptions tabulated and evaluated, papyri and writing tablets dug up from mounds of trash, painstakingly transcribed, and the immense mass of evidence synthesized to a degree that would have stupefied and delighted Gibbon.”

For Holland, the Pax Romana ran from the death of the Emperor Nero (A.D. 68) to the death of the Emperor Hadrian (A.D. 138), just before his adoption of Antonius Pius, who in turn adopted Marcus Aurelius. In Latin, of course, *pax* means peace, but the peace brought



by the extraordinary Roman hegemony was never simple. “Peace was intolerable to the Romans,” Holland observed in *Rubicon*, “unless they dictated it themselves.” In *Pax Romana: War, Peace, and Conquest in the Roman World* (2016), the historian Adrian Goldsworthy noted that “peace is not an absolute, but relative.” The rich complications of the Roman peace while the vast Roman empire was run under emperors of wildly differing temperaments is Holland’s grand subject in *Pax*.

IN RUBICON, HOLLAND DEALT WITH THE rise and fall of the Roman Republic, *Senatus Populusque Romanus*, the Senate and the People of Rome, ubiquitously inscribed on documents, monuments, and public works as SPQR. The days of the Republic, beginning in 509 B.C. with the death of Tarquin, Rome’s last king, were for the Romans the good old days. In Rome, as Holland recorded in *Rubicon*, “respect for the Republic’s laws and institutions endured because they were expressions of the Romans’ profoundest sense of their own identity.” In crossing with his troops the shallow river known as the Rubicon in 49 B.C.—thus violating the republican rule against bringing troops into Rome—Julius Caesar all but put a reluctant end to the Roman Republic.

For much of his long reign, from 27 B.C. to A.D. 14, Gaius Octavius Thurinus, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, harked back to the days of the Republic. He never officially took up the title of emperor. He styled himself *Divi Filius* (son of god) and only later accepted the honorific name of Augustus, meaning “illustrious one.” He referred to himself as *princeps*, or first citizen, for which one might also read *primus inter pares*, or first among equals.

Holland closes *Rubicon* on the accession of Augustus, leaving open the question of what that accession would mean for the Roman Republic. “The Romans were used to citizens who vaunted their power,” he writes, “who exulted in the brilliance and glamour of their greatness—but Augustus was different. The more his grip tightened on the state, the less he flaunted it.... It was as though, in a crowning paradox, he had ended up as the Republic itself.” Holland quotes Cicero that “[t]he fruit of too much liberty is slavery,” adding “and who was to say that his own generation, the last of the free Republic, had not proved it true.” *Rubicon* ends: “But the fruit of slavery? That was for a new generation, and a new age, to decide.”

In *Dynasty*, Holland took up the subject of Rome under its most famous—he refers to them as its “celebrity”—emperors: the so-called Julio-Claudian line of Augustus, Ti-

berius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. After Augustus, it was largely downhill all the way. None who followed Augustus had his intelligence, subtlety, or cunning. *Dynasty* ends with the suicide of Nero as he proclaimed, “What an artist perishes with me,” and Holland concluding: “He had indeed been an artist—he and his predecessors too. Augustus and Tiberius, Caligula and Claudius: each, in his own way, in fashioning out of his rule of the world a legend that would forever afterwards mark the House of Caesar as something eerie and more than mortal.”

HOLLAND BEGINS *PAX* IN A.D. 69, THE year of the four emperors: Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian, the last of whom he describes as “ostentatious in his modesty.” He moves on to the brief reign of Titus (A.D. 79-81), son of Vespasian, and treats at some length those of Domitian, Nerva, Trajan, and Hadrian. Titus remains in permanent bad odor with the Jews for pillaging and destroying the great Temple of Judea in A.D. 70; Domitian for his cruelty, an example of which was his allowing Vestal Virgins thought guilty of sacrilege to choose their own form of execution. Nerva, on the job a mere 16 months, prevented civil war after the death of Domitian. Trajan, the soldier-emperor, greatly expanded Roman borders along the Mediterranean and elsewhere. Hadrian, who more closely than any other Roman ruler resembled an intellectual in his wide curiosity, was perhaps best known for his devotion to his young lover Antinous, of whom he had countless statues erected, named towns after, and eventually honored as a god. (When I once asked Arnaldo Momigliano—in his day the leading historiographer of the ancient world—his opinion of Marguerite Yourcenar’s great historical novel, *Memoirs of Hadrian* [1951], his wordless answer was to place his finger tips to his lips in the gesture of a kiss for its splendor.)

Pax is a work of narrative history, which Holland, with point and wit, brings off brilliantly. His model, I suspect, is Tacitus. One grows used to his lengthy, richly detailed paragraphs, generally closing on an aphoristic or ironic final sentence. A prime example, from *Rubicon*, is his setting out the condition of Athens once its great days were over and it was now under the dominance of Rome. The once grand city had lost both its power and the cachet of its high culture, and began to look outward, its upper classes concentrating “on the only measure of achievement left to them—that of becoming millionaires.” Holland reports that “the institutions that had once maintained Athenian democracy were

allowed to wither,” though, he adds, “they were not abolished altogether because, apart from anything else, they were good for the tourist trade,” the tourists chiefly being visiting Romans. He ends: “Sometimes Athens offered the pleasures less of a museum than of a zoo.” Of the mixed spirit that made Rome, that minor remote town that grew into the greatest city the world has ever known, Holland writes in *Pax*: “The Roman who at the end of his life could take pride in duties fulfilled, ambitions met, the admiration of his fellows secured, was a Roman who had proved his *virtus*: his worth as a *vir*, a man. Naturally, the world being what it was, achievement was capable of inspiring jealousy as well as admiration.”

“MY GOAL IN WRITING *PAX*,” Holland notes, “has been at all times to show the inhabitants of the Roman world the respect due to all ancient peoples: by attempting to understand them not on our terms, but on their own, in all their ambivalence, their complexity and their contradictions.” *Pax* is studded with lush, sometimes lurid details. The menu of the gourmet—actually glutton—emperor Vitellius, we learn via Suetonius quoted by Holland, included “the livers of parrotfish, the brains of pheasants and peacocks, the tongues of flamingos, the entrails of lampreys.” In the battle for Judea (A.D. 66-70), some Jews, before escaping Jerusalem, swallowed gold, which they defecated outside the gates of the city. Meanwhile, those captured within were nailed up to crucifixes “in a variety of poses” by angry Roman troops. In a crowded courtroom a 90-year-old man had his penis inspected to determine if he had been circumcised.

Under the emperors, the Roman senate, once the source of all political appointments and the center of power, was soon reduced, in Holland’s phrase, to “a superannuated talking shop.” The old Roman status system was radically altered. Family, at the heart of aristocracy, counted for less now than it had. “Rich and poor, honorable and contemptible, distinguished and invisible,” the author explains, “these, in the final reckoning, were the divisions in society that truly mattered.”

Undergirding all were Rome’s slaves, which Holland estimates to have been perhaps a quarter of the city’s nearly one million population. These were of course not Aristotle’s “natural slaves” but captives, part of the spoils of Rome’s many wars. A loyal slave was often advanced to the status of freedman, and as such could accumulate wealth and even limited power in the role of gray eminence, though, as Holland writes, “naturally, the shame of their term of servitude would



never entirely fade.” He is excellent on the gradations of slavery:

As with horses, so with slaves: form counted for a great deal. Only a fool would buy a Briton, for instance, to perform anything but the most menial of tasks. Gauls made the best herdsmen. Doctors, teachers, secretaries: here were jobs ideally suited to Greeks. People from Asia, so connoisseurs tended to agree, were the best suited of all to slavery.

AS BEFITS A PEOPLE WHO TRACED their descent from the god Mars, the highest status in Rome through the centuries was that won through military victory. Thus, Marcus Licinius Crassus—said in his day to have been easily the richest man in Rome and the third member of the first triumvirate—in 53 B.C. went off at the age of 62 to fight the Parthians. He did so in order that his prestige might equal that of his partners Julius Caesar and Pompey Magnus, and in the attempt lost his life along with that of roughly 20,000 Roman soldiers in the battle of Carrhae. Among Roman emperors, Domitian was known to flex his military muscle. Holland quotes him, in response to his snuffing out the rebellion of the African tribe known as the Nasamonians, boasting, “I have forbidden the Nasamonians to exist.” Domitian also believed it was “better, in the final reckoning,

[to have] tyranny than anarchy,” a belief probably shared, if not so baldly stated, by most of the emperors taken up in *Pax* and by the better part of the Roman population.

Of these emperors, few had peaceful deaths. Galba was said to have been decapitated in the Forum by Otho’s men. Once dead, his murderers, according to Holland, “continued to stab and hack at his body.” Otho, who wanted to end the civil war between his and Vitellius’s troops, in discouragement took his own life by picking up “a dagger from under his pillow, placed its point over his heart, and ran it through with a single thrust.” Vitellius, too, met his death in the Forum, as Holland writes: after falling under a rain of blows, “as though his body were a joint of meat presented on a silver platter to the imperial table, his flesh was sliced with delicate precision from his bones. Finally, a hook was jammed into the roof of his mouth, and what remained of his body was dragged away and dumped into the Tiber.” Domitian was assassinated by freedmen in his home on the Palatine. Being emperor wasn’t always easy.

HOLLAND IS A DAB HAND AT BIOGRAPHICAL portraiture, and his Roman trilogy has given him a marvelous cast of players on whom to display it: the brothers Gracchus, Sulla, Marius, Pompey, Cicero, Cato, Agrippa, Maecenas, Seneca, the Plinys (Elder and Younger), Herod, Josephus, and many others. He treats some among them at length, some with a touch or two. “Herod the

Great,” he writes, “a brutal but slippery survivor much admired by both Antony and Augustus, had richly deserved his renown.... He had raised temples to Augustus; graced Jerusalem with a theatre, a hippodrome, and various other monuments fit to impress any visiting Roman; and commissioned a stupefying harbor which he had named—with typical smoothness—Caesarea.” Of the 23-year-old Pompey, Holland sketches: “Precocious swagger, a genius for self-promotion and an almost childlike relish for the perks of success: these were to be the defining characteristics of Pompey’s rise to success.... Pompey always had a nose for where the richest opportunities might lie.”

Roman history reads like a vast novel, Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* played out in real life. Greece had the greater dramatists, the more elegant poets, the more profound philosophers, the deeper culture. But the Romans, like no other people, put human nature most vividly on display. Ambition, greed, the propensity to violence, envy, the yearning for approval, desire in its every form—all play out in Roman history as nowhere else. If God were a novelist, the history of Rome would comprise I do not say his finest but easily his most absorbing single work, one that bears endless re-reading, and one that has found a most able scribe in Tom Holland.

Joseph Epstein is an essayist, short story writer, and the author, most recently, of The Novel, Who Needs It? (Encounter Books).

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