

Guest Column: Can America change its course?

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In 390 B.C., mid-way through Rome's long democratic history, an orator named Camillus confronted a Rome defeated in war and burned to the ground. He stood up in what was left of the Forum and gave this challenge: don't give up, remember our 400-year-old history, recover our greatness, celebrate our gods, and rebuild.

Today, 400 years after Jamestown and Plymouth Rock, there are enormous signs America may be finished as a democracy. America has not suffered a full-scale invasion of the homeland as Rome did then. But our new century began with a horrifying assault on our own greatest city and the ruin of its two shiniest towers. In addition, our roads and bridges, water, waste and power facilities, transit, airports and telecommunications infrastructure all lie in tatters, abused by neglect and underfunding if not by war.

And we are suffering defeat in many other ways. We have suffered a great plague which has taken away our wise elders and has left the living in a shock from which we have not yet recovered. Many people still cower at home, a part of "The Great Resignation," too unsettled to return to work yet.

Our country is unable to serve as the policeman of the world any longer. Our wealthy class is unwilling to bear anything like a fair share of the public freight. Tired of our religious denominations, our newspapers, our charities, our educational institutions and even our Capitol, we mock and disregard them.

Rome's Camillus made arguments we might listen to today. Rome's working class wanted to abandon the city to become immigrants and beggars in a distant countryside in Italy where the landowners might perhaps take them under their wings. Camillus questioned if they ought not instead remember their ancestors and ancient institutions represented by her temples of learning and worship, some still standing. Should they

forget their sacred holidays of thanksgiving, their patriotic gathering days for elections, their triumphal ceremonies conferring awards for valor, their funeral orations?

Should they abandon the gods who had established them in the land, and the new gods they had welcomed when Rome invited immigrants herself. Should they forget national monuments, sacred battlefields, political advances and great debates as a people?

He wondered if their lack of civic pride couldn't be remedied with effort, the city's streets and sewers rebuilt, new strengths found, and new policies enacted by consent of all of the people.

We might ask similar questions today. Should we not remember our own ancestry and our state and county histories? Should we deprive our national holidays of meaning, object to our own elections, forget our own heroes old and new? Should we marginalize the contributions of our religious denominations and their teachings of love and forgiveness and sacrifice? Should we forget the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the battleground of Gettysburg, our orations imploring us to "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country"? Should we deny the long-standing effort made to protect the public's health and overcome our own innumerable instances of pestilence, blight, cancer and sorrow?

Do we disregard our own monuments like the Statue of Liberty and forget our achievements like ending slavery, growing civil rights, and enfranchising women? Do we forget our early national debates over issues like slavery and whether the country should get into entangling European alliances and wars, and our new ones like what we wish to do with abortion, college debt and other grand issues? Do we run from them, or debate and decide them?

Camillus argued that Rome's ancestors did not give up when they encountered hardships, so why should they, and, indeed, why should we today?

Should we abandon our land, our cities and streets and let them be polluted and defaced and run into the ground by rogue drug lords, like the war lord of Russia has treated Ukraine? Camillus said he still looked upon Rome's "hills and plains" and even her skies with great affection and could not bear to leave them. Do we want to leave ours? Rome responded and rebuilt. What will we do?

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