



American

Civilization

IDEALS, INSTITUTIONS & CULTURE

Jacob C. J. Wolf

I.

The Savage State



NATURE

Liberty without security

II.

The Arcadian State



ARCADIA

Independence and virtue

III.

The Consummation of Empire



EMPIRE

Power, prestige, and prosperity

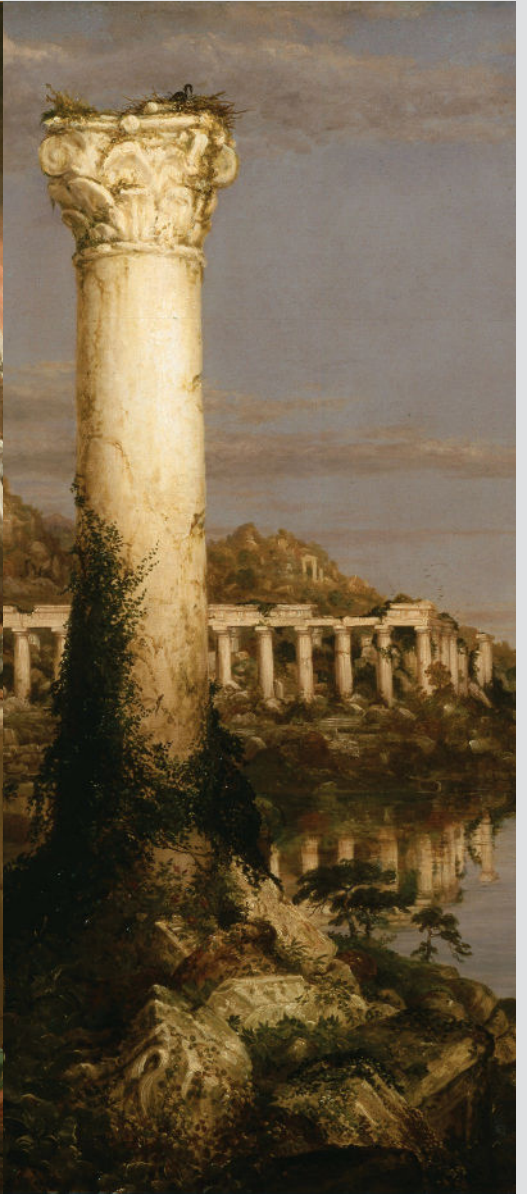
IV.

Destruction



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COLLAPSE

Civilization turned against itself

RUIN

Memory after civilization

Why American Civilization: Ideals, Institutions, and Culture?

AMERICAN CIVILIZATION: *Ideals, Institutions, and Culture* was born from the recognition that something is seriously wrong with the way civics is taught in contemporary America. Despite the proliferation of information, civic illiteracy in the United States remains remarkably widespread. A 2024 survey conducted by the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation found that 70 percent of Americans failed a basic civics assessment covering the structure of the US government, its constitutional principles, and the elementary functions of democratic institutions. Only about half of respondents could name the branch of government in which bills become law. Yet the same survey revealed overwhelming recognition of the importance of civics education: 95 percent of respondents agreed that civic knowledge was essential to the nation's health, while only 46 percent believed such principles are adequately being taught. This reveals a striking forty-nine-point gap between our civic aspirations and our confidence in civic education.

The problem, however, is not merely that students know too little about American government. It is that they have not been initiated into the civilizational inheritance that makes civics meaningful. A student may be able to name the branches of government,

define federalism, memorize key protections of the Bill of Rights, yet still fail to understand why these things matter, what kind of character these institutions assume, and why they are worthy of respect, gratitude, and preservation. The crisis of civic education, we believe, is not merely one of information but one of formation.

American Civilization is built on a more comprehensive—and more human—understanding of civic inheritance. It approaches America through three mutually reinforcing dimensions: ideals, institutions, and culture. **Ideals** are the principles that constitute America's highest individual and common ends: liberty, equality, natural rights, government by consent, constitutionalism, personal responsibility, human dignity, and religious liberty. **Institutions** are the means by which those ideals are translated from abstract thought into tangible public form. This occurs through *political* institutions such as the Constitution, federalism, separation of powers, Congress, the presidency, and the courts; however, it also occurs through *social* institutions such as churches, families, schools, neighborhoods, and charities. **Culture** is the shared imaginative and moral world in which ideals come to be loved and institutions put down roots: sermons, novels, poems, paintings, customs, monuments, music, holidays, and habits of life.

Put simply, ideals are the mind of a civilization, institutions are its body, and culture is its heart. Civic education must teach all three because a free and self-governing people cannot preserve a civilization whose principles it does not know, whose institutions it does not inhabit, and whose loves it does not share.

This framework corresponds, in civic terms, to the tripartite structure of the human person, constituted of mind, body, and heart. Ideals, the mind of civilization, supply direction: they name what a people hold to be true, good, beautiful, and worthy of reverence. Institutions, the body, supply durable form: they embody those principles in practices, offices, laws, associations, and habits that can endure across generations. Culture, the heart, generates attachment: it teaches citizens what to remember, imitate, and love.

A healthy civilization, like a healthy person, requires the right ordering of mind, body, and heart. It flourishes when these things are in place; it decays when institutions lose their animating ideals, when ideals cease to be loved, or when either become detached from the concrete practices of common life.

Most approaches to civics focus on one part of this whole, such as ideals, institutions, or historical narrative. But a proper study of American civilization must attend not only to ideals and institutions, but also to culture—the moral, religious, and aesthetic world that gives context to our ideals and institutions. Through art and literature, students come to imaginatively enter their nation and its story. Through theology and philosophy, they come to understand the deeper foundations of its principles. Through history, they come to see themselves not as detached spectators, but as participants in an unfolding civilizational drama.

This textbook is organized around key debates and decisions that have shaped American national identity. Its content is not limited to political rhetoric or constitutional argument, though both are of course central. A true civic education includes not only the Declaration of Independence, *The Federalist Papers*, and the speeches of Abraham Lincoln, but also the sermons of Jonathan Edwards, the novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the landscape paintings of Thomas Cole, the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the poetry of Robert Frost, and the short stories of Flannery O'Connor. It is within this broader conversation—spanning politics, statesmanship, philosophy, theology, literature, and art—that a people comes to understand itself as a people.

This is why a new textbook is needed. A free society will not endure because its citizens know facts about its government or can recite the components of its constitutional structure. It will endure when citizens understand its principles, inhabit its institutions, and admire that civilizational inheritance enough to assume responsibility for its future.

American Civilization: Ideals, Institutions, and Culture seeks to form the whole citizen.

The Architect's Dream by Thomas Cole (1840)



Can America Escape the Course of Empire?

IN THE YEARS FOLLOWING the American Revolution and the ratification of the Constitution, the task shifted from founding to nation-building. The people had declared independence from Britain, secured that independence through war, and established a new constitutional order. Yet the most fundamental question still remained: What sort of nation should America be? Should it preserve the austere virtue of a small republic like Sparta? Should it pursue the commercial energy, cultural brilliance, and democratic ambition of Athens? Or could it somehow unite republican virtue and national greatness, as Rome once did, without collapsing into luxury, decadence, and corruption?

The Founders knew that the achievement of independence by no means settled the question of the sort of nation we should be; it only made the question more urgent. Liberty, once won, had to be embedded in institutions, translated into a common culture, and perpetuated to subsequent generations. Reflecting on this, Thomas Jefferson wrote, “We have spent the prime of our lives in procuring them the precious blessing of liberty. Let [subsequent generations] spend theirs in showing that liberty is the great parent of science and of virtue; and that a nation will be great in both always in proportion as it is free.” In a similar spirit, George Washington declared in his Farewell Address: “Of all the dispositions and habits, which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports.” The crucial task was not whether America could be free, but whether that freedom could be wedded to the institutions, habits, and virtues necessary to preserve it across generations.

Thomas Cole’s five painting series, *The Course of Empire*, turns this question into a visual civics lesson. Cole, the founder of the Hudson River School, was born in Lancashire, England, in 1801 and emigrated to the United States as a young man. He quickly earned the reputation of America’s greatest landscape painter; however, his deeper achievement was to teach Americans how to see their country and its potential. Europe had ruins, monuments, and memories of ancient cities—all of which turned the mind

backward toward a lost golden age. America, by contrast, had wilderness, mountains, rivers, and vast unsettled territories that hurled the imagination forward. Its very landscape seemed to ask what kind of civilization may one day be built upon it.

Cole believed that art could draw the soul upward and outward, away from material concerns and self-interested calculation. His landscapes were therefore never mere landscapes; they were moral and civic allegories that trained citizens to see inheritance as beautiful, fragile, and worthy of preservation. His greatest civic allegory is *The Course of Empire*, which traces the rise and fall of an unnamed civilization—though one clearly inspired by the history of Rome. Across five paintings, one sees a people emerge from nature, form a primitive society, achieve imperial splendor, collapse into violence, and end in desolation. The sequence—like the paintings themselves—is as beautiful as it is foreboding. Cole warns us, in effect, that civilization is not the same as progress. Human beings may build cities, engage in commerce, and cultivate the arts and sciences and yet lose the virtues and moderation that make civilization good.

In this way, *The Course of Empire* encapsulated the ancient belief that all regimes are subject to tragic cycles of rise and decline. This tragic cycle was given classic expression in Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, which Cole himself circulated with the series:

There is the moral of all human tales;
’Tis but the same rehearsal of the past,
First Freedom, and then Glory
—when that fails,
Wealth—Vice—Corruption,
—Barbarism at last.
And History, with all her volumes vast,
Hath but one page.

But the American Founding represented an attempt to interrupt the old cycle of regimes—an attempt, in other words, to establish the “perpetual republic.” The fledgling nation aimed to challenge the tragic sense of history. The Founders believed they lived at a providential moment in history where they had a rare chance to make liberty endure.

Cole presses the viewer to ask whether there is a moment at which civilization ought

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It has been frequently remarked that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.

ALEXANDER HAMILTON

Federalist, no. 1

Clouds by Thomas Cole (c. 1838)

to pause—and indeed whether it can be paused at all. Each stage contains promises and perils. Nature, for example, offers freedom but not security. Agrarian life cultivates virtue, independence, and self-command but is lacking in strength, comfort, and national vitality. Empire achieves power, prestige, and prosperity but opens the door to luxury, decadence, and corruption. Each stage also forms a different type of human being: the hunter, the farmer, the merchant, the soldier, and the spectator.

The Course of Empire asks the questions America must continually answer. Are nations fated to rehearse Byron’s tragic logic: freedom, glory, wealth, vice, corruption, and barbarism? Can we grow in power without abandoning virtue, in prosperity without luxury, and in national greatness while remaining a self-governing republic?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What would it mean for America to be established by “reflection and choice” rather than be subject to “accident and force”?
2. Is there a way to break the tragic cycle of regimes? How?



MAIN POINTS

- Cole's *Savage State* portrays humanity before civilization.
- Natural liberty offers freedom and independence, but it also exposes individuals to danger, uncertainty, and insecurity.
- The "state of nature" is a political concept philosophers use to examine why people leave natural freedom and form governments.
- The American Founding sought to balance liberty and order.

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... all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights ...

DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

The State of Nature

Absolute Liberty and Constant Danger

THOMAS COLE BEGINS *The Course of Empire* not with a city, constitution, or king, but with untamed nature. His first painting, *The Savage State*, or *The Commencement of Empire*, presents human life before the development of institutions and prior to civil society itself. The scene is therefore wild, mysterious, dark, and indeed chaotic. Yet life is not simply bleak: light breaks through the storm clouds and traces of human life dot the natural landscape. Man's existence is simple, shifting, and subject to necessity, as evidenced by the hunters, canoes, fires, and temporary dwellings. Nature dominates the scene, with the central promontory suggestively towering above any human artifice.

Cole does not present this first condition as one of mere misery. There is vigor and freedom here. In fact, this scene is the image of independence itself: the lone individual, unhindered and unconstrained, striving against nature through sheer force of will and determination. In this sense, the painting represents *natural liberty*: man's independence before the advent of property, law, government, and settled convention. Yet, natural liberty is not yet civil liberty, for it is precarious and exposed to constant dangers. Nature, which renders men free, also makes him vulnerable; he may be independent, but he is not yet secure.

Cole's first painting invites comparison to the political concept known as "the state of nature." Early modern political philosophers used the state of nature not merely to describe a pre-historic man, but to ask a fundamental question pertaining to civics: What are human beings like *prior to the advent of society* and *why is government necessary in the first place*? If man is born into a situation of natural liberty, as these theorists suggested, then why should he leave such a state? What does political society promise, and what might be lost?

The Savage State by Thomas Cole (1834)

Early modern political philosophers used the state of nature not merely to describe a prehistoric man, but to ask a fundamental question pertaining to civics: What are human beings like *prior to the advent of society* and *why is government necessary in the first place*?

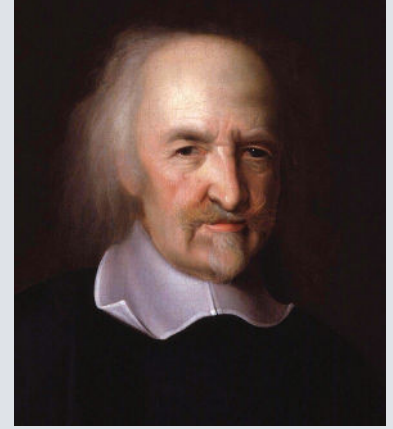
Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) viewed the state of nature in the most pessimistic terms. Without a common civil power to keep the peace, there could be “no industry,” “no culture of the earth,” “no commodious building,” “no arts,” “no letters,” and, indeed, “no society.” What’s worse, the state of nature was subject to “continual fear and danger of violent death.” Human life, in Hobbes’s famous formulation, was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” For Hobbes, while natural liberty is appealing, its benefits are entirely swallowed up in insecurity. One would willingly surrender some portion of that natural liberty to gain peace, civil protection, and some modicum of order.

John Locke (1632–1704) offered a more optimistic account. For Locke, the state of nature was one of “perfect freedom” and “equality.” It was a “state of liberty” but not a “state of license” because each individual remained subject to the law of nature—that is, to reason. Such reason, Locke argued, obliges each individual not to “harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions”—a formulation that inspired the Declaration of Independence’s language of natural rights. Locke, like Jefferson, believed that individuals possessed rights by nature. That is, nature, not governments or rulers, conferred rights upon individuals. Yet even for Locke, natural rights were insecure without promulgated laws, impartial judges, and common authority. One therefore enters civil society not because

liberty is bad, but because one’s natural liberty demands greater protection.

This distinction is essential to the American Founding. The Declaration teaches that human beings are endowed with rights by their Creator, and that governments exist merely to “secure these rights.” Political society should neither abolish one’s natural liberty nor render it insecure. If we wanted to maximize liberty, we would remain in the state of nature and subject to its dangers; if we wanted liberty to be secure and conducive to common life and mutual benefit, we would want it bolstered through constitutional government.

Cole’s first painting therefore teaches the primary lesson of civics: liberty without law is anarchy, but law without liberty is tyranny. Civilization—that golden mean between anarchy and tyranny—depends upon the proper ordering of law and liberty. Human beings have their origins in nature, but their fullest development requires them to leave the state of nature without losing sight of the natural liberty that makes government legitimate. American civilization begins here, with the attempt to join the liberty and independence granted by nature to the laws, habits, and institutions built by human prudence. The goal is not to abolish nature, but to secure its benefits through civic and political order. The precise balance of nature and civilization—between natural liberty and constitutional order—would become one of the central debates of the early republic.



Thomas Hobbes, portrait by John Michael Wright (c. 1669–1670)

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In [the state of nature], there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall fear, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

THOMAS HOBBS

Leviathan, chapter 13

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To understand political power right, and derive it from its original, we must consider, what state all men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and person, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man. A state also of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal.

JOHN LOCKE

Second Treatise of Government, chapter 2

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We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. **ART:** In Cole’s painting, what artistic and symbolic details suggest freedom and what details suggest insecurity?
2. **FOUNDERS:** Hobbes, Locke, and the Declaration begin from the idea that human beings exist in the state of nature. Why does this matter for the American Founding?
3. **CIVICS:** What does it mean to say that liberty without law is anarchy, but law without liberty is tyranny? How should law and liberty be balanced?



MAIN POINTS

- Cole's *Pastoral State* depicts the rise of civilization, where people have moved beyond mere survival to farming, commerce, family life, worship, and the arts.
- The painting emphasizes harmony and self-government.
- The Founders believed republican government required virtuous citizens, since laws alone cannot sustain liberty.
- Jefferson saw farmers as the foundation of a free republic, believing agriculture cultivated the character necessary for self-government.

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Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens.

THOMAS JEFFERSON

The Arcadian Republic

Jefferson, Virtue, and the Empire of Liberty

THOMAS COLE'S *Arcadian or Pastoral State* illustrates the early days of civilization. Human beings have escaped the violence and insecurity of the state of nature, and they are no longer enslaved to the all-consuming quest for survival. Life in this scene has become recognizably human: farming, building, commerce, and animal husbandry are among the vocations glimpsed throughout the painting. Because the necessities of life are more secure, human beings are now free to cultivate the higher pursuits of the mind and soul: art and music, marriage and worship, mathematics and construction. Most tellingly, one sees both young and old, suggesting that civilization is not the achievement of isolated individuals but the work of generations.

Through its proportion and composition, the painting presents a scene of harmony: humans live in concert with nature and with one another. The hues of green and blue suggest youthful hopefulness. The vegetation, no longer rough and wild, resembles a cultivated garden—the perfect marriage of nature and human effort. In the oxen and plow, the sheep and the crook, the sea and the ship, one sees human beings benefit from nature without dominating it. The scene is ordered but not oppressive, cultivated but not artificial, beautiful but not decadent. Ennobled by work and leisure, human beings come to possess the virtues that sustain self-government as well as the institutions that make shared life possible. Liberty remains, but it has been disciplined by labor, worship, family, and custom, and thereby brought to communal advantage.

This was one of the central questions of the early republic. The Founders broadly agreed that America should be a republic; the deeper question was what kind of people could sustain republican government. Self-government presumes the governance of the self. A republic

The Arcadian or Pastoral State by Thomas Cole (1834)

therefore requires citizens capable of self-restraint, independence, and public-spiritedness. Laws and constitutions matter, but so does the unwritten constitution—the habits, virtues, and affections of a people. Without that moral foundation, any political form remains fragile and liberty becomes vulnerable to appetite, ambition, and dependence.

Jefferson's agrarian republic was one answer to this problem. He saw in Cole's pastoral state the moral ecology most hospitable to republican liberty. For Jefferson, the type of citizen most likely to preserve liberty over time was the independent farmer. "Those who labour in the earth," Jefferson wrote, "are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue." In other words, Jefferson did not praise agriculture merely because it supplies the necessities of life; he praised it because it formed a certain kind of soul: industrious, frugal, patient, and disciplined. Moreover, the farmer maintained an intimate relationship with nature and a tangible attachment to place. For all these reasons, the farmer remained relatively independent of others—employers, banks, foreign markets, and political patrons.

For Jefferson, a little dependence was fatal to republican character. "Dependence," he foresaw, "begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition." The farmer's independence was therefore not merely economic; it was moral and political. Because he owned land, worked it with his own hands, lived close to nature, and had a tangible stake in the community, the farmer was the model of virtuous citizenship. Agriculture, in other words, was a school of republican virtue. This is why Jefferson could conclude that "it is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor." Good laws are not enough; a nation must be concerned with good character as well. The question for Jefferson was whether a republic could preserve agrarian virtues, especially

as the promising young nation grew in influence and territory.

In the Louisiana Purchase, Jefferson's agrarian vision reached a moral and political crossroads. The acquisition of Louisiana promised new lands for cultivation, making possible generations of independent farmers. Yet, by effectively doubling the size of the United States, it opened the door to a troubling possibility: the republic of virtue might become, one day, a sprawling continental empire. Jefferson chose expansion because he believed such arable land would preserve liberty rather than corrupt virtue. He imagined America could be something unseen in human history: an "empire of liberty." His agrarian ideal explains why: "We have now lands enough to employ an infinite number of people in their cultivation. Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country, and wedded to its liberty and interests, by the most lasting bonds." Jefferson hoped, in effect, that the expansion of the United States would not destroy, but rather forever preserve, the spirit of American industry, independence, and virtue.

Yet Cole does not allow the viewer to rest in simple nostalgia. Even his idyllic pastoral landscape contains signs of future danger. For if one looks closely, one sees the awakening of commerce, martial ambition, and the quest for power: a warship is under construction near the shoreline and an innocent child sketches a soldier wielding a sword. The ominous tree stump in the foreground suggests that cultivation can become the conquest of nature. The very powers of mind and body that brought men out of the state of nature—labor, art, science, commerce, and ambition—may also draw them toward empire. Cole's second painting is not so much a statement of the ideal as a civic question: Can a republic preserve its simplicity and virtue or does human nature draw us ever toward expansion and empire?



Thomas Jefferson, portrait by Rembrandt Peale (1800)

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Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phaenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example. . . . Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition. . . . While we have land to labour then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a distaff. Carpenters, masons, smiths, are wanting in husbandry: but, for the general operations of manufacture, let our workshops remain in Europe. It is better to carry provisions and materials to workmen there, than bring them to the provisions and materials, and with them their manners and principles. The loss by the transportation of commodities across the Atlantic will be made up in happiness and permanence of government.

THOMAS JEFFERSON

Notes on the State of Virginia, query 19

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We have now lands enough to employ an infinite number of people in their cultivation. Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country, and wedded to its liberty and interests, by the most lasting bonds. As long, therefore, as they can find employment in this line, I would not convert them into mariners, artisans, or anything else. But our citizens will find employment in this line, till their numbers, and of course their productions, become too great for the demand, both internal and foreign. This is not the case as yet, and probably will not be for a considerable time.

THOMAS JEFFERSON

to John Jay, 1785

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. **ART:** What aspects of Cole's painting suggest harmony between nature and human effort? What details suggest that this harmony might contain the seeds of empire and expansion?
2. **FOUNDERS:** Why did Jefferson believe independent farmers were most suited to republican government? What virtues did agrarian life cultivate?
3. **CIVICS:** Can a modern republic preserve simplicity, independence, and virtue while growing in power, prestige, and prosperity?



MAIN POINTS

- Cole's *Consummation of Empire* depicts civilization at its peak, marked by wealth, technological achievement, artistic refinement, and political power.
- The painting reflects Hamilton's vision of national greatness, emphasizing commerce, military strength, and strong government.
- Cole highlights the costs of imperial success, showing luxury, hierarchy, conquest, and dependence replacing the simplicity and virtue of earlier republican life.
- Can a republic achieve prosperity and power without sacrificing self-government and virtue?

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Not only the wealth; but the independence and security of a Country, appear to be materially connected with the prosperity of manufactures.

ALEXANDER HAMILTON

The Magnificent City

Hamilton on the Need for Power, Prestige, and Prosperity

IN *THE CONSUMMATION of Empire*, Thomas Cole presents a “magnificent city” at the height of its power, prestige, and prosperity. Nature, represented by the wilderness, has all but vanished from the scene. In a reversal of the former painting, human artifice now towers over nature; white columns, temples, and statuary overshadow the distant mountain. The simple village has become an imperial city, filled with colonnades, bridges, statues, fountains, banners, ships, and innumerable multitudes of people. What was once a simple river has become a harbor—a veritable stage for commerce and conquest.

The painting is dazzling because civilization itself is dazzling. Civilization is refined, beautiful, energetic, prosperous, and powerful. Simplicity has given way to luxury: the palette of greens and blues has been replaced by stunning white marble, polished stone, gilded ornament, and sumptuous textiles in regal pinks and purples. The city displays the obvious increase of art and architecture, peace and prosperity, trade and technology. All of this unfolds symbolically under the gaze of Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, law, justice, trade, and military victory. Cole himself described this scene as “the summit of human glory.”

This is the point where Alexander Hamilton becomes relevant to the story. If Jefferson's imagination was drawn to the simple virtues of the pastoral republic, Hamilton's mind was drawn to the idea of national energy, commercial prosperity, and military greatness. For Hamilton, a nation could not preserve its independence by remaining small, simple, agrarian, and

virtuous. An agrarian society might avoid the temptation to empire and yet fall prey to actual empires. Hamilton knew that one needed power, prestige, and prosperity to navigate a world of ambitious and expanding European powers. To survive in such a cut-throat international order, one needed more than innocence. One needed strength.

Hamilton's project was therefore one of nation building. He did not reject agriculture itself; he rejected the idea that agriculture alone was sufficient to preserve independence. While agriculture might cultivate individual independence, it could paradoxically leave the nation as a whole dependent on others. The young republic needed manufactures, commerce, public credit, administration, energetic national government, and a navy. These things were not merely tools of wealth, but of survival. As Hamilton argued in his *Report on Manufactures*, "Not only the wealth, but the independence and security of a country, appear to be materially connected with the prosperity of manufactures." As Hamilton saw it, a nation dependent upon foreign powers for essential goods, credit, commercial markets, and military defense was independent in name only. It might possess liberty in principle, but it would be unable to preserve it in the face of an adverse international order.

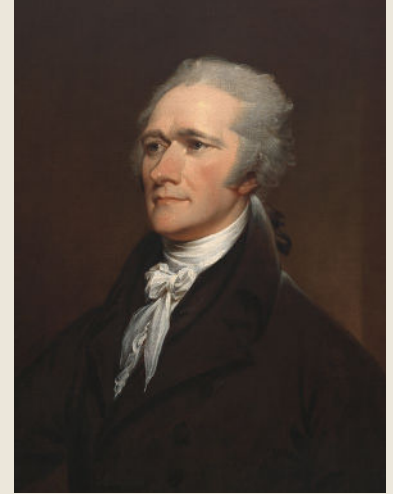
Think of Hamilton as a realist. Whatever the nation hoped to achieve in terms of its ideals—liberty, self-government, equality under the law—it would require power, prestige, and prosperity to achieve them. The world does not spare weak republics simply because they are virtuous. In *Federalist*, no. 11, Hamilton warned, "The rights of neutrality will only be respected, when they are defended by an adequate power." Hamilton understood power not as antithetical to liberty, but as a necessary condition of liberty.

Cole's *Consummation* helps us see the allure of Hamilton's vision. It is the largest painting in the series because it depicts a

kind of zenith of human achievement. The imperial city is magnificent: it dazzles its citizens and strikes fear in the heart of potential enemies. It demonstrates what human beings can attain when society invests heavily in political order, commerce, technology, art, and military strength. The infrastructure seen in Cole's paintings does not arise by happenstance, but rather through social organization, civilizational confidence, commercial prosperity, and military power. The higher things in life come, as it were, at high costs.

Yet, for all its appeal, there is something unsettling about Cole's third painting and the empire it represents. The abundance of the scene is not simply innocent. In the triumphal procession on the bridge, one sees hierarchy, domination, and dependence. Military power is openly displayed, with conquered multitudes drawn in the train of victory. Commerce remains essential, but it now seems commingled with conquest. In a telling detail, the warships vastly outnumber the commercial vessels. The people, in turn, have been transformed from self-governing citizens into spectators of imperial glory. Their prosperity has softened into luxury and decadence. Even architecture, once a testament to human creativity and civic order, now seems employed to manifest the power of the empire.

The Consummation of Empire raises perennial civic questions: Can we harness the benefits of an advanced society without indulging its vices? Can we sustain commerce without promoting luxury and decadence? Can we become powerful without becoming imperial? Can we, most importantly, preserve self-government and virtue despite monetary and territorial expansion? Cole knows that we will be attracted to this painting. However, he seeks to remind us of a fundamental paradox: a republic that refuses greatness may become weak; a society that worships greatness may cease to be republican.



Alexander Hamilton, portrait by John Trumbull (1806)

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Not only the wealth; but the independence and security of a Country, appear to be materially connected with the prosperity of manufactures. Every nation, with a view to those great objects, ought to endeavour to possess within itself all the essentials of national supply. These comprise the means of Subsistence habitation clothing and defence. The possession of these is necessary to the perfection of the body politic, to the safety as well as to the welfare of the society; the want of either, is the want of an important organ of political life and Motion; and in the various crises which await a state, it must severely feel the effects of any such deficiency. The extreme embarrassments of the United States during the late War, from an incapacity of supplying themselves, are still matter of keen recollection: A future war might be expected again to exemplify the mischiefs and dangers of a situation, to which that incapacity is still in too great a degree applicable, unless changed by timely and vigorous exertion. To effect this change as fast as shall be prudent, merits all the attention and all the Zeal of our Public Councils; 'tis the next great work to be accomplished.

ALEXANDER HAMILTON
Report on Manufactures (1791)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. **ART:** What details make Cole's imperial city appear magnificent and desirable? What details warn of its possible vices?
2. **FOUNDERS:** Why did Hamilton believe that manufactures, commerce, energetic government, and military capability were essential for national independence? How does his argument challenge Jefferson's agrarian ideal?
3. **CIVICS:** What virtues or institutions are necessary to ensure national greatness remains directed toward individual liberty?



MAIN POINTS

- Cole's *Destruction* portrays a civilization collapsing from within.
- Civilization's achievements can become instruments of downfall, as commerce and military power give way to chaos and ruin.
- The Founders believed republics are vulnerable to prosperity and luxury, which can erode virtue, self-government, and commitment to the common good.
- Power, prestige, and prosperity must be balanced by virtue, moderation, and the rule of law for a free society to endure.

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But a soul depraved by luxury has many other desires, and soon becomes an enemy to the laws that confine it.

MONTESQUIEU

Destruction

A Nation That Has Forgotten Moderation

THOMAS COLE'S FOURTH painting, *Destruction*, depicts not the absence of civilization, but a civilization turned against itself. Cole evokes the historical memory of the sack of imperial Rome; yet by not naming the city, he universalizes the warning: every civilization that allows wealth, conquest, luxury, and ambition to outpace its virtue, moderation, and rule of law may meet a similar fate. This is what makes the fourth painting even more terrible than the first. *The Savage State* showcased the dangers of life prior to civilization. *Destruction*, on the other hand, shows the even greater dangers of a civilization unmoored from reason, virtue, and moderation. The very powers that brought about civilization can bring about its undoing, and therefore the lesson to all is to stay within certain moral and metaphysical limits.

Cole sharpens the lesson by making the composition of *Destruction* mirror that of *The Consummation of Empire*. We see the same harbor, bridge, and public spaces; however, what once symbolized power, prestige, and prosperity now signifies collapse, conflagration, and catastrophe. The harbor that brought about commerce has become an avenue for external invasion and conquest. The bridge that bore a triumphal military procession has now broken under the weight of chaos. The monuments that projected public grandeur and order have tumbled down with terrible force. The people, previously so rich and luxurious, proved morally and physically incapable of defending themselves. Civilization, in short, has undone itself.

The history of the ancient world, especially that of Rome, taught precisely this danger. Edward Gibbon, the great historian of Rome's rise and fall, put it this way: “The decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and, as soon as

Destruction by Thomas Cole (1836)

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time or accident had removed the artificial supports [e.g., virtue], the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight.” Cole paints that terrifying logic in vivid colors: civilization expands, grows wealthy, acquires military power, and multiplies the means by which it may collapse. The tragedy is not simply that the barbarians have arrived at the gates, but that the city has already weakened from within. By forgetting virtue, moderation, and self-government, the empire simply caves in upon itself; conquest only completes what corruption began long before. As Arnold Toynbee once put it, “Civilizations die by suicide, not murder.”

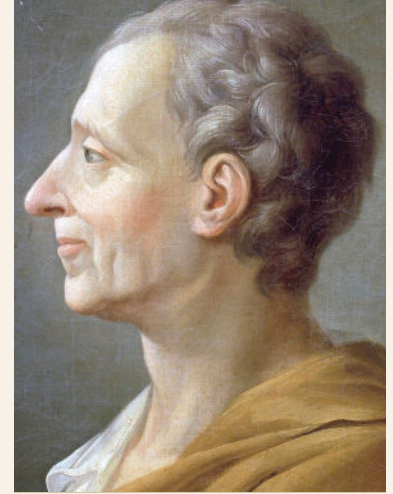
The American Founders knew that republics were uniquely susceptible to internal corruption—often falling prey to the very prosperity they produce. This was a lesson the Founders learned from the French philosopher Montesquieu, who wrote that “in proportion as luxury gains ground in a republic, the minds of the people are turned towards their particular interest” and that “a soul depraved by luxury” ultimately becomes “an enemy to the laws that confine it.” This lesson was not lost on Hamilton. At the New York ratifying convention, he observed that “as riches increase and accumulate in few hands” and “as luxury prevails in society,” virtue will be increasingly treated only as “a graceful appendage of wealth,” and the general tendency will be “to depart from the republican standard.”

Yet prosperity was not the only issue. Power and prestige could likewise weaken a civilization. Hamilton himself warned in a letter to Robert Morris that “great pow-

er, commerce and riches, or in other words great national prosperity, may in like manner be denominated evils; for they lead to insolence, an inordinate ambition, a vicious luxury, licentiousness of morals, and all those vices which corrupt government, enslave the people and precipitate the ruin of a nation.” This is what makes Hamilton so useful for understanding Cole. Hamilton—that great defender of military strength, international commerce, and national manufacturing—understood the importance of moderating habits, virtues, and institutions.

The civic lesson for America is something of a paradox. A republic may need power, prestige, and prosperity to navigate an adverse international order, as Hamilton well understood. But these things must always be wedded to virtue, moderation, law, and civic-spirit-edness, lest they be a nation’s undoing. Power is useful, until it becomes an end in itself. Prestige is admirable, until national greatness overshadows individual liberty and dignity. Prosperity is good, until it settles into the soul as moral decadence. Even ambition can ennoble a nation, until it escapes or circumvents the moderating force of laws and institutions.

Destruction is thereby a cautionary tale for every free people: power, prestige, and prosperity may be necessary to preserve liberty, but they can subtly and surreptitiously enter the human soul and corrupt the virtues and habits that keep people free. Cole shows us the cost of the collapse; the Founders supply the warning. A republic needs enough strength to survive, enough virtue to remain good, and enough moderation to keep greatness from falling into ruin.



Montesquieu (c. 1750)

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In proportion as luxury gains ground in a republic, the minds of the people are turned towards their particular interests. Those who are allowed only what is necessary have nothing but their own reputation and their country’s glory in view. But a soul depraved by luxury has many other desires, and soon becomes an enemy to the laws that confine it.

MONTESQUIEU

Spirit of the Laws, book VII

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Great power, commerce and riches, or in other words great national prosperity, may . . . lead to insolence, an inordinate ambition, a vicious luxury, licentiousness of morals, and all those vices which corrupt government, enslave the people and precipitate the ruin of a nation.

ALEXANDER HAMILTON

to Robert Morris, April 30, 1781

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As riches increase and accumulate in few hands; as luxury prevails in society; virtue will be in a greater degree considered as only a graceful appendage of wealth, and the tendency of things will be to depart from the republican standard.

ALEXANDER HAMILTON

New York Ratifying Convention, June 21, 1788

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. **ART:** How does Cole reverse the visual symbols of *The Consummation of Empire*, and how do these details show a civilization turned against itself?
2. **FOUNDERS:** What, according to Hamilton, are the dangers of power, prestige, and prosperity?
3. **CIVICS:** What things may help balance a nation’s power, prestige, and prosperity, so that they do not bring about a nation’s undoing?



MAIN POINTS

- Cole's *Desolation* depicts the aftermath of civilizational collapse, where humanity has vanished and only ruins remain.
- Ruins function as both a warning and an inspiration.
- Cole emphasizes the importance of historical memory, arguing that civilizations endure only when they learn from the past.
- The Founders believed free societies depend on moral and civic virtue, since constitutions and institutions cannot survive without the habits, beliefs, and self-discipline that sustain self-government.

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Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.

GEORGE WASHINGTON

Desolation

Nature, Memory, and the Possibility of Civilization

DESOLATION, THE FIFTH and final painting of Cole's *Course of Empire*, is the most chilling because of its profound silence. The violence has passed, the fires have gone out, the armies have departed, and the citizens have long been forgotten. In fact, human beings are completely absent from the scene. There is a haunting stillness because the soul of a civilization has departed, leaving behind only its empty shell. All that remains are ruins—the tangible memories of a once-great civilization.

The bridge, the column, the arches, and the buildings on the hill all function as whispers from the past. Cole bathes the scene in the pale light of evening, suggesting a somber finality to the course of empire. A solitary column rises in the foreground, no longer supporting a religious or civic structure, and slowly being overtaken by nature. There is an elegiac beauty here: nature, once conquered, now slowly reconquers. The painting asks whether the course of empire is a cycle, with a new beginning, or if this is in some sense final.

Cole has painted for us the tragic consequences of forgetting nature—both human nature and the proper ends of civilization. Human beings establish societies to secure their liberty, exercise their nobler faculties, and achieve their higher ends. However, there is a tragic outcome when the means of society—the glory, power, and wealth—displace the ends they were meant to serve. We design institutions to support a richer common life, but they remain only as empty forms when their purposes are forgotten. Ruins are the institutions of society after the soul of civilization has departed.

Yet, ruins are a paradoxical thing for Cole. On the one hand, they represent profound tragedy and the collapse of what once was. On the other hand, they remind subsequent generations

Desolation by Thomas Cole (1836)

A healthy civilization recognizes both sides of human nature, cultivating what is highest in the human person while simultaneously constraining what is most dangerous.

that human beings are perennially capable of building magnificent things. Who has not been inspired by the Parthenon of Athens or the Forum in Rome? This perspective would have resonated deeply with early Americans. Everyone was keenly aware of the fact that Europe was littered with the ruins of once-great republics and civilizations. Those ruins served as both an inspiration and a warning: republics could rise to greatness and still collapse through luxury, decadence, factionalism, ambition, and civilizational forgetfulness.

Through *Desolation*, Cole reminds us of the importance of civilizational memory. To build—or rebuild—a people must look to the past. History furnishes the mind with previous examples and ignites the imagination with future possibility. It also reminds us of the fragility of civilization: what generations have accomplished may be lost in an instant without constant vigilance. When we contemplate the literal pillars and supports of a fallen civilization in *Desolation*, our mind comes naturally to the consideration of the main pillars and supports of our own society. Upon what foundations does our own civilization rest?

The Founders understood that the visible architecture of society rests upon invisible moral foundations. The external forms of our government—the Constitution, legislatures, and courts—are all animated by an inner life consisting of habits, virtues, beliefs, and affections. No one expressed this more clearly than George Washington. In his Farewell Address, he called religion and morality “the indispensable supports” of political prosperity and the “great pillars of human

happiness.” His architectural metaphor is especially poignant beside Cole’s ruins. The supports matter, whether physical, moral, or spiritual.

John Adams expressed the same sentiment in more striking terms. Government, he argued, has no power “capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion.” Left unchecked, human nature would “break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net.” Adams’s point was not that institutions or constitutional protections were unimportant, but rather that neither would function properly in the absence of the virtues, habits, and self-discipline that make self-government possible.

The Founders’ warnings return us to Cole’s larger meditation on nature. Civilization must be constructed in accordance with nature, especially human nature. By nature human beings possess liberty and equality, reason and moral agency, as well as sociability and the capacity for self-government. However, human beings also possess the pride, ambition, and discordant passions to tear it all down. A healthy civilization recognizes both sides of human nature, cultivating what is highest in the human person while simultaneously constraining what is most dangerous. A healthy civilization achieves this balance through sound institutions, religious commitments, and the inculcation of virtue.

Cole’s ruins therefore teach us that rebuilding must be done in accord with nature—with reason, virtue, and self-mastery. As we rebuild, we must be careful to attend to the unwritten constitution as well as the Constitution itself.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. **ART:** How would you describe the composition of *Desolation*? What is Cole trying to prompt us to consider?
2. **FOUNDERS:** Why did Washington and Adams stress the importance of religion and morality?
3. **CIVICS:** What must each generation preserve and renew if we are to keep the soul of a civilization alive and well?



George Washington, portrait by Charles Willson Peale (1776)

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Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. . . . And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

GEORGE WASHINGTON
Farewell Address (1796)

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[W]e have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge, or gallantry, would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.

JOHN ADAMS
To the Officers of the First Brigade of the Third Division of the Militia of Massachusetts, 1798

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It seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.

ALEXANDER HAMILTON
FEDERALIST, NO. 1

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