

## CONTENTS

Introduction	1
<b>PART I. FIRST REPUBLICS</b>	9
1 Simple Governments: One, Few, and Many	11
2 A Military Republic: Sparta	21
3 A Commercial Republic: Carthage	41
<b>PART II. IMPERIAL REPUBLIC</b>	63
4 End of Monarchy: The Foundation of the Roman Republic	67
5 Senate and People: The Shape of the Roman Republic	79
6 New World Order: A Republic to Govern an Empire	104
7 Divisions Born of Affluence: The Gracchi and the Rise of Partisan Warfare	117
8 Appeal to the People: The Growth of Populism and the Military Response	139
9 Too Many Victors: The Fall of the Roman Republic	161

<b>PART III. THE REPUBLICAN THREAD</b>	
<b>ACROSS THE MIDDLE AGES</b>	183
10 Escape to a Watery World: The Foundation of the Republic of Venice	187
11 Medieval Republic, Modern World: The Fall of the Republic of Venice	212
<b>PART IV. THE LESSONS OF FALLEN REPUBLICS</b>	
<b>FOR A NEW AGE</b>	237
12 The Republican Planners: Imagining Republics in the Renaissance and Enlightenment	239
13 Plans into Action: Republicanism in Restoration England and Absolutist France	261
<b>PART V. NEW AMERICAN REPUBLICS ON THE ASHES</b>	
<b>OF THE OLD</b>	279
14 America's Failed Constitutions	281
15 John Adams, Fallen Republics, and the <i>Defence of the</i> <i>Constitutions of Government of the United States of America</i>	295
16 Lessons of Fallen Republics and the Framing of the U.S. Constitution	314
<b>PART VI. CONCLUSIONS</b>	345
17 The Fabric of Republics	347
18 Fallen Republics and America's Third Century	352

CONTENTS xi

*Acknowledgments* 381

*Notes* 383

*Bibliography* 407

*Index* 419

# Introduction

IMAGINE THE SCENE IN London's Grosvenor Square on October 4, 1786.

The American ambassador to Great Britain, Mr. John Adams, is striding briskly across the autumn landscape, his walking stick keeping time with the crunching leaves beneath his feet. In his left hand he clutches the stiff cover of a recently published pamphlet. It is the latter that quickens the pace of the former.

Arriving at his London residence at 9 Grosvenor Square, Mr. Adams removes his hat and overcoat and goes swiftly to his writing desk. There he throws down the pamphlet, settles into his chair, takes a fresh sheet of paper, and thrusts a pen into the nearby inkwell. He is eager not only to refute the errors he had just read in this small tract, but to grind them into dust beneath the lessons of human history. It is a task that would take him two years and three volumes to complete.

The product of Adams's toil is a substantial work virtually forgotten today. Yet in 1787 the *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* was a bombshell, provoking intellectuals and statesmen on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. The small pamphlet that had so stirred up Adams was penned by the British political philosopher Richard Price, who had long supported American independence. In his latest tract, however, Price expressed some misgivings about the decentralized nature of the new American government under the Articles of Confederation. He concluded his comments by inserting a letter from the highly respected French intellectual Anne Robert Jacques Turgot.

The latter strongly criticized the patchwork of American state constitutions, urging Americans to centralize authority in some form of national assembly. Even worse, Turgot disparaged Adams's most cherished handiwork, the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, a blueprint for a mixed-government republic of checks and balances. Turgot believed that pitting branches of government against one another was folly, for it not only institutionalized factionalism but restrained the common people from overcoming the privileges of elites. That is where Adams was determined to prove Turgot wrong.

Over the next two years a torrent of history's republics flowed from Adams's scrawling pen. His project was not simply to prove that the most stable form of free government was one where "power must be opposed to power, and interest to interest," but also to demonstrate where those principles had worked and, crucially, where they had failed. His audience was not Turgot (who had died several years earlier), but included all Europeans, who watched with trepidation as the French monarchy groaned under the threat of a liberal revolution. Yet, Adams's most important audience was across the ocean, in the city of Philadelphia, where the state delegates would soon convene a new Constitutional Convention. Adams wanted the Framers of America's new Constitution to draw lessons from the long history of republics before setting about the business of crafting their own.

The first volume of the *Defence* was published in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia in 1787 with plenty of time for the constitutional delegates to acquire their own copies. The book was well received across the United States, but nowhere more than in the chambers of Independence Hall. And just as he had hoped, Adams's examples and historical lessons were the starting point for the delegates as they debated the new American Constitution. Records of the deliberations attest that Sparta, Rome, and other fallen republics were regularly cited by the Framers as they went about their work.

The delegates of the Constitutional Convention were not unacquainted with history before reading Adams's new treatise. Education in the eighteenth century was grounded above all in the classics of antiquity. As children most of the Framers had labored over Latin and

Greek so that as adults they could read Herodotus, Polybius, Livy, Tacitus, Cicero, and a variety of other ancient authors. Ancient history remained vibrantly alive for them. They debated it in their chambers, spoke about it in their homes, and decorated their government buildings, seals, and currencies with its images and mottos. In the *Defence*, Adams built on that foundation, drawing conclusions about the failures and successes of past republics to help them fashion an enduring new one.

Throughout the *Defence*, Adams insisted that the only sensible choice for the American Constitution was a mixed-government republic. Since antiquity, philosophers and historians had stressed the effectiveness of mixed governments. Polybius maintained that so-called simple governments—monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy—were doomed to repeat an endless cycle of order and disorder, stability and strife, which the ancient Greeks called *anacyclosis*. A mixed-government republic short-circuited this cycle, since it simultaneously contained all three governments of the cycle, pitting each against the other. Monarchy (the executive), aristocracy (the Senate or upper chamber), and democracy (the House of Representatives or lower chamber) cohabitated in the same system with each checking the power of the others. Not content to trust in the good motives of those in power, the mixed-government republic assumed that constituencies would act in their own self-interest, which would naturally check the self-interests of others.

For Adams and his congressional audience, each fall of a historical republic was a cautionary tale for their own ambitious project. Taking these lessons to heart, the Framers implanted mechanisms into their Constitution that they hoped would avoid past catastrophes. In his *Defence*, Adams boasted that had the safeguards that he identified been adopted by the ancient Romans their republic might still survive to that day—seventeen centuries after its fall.

The American Framers believed that the basis for individual virtue worthy of a free people was a classical education, and assumed that this would remain true in the future. It has not. Familiarity with the classics or the history of past republics is a rare thing in the twenty-first century.

Ancient history has become precisely that. With little historical framework, many modern Americans have tended to view the Constitution as a quasi-sacred document, delivered by prophet-like Founders possessed of almost divine genius. When cracks in the republic's edifice appear, they seek in vain for guidance since they believe that the American Republic is the first of its kind. With the decline of history in schools, colleges, and universities, many Americans see every contemporary challenge as something genuinely new. Few are. This book takes the *Defence* as its inspiration, surveying history's most important republics and their fall as a path toward understanding how the Framers of the U.S. Constitution responded to those lessons, and evaluating what dangers remain.

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The word "republic" derives from the Latin *res publica*, meaning "public matters," "public business," or simply "government." It was the term that the ancient Romans used to describe their own system.<sup>1</sup> Aside from an emphasis on the role of the people, there is nothing inherent in the term that implied a specific form of government. For the Romans, it was simply their system as it existed between the age of kings and the age of emperors.<sup>2</sup> Because of its association with that period in Roman history, by the modern era the term *res publica* came to denote political systems that lacked a monarchy and had adopted a "mixed government." In the ancient world, systems of this sort combined the three simple forms of government (monarchy, aristocracy, democracy) into one system of checks and balances. In the modern world, that division was modified into a separation-of-powers system divided into executive, legislative, and judicial branches. More about that development later in the book.

Today almost every state is called a "republic," although the word still retains the implication of self-government without monarchs. In this study we are using a narrower definition of the term, referring exclusively to mixed-government republics with separate branches of authority. That is by no means the only or even the most common definition of "republic," but it has for centuries remained in wide use. When

Benjamin Franklin famously responded to the question “What government have you given to us?,” he replied, “A republic, if you can keep it.” Both he and his audience understood that he meant a mixed-government republic. To avoid confusion, however, we will refer to mixed-government systems frequently, but also use the term “republic” alone to avoid wordiness and the belaboring of the point. To be clear: “Republic” can mean many things in common parlance. Here it refers only to mixed-government systems, the sort common today, including the government of the United States.

Although there were very few mixed-government republics in the premodern world, they began multiplying in the modern age, particularly after the American and French Revolutions of the eighteenth century. And, as we shall see, there were crucial innovations added to the ancient model during the Enlightenment. Since the focus here is on the fall of republics and the lessons that the American Framers drew from them, mixed-government republics that rose or fell after 1787 are not discussed here.

It is, furthermore, not possible or practical to examine every mixed-government republic before the eighteenth century. A great many lasted only a short time, collapsing before they were ever fully established. This was particularly true for the various Italian republics of the Middle Ages, all of which (with the exception of Venice and San Marino) fell into despotism. For this reason, I have adopted what I call the “Century Rule.” Since republics are based on newly constructed systems of laws, customs, and norms, at least a century is necessary to bestow on them the permanence and reverence that constitutes a lasting constitution and a “great republic.” For that reason, although a few words will be said about short-lived republics in Florence and other Italian cities, their decline into tyrannies is not the focus here. San Marino, a unique medieval republic isolated in the mountains, is also ignored, for the simple reason that it has yet to fall. Likewise, other so-called republics had mixed governments but were so loosely organized that they are best understood as leagues of independent states. This latter group includes the Dutch Republic formed in the rebellion against the Hapsburgs, the Swiss Cantons, and the American states under the Articles of

Confederation. Although these are referenced in this study, they are not its subject.

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This book begins with a primer on simple governments in the ancient West, describing their classification by the Greeks and the developments of mixed systems. We then examine in closer detail two of the best known of the ancient mixed-government republics: Sparta and Carthage. Both, like most established mixed-government systems, were extremely stable, weathering extraordinary changes in the world around them.

The Roman Republic is unique. It was not conquered, but collapsed from within. Nevertheless, the Roman state survived the death of its Republic, forming a new imperial government under dynastic emperors that would endure another millennium and a half. Here, we will examine the contours of the Roman Republic and the unusual circumstances that led to its decline and fall. The ancient Romans believed that their Republic was worn down by the effects of the wealth, power, peace, and security that they enjoyed after 146 BC. This in turn led to fierce political divisions among the Romans in a world in which they had no serious external enemies or existential fears. Those divisions manifested themselves in destructive political struggles that strained and ultimately broke the framework of the Roman constitution. In the end, the Roman military and its leaders stepped in and ended the republic, even while claiming to restore it.

After the fall of Rome, one great republic spanned the thousand years between the ancient and modern worlds—the republic of Venice. This republican thread stretched across the centuries from Roman refugees fleeing the barbarian invasions to the creation of the United States of America. We will examine how this unusual republic formed in the islands of a brackish lagoon and explore the factors that led to its fall at the hands of Napoleon.

With the dawn of the Renaissance in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, scholars began to study more closely the ancient past, including

the characteristics of mixed-government republics. The next section of this book surveys the “republican planners” who lived in an age of monarchies but dreamed of forming new republics based on the lessons of past successes and failures. These planners built the conceptual framework of modern republicanism, which resulted first in the English “Glorious Revolution” of 1688 and later in the U.S. Constitution of 1787.

The last section of this book brings together the history and planning of centuries as it was consumed by Americans after their hard-won independence. Boundless optimism led to a flurry of new republican constitutions implemented in the states, while the federal government became a weak confederation that was quickly sidelined. The failure of the Articles of Confederation and the chaos of state governments led to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. There the lessons of fallen republics, the advice of three centuries of republican planners, and John Adams’s *Defence* were critical elements in the deliberations and debates to form a more perfect union. This section closely examines how the threats that brought down past republics were mitigated by the Framers with safeguards placed into the new U.S. Constitution.

Finally, this study ends with a brief discussion of the factors that still threaten the American Republic. Like the Roman Republic in 146 BC, in 1989 the American Republic achieved a milestone in which it no longer had serious, malign, and existential threats after the defeat of communism and the fall of the Soviet Union. As in Rome, the result was deeper political divisions that have eroded the fabric of the republic. These strains on the American Republic are real, but they are also mitigated by the safeguards that the Framers themselves placed into the Constitution. As students of history and receivers of the work of the republican planners, the Framers understood how great and powerful republics could collapse. They endeavored to incorporate those historical lessons into their Constitution.

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As John Adams gathered his manuscript pages, bundling them up for publication, he thought again of his compatriots across the ocean who

were beginning so important a project. His survey of history's fallen republics would be crucial for their deliberations, he believed. They must come to grips with the flaws in each, carefully avoiding them in their new government. He stopped for a moment, reached again for his pen, and added one final note: "But it is of great importance to begin well. Misarrangements now made will have great, extensive, and distant consequences. And we are now employed, how little so ever we may think of it, in making establishments which will affect the happiness of a hundred million inhabitants at a time in a period not very distant."<sup>3</sup> In this time, not so very distant, we live with the consequences of that grand project. It is the purpose of this book to return to those fallen republics once again, pondering their flaws, and seeking ways to avoid their fates.

## INDEX

- absolutism, 245, 246, 282; Adams on, 295;  
defense of, 267
- Absolutist monarchies, 278
- Acerbas: Dido and, 42–44; Pygmalion and,  
42–43
- Achaean League, 37, 38–39, 318, 323
- Adams, John: in Amsterdam, 297–98;  
*Defence of the Constitutions of Government  
of the United States of America*, 1–4, 7,  
19, 183, 315, 317, 325, 338, 352, 380; Dolfin  
and, 287; in London, 298–99; Madison  
and, 336; Massachusetts state constitu-  
tion, 288; on Netherlands, 283; para-  
phrasing Polybius in his *Defence*, 19–20;  
in Paris, 295–97; on republic project,  
7–8; on Roman Republic, 363; Rome  
and the *Defence*, 306–11; state constitu-  
tions, 285; on translation, 292. See also  
*Defence of the Constitutions of Govern-  
ment of the United States of America*  
(Adams)
- Adams, John Quincy, Harvard Commence-  
ment Address (1787), 284
- Adherbal, 141–44
- adirim, Carthaginian aristocratic branch,  
46–47, 62
- Aeneas, Virgil on, 44, 67–68
- Aeneid* (Virgil), 42
- Agathocles, Carthage and, 53
- Agis IV (King), 34–36
- agoge, Spartan education, 24–25, 40
- Ajax* (Sophocles), 355
- Albinus, Postumius, Jugurtha and, 146
- Alexander the Great, 33–34, 111, 112, 165;  
Carthage and, 52–53
- Alexius IV (Emperor), 208
- Alien and Sedition acts, 343
- America. See United States
- American Constitution (1787), 2, 4, 7, 280,  
287; Framers of, 238, 267, 269, 279, 293,  
326; model for, 278; perils of prosperity,  
354–55; ratification of, 342; Soderini on,  
287–88; unified executive, 330–31
- American Republic, 7; Adams and, 313;  
populism and tyranny, 362–66; remedies  
for an ailing republic, 377–80; symptoms  
of an ailing republic, 375–77
- Amphictyonic League, 323, 324, 341
- Amsterdam, Adams in, 297–98
- anacyclosis, Polybius on “repeating cycle,”  
18, 19
- Anafesto, Paoluccio (doge), 191
- ancient Greek governments, 13–14
- Ancient History* (Rollin), 323, 341
- ancient mixed-government republics, 64
- ancient republics, fall of, 327
- Andronicus I (Emperor), 207
- Annius, Titus, 126
- Anti-Federalists, 289, 290
- Antigonus III (Seleucid King), 37, 60, 112
- Antonius, M., Marius and, 151
- Antony, Mark: assassination of Caesar, 173;  
Caesar and, 171–72; Cleopatra and,  
177–78; Octavian and, 40, 174–77;  
Octavian versus, 177–79
- Antyllus, Gaius, 136

- Apollo, 67  
Apollo's oracles, Lycurgus seeking advice of, 22  
*Apologia* (Sidney), 270  
aristocracy, 15; ducal court, 200; republic, 347; rule by few, 17; Senate, 77; wise men, 19  
Aristotle, 304; on Carthage, 42; on Carthaginian government, 46; on education, 379; on government, 253; on mixed-government republics, 238; on origin of civilization, 63; Plato's student, 16–18; polity, 17–18; Polybius and, 16; on Sparta's Ephors, 29  
Arizona State University, 379  
Artaxerxes II (King), 32  
Artemis Orthia, altar of, 25  
Articles of Confederation, 5–6, 7, 314; failure of, 281–84, 336  
Ascanius, first king of Alba Longa, 68  
assemblies, Roman Republic, 86–91  
Athenian Empire, 31  
Athens, Peloponnesian War, 14  
Attalus (King), 125  
Attila the Hun, 187, 188, 233  
auctoritas, Romans, 91  
auguries: seriousness of, for Romans, 87–88; “watching birds,” 85  
Augustus: Caesar and, 337, 364; fall of Roman Republic, 179–81, 371  
  
Baal (god), 43; child sacrifice, 48  
Bacon, Francis, *The New Atlantis*, 251  
Badian, Ernst, on conquest as history's norm, 105  
Badoer, Badoero, 219–20  
Barcids, Carthage and, 54–56, 59  
Barlow, Joel: on *Defence* (Adams), 302; state constitutions, 285  
Battle of Cannae, 57  
Battle of Cnidus, 32  
Battle of Crimissus, 52  
Battle of Nemea, 32  
  
Battle of Thermopylae, 30  
Battle of Zama, 59, 111  
Baxter, Richard, on Harrington, 262  
Berengar (King of Italy), 197  
Bestia, Lucius Calpurnius: exile of, 146; leading army to Numidia, 145  
Biden, Hunter, investigation of, 368  
Biden, Joe: election of, 365; son Hunter, 368; Supreme Court and, 364; Trump and, 369  
Bill of Rights of 1689, 272  
Black Lives Matter riots, 373  
Boccanegra, Guglielmo, Genoa and, 184  
*Bocche di Leone* (Lion's Mouth), 221, 228  
Bodin, Jean: republican theorist in France, 244–45; sovereignty, 282  
bodyguards, 166; paramilitary, 182  
Bomilcar, Carthage and, 53–54  
Bonaparte, Napoleon, fall of Venice, 230–34  
Book of Gold, Venice, 217  
Book of Silver, Venice, 217  
Brennus, Gauls and, 79  
*Britannia and Rawleigh* (poem), 263–64  
Brutus, Marcus, Cassius and, 172–74, 175–77  
Brutus Junius, Lucius, Roman leader, 74  
Bush, George W., decision of U.S. Supreme Court, 358  
Byzantine Empire, 192, 201, 209; Venice and, 205–9  
  
Caesar, Julius, 162, 332; Antony and, 171–72; assassination of, 172–73; assassins, 176; Cleopatra and, 170, 171; Crassus and, 166–67; Curia Iulia, 93; dictatorship of, 169–72; fall of Roman Republic, 252; Marius and, 337; political enemies, 371; prosecutorial politics, 366; Roman civil war, 40; Rubicon River, 167–69  
Calendario, Filippo (doge), 224–25  
Camillus, Servian Wall and, 80–81  
Candiano, Pietro III (doge), 196–98  
*Candide* (Voltaire), 229  
Capello, Antonio, Carmichael and, 286–87  
Carmichael, William, Capello and, 286–87

- Carolingian Empire, 194
- Carthage, 64, 349; child sacrifice in, 48–49; culture of commerce, 44–46; Dido and foundation of, 41–44, 67; expansion of republic, 49–56, 104; fall of republic, 12, 60–62; First Punic War, 54, 108; government of, 17, 18; Marius' flight to, 140–41; premodern republic, 352; republic under Rome, 59–60; Rome and, 68, 107–11; Second Punic War, 57–58, 109; Semitic name and meaning, 42; shape of republic, 46–48; struggle with Rome, 56–59
- Carthaginians, attacks on, 11
- Carthalo, Carthage, 49–50
- Cassius Longinus, Brutus and, 172–74, 175–77
- Catherine (Queen of England), 263, 264
- Catholic church, 189–91; England and, 263; France, 273; Protestant Reformation and, 244
- Catholicism, 262; England and, 263–65
- Cato, opposing Caesar, 167, 168
- Cato the Elder: Carthage and, 61; “Carthago delenda est,” 11; critic of Roman society, 114
- C. Dille publishers, Adams and, 301, 352
- “Century Rule,” 5, 184
- Charilaus, birth of, 22
- Charles I (King of England), 225; Cromwell and, 334; execution of, 250, 262; republican government, 245–46
- Charles II (King of England), 261–62; Louis XIV and, 262–63
- Charles IV (Emperor), 222
- child sacrifice, Carthaginian culture, 48–49
- China, threat of, 378
- Christopher of Grado (Patriarch), 191
- Chronicon Altinate*, 190
- Cicero, 3, 19, 174, 304, 315; on ancestors of Romans, 86; Cassius and, 173; death of, 177; education of young men, 290; guide of antiquity, 302; on mixed-government republics, 238; Octavian and, 174–75; on Roman mixed-government republic, 77; on Rome's republic, 245; on Senate of Roman Republic, 92; source of republican system, 84; as tourist in Sparta, 39–40
- Cincinnatus, Lucius Quinctius, dictator in story of, 98–99
- Cinna, L. Cornelius: Marius and, 156–58; Sulla and, 156
- citizenship, politics of, 150–52
- civics, teaching American children, 360
- civilian control, concept of, 332
- Civitas Institute, 379
- Claudius Pulcher, Appius, Tiberias and, 121
- Claypole, Elizabeth, on Harrington's manuscript, 251
- Cleitarchus, on Plato, 48
- Clement V (Pope), 218
- Cleombrotus (King of Sparta), 35
- Cleomenes (King of Sparta), 36–37
- Cleopatra (Queen of Egypt): Antony and, 177–78; Caesar and, 170, 171
- Clinton, Bill, impeachment of, 369
- Clinton, Hillary, Trump and, 367
- Cold War, 357
- College of the Vestal Virgins, 178
- College of William and Mary, 291
- comitia centuriata: electing consuls and praetors, 100–101; Roman members of, 87; Rome, 89–91
- comitia curiata, Rome and, 70–72
- comitia tributa (Assembly of the Tribes), Rome, 88–89, 90
- commercial republic. *See* Carthage
- Common-Wealth of Oceana, The* (Harrington), 251–52, 257
- communes, 184
- communism, collapse of, 356–57
- concilium plebis (Council of the Plebeians), Rome, 89
- Connecticut Compromise, 324
- Conservative Whigs, 316

- Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline* (Montesquieu), 274, 276, 277
- consilium sapientes*, Council of the Wise, 200
- Constantine (Emperor), 189; conversion to Christianity, 40
- Constitutional Convention (1787), 2, 7, 314; debates at, 311; Philadelphia, 299
- Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2, 288, 296, 301, 312, 317, 319
- Continental Army, Revolutionary War, 328
- Continental Congress, 290
- Council of Ten: reform of, 227–28; Republic of Venice, 220–21, 225–26, 305, 325
- Council of the Wise, *consilium sapientes*, 200
- Coxe, Tench, copy of *Defence* (Adams) to, 301
- Crassus, Marcus Licinius, Pompey and, 163, 166–67
- Crete, government of, 17
- Cromwell, Oliver: Charles I (King) and, 334; death of, 258, 261–62; on Harrington’s manuscript, 251; as Megaletor, 256–57; Rump Parliament and, 246–47
- Cromwell, Richard, 257; Parliament of, 258–59
- “Cronus” (god), Diodorus on statue, 48
- Curia Hostilia, Senate house, 92
- Curia Iulia, Senate house, 93
- cursus honorum* process, Roman Republic, 95–96
- Dandolo, Enrico (doge), 207–8
- Dandolo, Giovanni (doge), 212, 223
- Dandolo, Vitale, 201
- Decemvirs of Rome, 330
- Decimus, 175
- Declaration of Independence, 281, 290, 298; Locke and, 279
- Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* (Adams), 1–4, 7, 19, 183, 315, 317, 325, 338, 352, 380; audience of, 300–304; first volume, 303; Framers of the Constitution, 313; Rome and, 306–11; two more volumes of, 311–13; Venice and, 304–6
- Delaware, Dickinson of, 340–41
- Delian League, 14, 31, 334
- democracy, 15; popular assemblies, 77; republic, 347; Roman assemblies, 87; rule by many, 17
- Deus nobis haec otia fecit*, Virgil’s First Eclogue, 291
- de Vattel, Emerich, sovereignty, 283
- Dialogue on the Government of Florence* (Guicciardini), 243
- Dickinson, John: on fall of ancient republics, 339; on Madison’s argument, 340–41
- dictator, magistrate, 98
- Dictator for Life, Caesar elected, 171
- Dido: Acerbas and, 42–44; foundation of Carthage, 41–44
- Diodorus of Sicily: on “Cronus,” 48; on loss of fear, 356
- Dionysius of Halicarnassus, source of republican system, 84
- Discourses concerning Government* (Sidney), 267, 269, 270
- Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius* (Machiavelli), 240, 242, 243, 252
- doge(s): chaos and, in Venice, 195–99; election of, 209–11; executive, 200; Venetian people and, 191–94. *See also* Republic of Venice (foundation of)
- Dolfin, Daniele, meeting with Americans, 286–87
- Drusus, M. Livius: citizenship and immigration, 151; opposing populist agenda, 134–36
- ducal court, aristocracy, 200
- Duke of Monmouth, conspirator, 269
- Dutch Republic, 237, 273, 282, 304, 324; Adams and, 297–98
- Earl of Essex, conspirator, 269
- education: eighteenth century, 2–3; Sparta, 24–26
- Egypt, 178, 347

- England: Catholicism and, 263–65; civil war and republic planning, 245–48; Glorious Revolution of 1688, 271–73, 274; King and opposition, 262–65; Locke (John), 270–71; Neville (Henry), 265–67; republican planners, 261–62; republic of, 238; Sidney (Algernon), 267–70
- Enlightened Despotisms, 278
- Enlightenment: republican planners, 353; thinkers, 229
- Epaminondas, Theban leader, 32
- Ephors: abolition of, 36; decisions in Sparta, 28–30, 34–36
- Eshmuniaton, Carthage, 50–51
- Esper, Mark, Trump and, 373–74
- Exarch Isaac, 191
- Exclusion Bill, 269
- executive, tyranny of the, 327–36
- Executive Magistracy, 329, 330
- Fabius Maximus Cunctator (“the Delayer”), 110, 111
- factionalism, 343
- Falier, Marino (doge), 222–26; Adams on conspiracy, 305
- fasces*, symbolism of, 71
- Father of the Country, Caesar title, 170, 176
- fear, republics and, 355–58, 378
- Federalist*: no. 10, 361; no. 18, 19, 20, 318; no. 63, 340; no. 70, 330, 333–34
- Fields of Mourning, 67
- Filmer, Robert: on Hunton’s treatise, 248; *Patriarcha*, 267, 270
- First Crusade, Genoa and, 184
- First Punic War: campaigns in Sicily, 100; Carthage and, 54, 108; Publius Claudius and, 88; Romans as maritime power, 108
- First Triumvirate, Pompey and, 165–67
- Flaccus, L. Velarius: Marius and, 151; Sulla and, 159
- Florence: republican experiment, 239; Savonarola urging mixed-government republic, 239
- Florentine Republic, 239; Machiavelli, 240–44
- Floyd, George, murder of, 364
- Foscarini, Antonio, 228
- Founders, Framers of the Constitution, 279
- Fourth Crusade, 208
- Framers, of the American Constitution, 3–4, 20, 238, 267, 269, 279, 293, 327, 342, 343; education of children of, 2–3
- France: Absolute Monarchy, 273; Adams in Paris, 295–97; Montesquieu, 273–78; theorist Bodin, 244–45
- Francis II (Emperor), 232
- Franklin, Benjamin, 304; Adams and, 296–97, 298; copy of *Defence* (Adams) to, 301; Dolfin and, 286, 287; King Louis XVI and, 286; on republic, 5; state constitutions, 285; Washington and, 314
- French Revolution, 5, 230, 234; Louis XVI, 250
- Fukuyama, Francis, 354
- Fulvius Flaccus: Gaius Gracchus and, 133–37; Tiberius and, 128
- Fulvius Laccus, Land Commission, 131
- Gabinus, Aulus, Pompey and, 164
- Galbaio, Giovanni (doge), 193
- Galbaio, Maurizio (doge), 193
- Galbaio, Maurizio II (doge), 193
- Gallic Sack, 79, 80, 143; aftermath of, 105
- Gallic Wars* (Caesar), 290
- Gaulo, Galla (doge), 192
- Gauls, 105; consul fighting in northern Italy, 100; Romans and Etruscans fearing, 79–82; warlord Brennus and, 79
- George III (King of England), Adams and, 298
- Gerousia, council of elders in Sparta, 24, 27–29, 47
- Gisco, Carthage and, 52, 54
- Glorious Revolution of 1688, 7, 237; England, 271–73, 274
- Gorbachev, Mikhail, on depriving America an enemy, 357

- Gore, Al, Clinton and, 369  
governments, 63–64; Greeks and, 12–18  
Gracchus, Gaius: death of, 136–38, 143, 376;  
Fulvius Flaccus and, 133–36; Land  
Commission, 131  
Gracchus, Tiberius Sempronius, 117–19, 363;  
Adams on, 310; Land Bill, 121–23; Land  
Commission, 362; murder of, 129–30,  
376; partisan warfare, 127–30; political  
divisions, 132; Roman Republic, 309;  
Scipio Aemilianus and, 120–21, 123  
Gradenigo, Pietro (doge), 213–14, 217, 218–20  
Graham, Lindsey, Trump and, 374  
Grain Law, 138; *lex frumentaria*, 133–34  
Grand Tourists, England, 273  
Great Council: Milton's republic on, 259–60;  
Republic of Venice, 209–10, 213–17,  
219–21, 222–24, 232, 234, 235, 305–6, 350  
great republics: reverence, 351; term, 348  
Greeks, governments and, 12–18  
Grotius, Hugo, sovereignty, 283  
Guicciardini, Francesco, analysis of  
governments, 243–44  
  
Hall and Sellers, *Defence* publisher, 301  
ham, Carthaginian popular assembly, 47  
Hamilcar, Carthage and, 53, 54–55, 58  
Hamilton, Alexander: American bicameral  
system, 338; on American society, 339–40;  
*Federalist* no. 1, 289; *Federalist* no. 70, 330,  
333–34; ratification of Constitution, 337;  
on Roman Republic, 363; on seeking  
models of simple ages, 315; on senate in  
commonwealth, 316  
Hannibal: Carthage and, 55, 56–59, 59–60,  
109–11; Carthaginians and, 11; Scipio and,  
58–59, 111, 112  
Hanno, Carthage, 50–53  
Harrington, James, 261, 304; on Hobbes and  
Machiavelli, 251; mixed-government  
republics, 250–57; Oceana, 251–52, 254–57;  
on republics, 349; Sidney and, 268  
Harringtonians, Rota Club, 260, 265–66  
*Hartford Courant* (newspaper), 284  
Harvard Commencement Address,  
Adams, 284  
Hasdrubal, Carthage and, 55, 56, 58  
helots, Sparta, 24  
Henry, Patrick, on American body politic, 286  
Heracles, 23  
Heraclius (Emperor), 191, 192  
Herodotus, 3; investigating Greek and  
non-Greek governments, 14  
Hiempsal, Jugurtha and, 141–42  
Hiero (Greek King of Syracuse), 108  
*Histoire du gouvernement de Venise*  
(Houssaie), 229  
*History of England* (Hume), 325  
Hobbes, Thomas: critic of republicanism,  
249–50; on human life, 64; Locke and,  
270–71; Sidney and, 267–68; sovereignty,  
282  
Holy Land, 192  
Homo sapiens, 63, 347  
homosexual relationships, Sparta, 25  
Hooper, William, North Carolina  
convention, 325–26  
Hosius (bishop of Sparta), 40  
Houssaie, Amelot de la, on Venice's decline,  
229  
Hume, David, 304; on history of England,  
325; on ideal commonwealth, 319  
Hunton, Philip, republican planner, 247–48  
  
Ides of March, Roman Republic and, 172–75  
immigration politics, Rome, 133–36, 150–52  
*Impartial Trimmer, The* (poem), 264  
Imperator, Caesar title, 170  
*imperium* (authority to command troops),  
magistrates, 96, 97, 99  
*intercessio*, between victim and magistrate, 102  
Ipatò, Orso (doge), 191, 192  
Ipatò, Teodato, son of doge Orso, 192  
Isarello, Bertuccio (doge), 223–25  
Islamist attack of 9/11, 358  
Isocrates, on Carthage, 42

- Jackson, Andrew, 363  
James (Duke of York), 263, 264–65, 269  
James II (King of England), 271–72  
January 6, as “insurrection,” 365  
Jay, John: Adams and, 298; copy of *Defence* (Adams) to, 301; state constitutions, 285  
Jefferson, Thomas: American revolutionary, 271; College of William and Mary, 291; on Congress, 283; Dolfin and, 287; framers of the Constitution, 313; members in Virginia, 317; *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 336; on translation, 292  
Johnson, Andrew, impeachment of, 369  
John XIII (Pope), 198–99  
Jugurtha: Adherbal and, 141–44; Hiempsal and, 141–42; massacring Romans, 144–45; Numidian prince, 141; party politics and, 141–46; ridding himself of cousins, 141–44; Scipio Aemilianus and, 142  
Jugurthine War, 145, 158  
Jupiter, 67  
Justin: on Carthage, 42, 51; Carthaginian government, 46  
  
King, Martin Luther, Jr., assassination of, 373  
King, Rodney, verdict violence, 373  
King’s Peace, 32  
  
Land Bill: Gracchus, 310; Tiberias, 121–23  
Land Commission, 121, 125, 130–32, 138, 255, 362  
*La Serenissima* (Most Serene), Venice, 184  
Latin League, 105  
Latinus (King of the Latins), 68  
Lavinia, Aeneas and, 68  
*Law of Nations* (de Vattel), 283  
League of Free Laconians, 39  
Lee, Arthur, Adams and, 296–97  
Lee, Richard Henry, on English Constitution, 286  
Leonidas (King of Sparta), 30, 36  
Leonidas II (King of Sparta), 34  
  
Lepidus, Marcus Aemilius: Antony and, 174, 176; Pompey and, 162  
*Leviathan* (Hobbes), 249  
*lex Annalis*, 149  
*lex curiata*, 70  
*lex frumentaria*, Grain Law, 133–34  
*lex Gabinia*, 164  
*lex Hortensia*, 83, 102  
*lex Licinia Mucia*, 151  
*lex Rubria*, 135, 136  
*lex Valeria*, 83  
Liberators, 175; Antony inflaming people against, 173–74; assassination of Caesar, 172–73; Caesar title, 170  
Liberty Tree, 234  
Lion’s Mouth, 305, 306; *Bocche di Leone*, 221  
Livy, 3, 304, 315; on Carthage, 42, 56, 60–61; Carthaginian republic, 59; on decline of Roman republic, 113; on government, 253; on Machiavelli’s *Discourse*, 240; on Manlius, 82; Roman military leaders, 72; Roman Republic, 269; source of republican system, 84; on story of Cincinnatus, 98–99  
Locke, John, 302, 304; Declaration of Independence and, 279; republican planner in England, 270–71  
London, Adams in, 298–99  
Lord Archon, Oceana, 256–57  
Louis XIV (King of France), Charles II and, 262–63  
Louis XVI (King of France), 225; Adams and, 295, 297; Franklin and, 286  
Lucanians, Romans and, 106  
Lucius Tarquinius (King of Rome), 71, 72  
Lucretia: Collatinus and, 73–74; violation by Sextus, 73–74  
Lupercalia, festival, 171, 172  
*lustrum*, celebration, 101  
Lycurgus, 84, 280; Sparta, 70; Spartan Constitution and, 21–23, 39; Sparta’s artificial creation, 241  
Lysander (Admiral), victory of, 31

- Machiavelli, Niccolò, 304, 327; Florentine Republic, 240–44; Harrington on, 252–53, 254; Sidney and, 268  
“Machiavellian moment,” 240, 280  
McKean, Thomas, copy of *Defence* (Adams) to, 301  
Madison, James: Adams and, 336; on American society, 339–40; on discretionary powers of Executive Magistrate, 329; federal and state governments, 321; *Federalist* no. 14, 289–90; *Federalist* no. 63, 340; *Federalist* nos. 18, 19, and 20, 318; Jefferson and, 317–18; opening of Constitutional Convention, 320; on representation, 338; on standing army, 334–35; state governments, 288; unity of Framers, 316; on Venice, 325; on veteran legions of Rome, 28; Virginia Plan, 323  
*magister equitum* (master of the horse), 98  
magistrates: promagistrates, 99; Roman Republic, 95–102; seeking advice of Senate, 93, 96  
Magna Carta, England, 245, 247  
Mago, Carthage, 47, 50  
Magonids, 50  
Mancinus, Gaius Hostilius, Tiberius and, 118, 125  
Manin, Lodovico (doge), 234  
Manlius, Marcus: assemblies and, 87; execution of, 82–83; fear of tyrants and, 79–82  
Manuel Commenus (Emperor), 200–202  
Marcus Tullius Cicero, Roman senator and jurist, 70  
Marius, Gaius, 332, 362, 374; Caesar and, 337; flight to Carthage, 140–41; Metallus and, 146–48; politics of immigration and citizenship, 150–52; return of, 156–58; rise of, 146–50; Sulla and, 149, 152, 165, 259, 310; Sulpicius hailing as hero, 153–54  
Martin, Luther, 324, 341  
Marvell, Andrew, English poetry, 264  
Masinissa of Numidia, Carthage and, 61, 141  
Mason, George, on standing army, 328  
Massachusetts Constitution (1780), 288, 296, 311, 317  
Massiva, Jugurtha and, 146  
Mastropiero, Orio (doge), 201, 206–7  
Mazeus, Carthage, 49–51  
Megaletor, Olphaus, leader in Oceana, 256  
Melian Dialogue, Thucydides’s, 14  
Melqart (god), 42, 49  
Menelaus, king of Sparta, 355  
Merula, L. Cornelius, replacing Cinna, 156–57  
Metellus, Q. Caecilius: Jugurthine War, 146; Marius and, 146–48  
Michiel, Vitale (doge), 201–4  
Michiel, Vitale II (doge), 205, 206  
Micipsa (King), Jugurtha and sons of, 141  
Middle Ages, Italian republics of, 5  
military politicization: fall of republics, 370–75; Sulla and, 152–56, 371, 372, 374  
military republic. *See* Sparta  
Milley, Mark, Trump and, 374  
Milton, John, 261; on mixed-government republics, 257–60; Sidney and, 268  
Mithridates (King of Pontus), 152–53  
Mithridatic Wars, 366  
mixed-government republic(s), 120, 124, 347; balance of struggles, 349–51; Bodin on, 244–45; foundations of new republic, 315–22; Harrington on, 250–57; Hobbes on, 249–50; Milton, 257–60; prosecutorial politics, 366–70; republican reverence, 348–49  
mixed monarchy: Hunton on, 247; Sheringham on, 248  
monarchy: consuls and magistrates, 77; republic, 347; rule by one, 17  
Monck, George, Rump Parliament and, 258–59  
Monegario, Domenico (doge), 192  
Mons Sacer, 75, 77  
Montagu, Lady Mary Wortley, 292  
Montague, Edward W., 292–93

- Montesquieu, 304; Adams and, 296;  
American Framers, 353; republican  
government, 282, 289–90; republican  
planner in France, 273–78; on Roman  
Republic, 274–77; on state governments,  
289; on tyranny of the executive, 332–33
- Moore, John, on strength of a constitution,  
229
- More, Thomas, *Utopia*, 251
- Morris, Robert, Franklin and, 314
- mos maiorum*, Romans “way of our  
ancestors,” 86
- Mouritsen, Henrik, on Social War, 152
- Nabis (King of Sparta), 37–38
- Napoleon, and the fall of Venice, 6, 231–34
- Nascia, Tiberius and, 129–30
- National Guard, Trump and, 374
- Neal, Richard, on tax returns of Trump, 368
- Nedham, Marchamont, on constitution of a  
commonwealth, 312
- Neville, Henry, Harringtonian in England,  
265–67
- New Jersey Plan, Paterson’s, 323, 329
- New York Journal*, 289
- 9/11 attack, 358, 378
- Nixon, Richard, resignation of, 369
- North Carolina, Hooper to convention,  
325–26
- Nostradamus’ Prophecy* (Marvell), 264
- Notes on Ancient and Modern Confederacies*  
(Madison), 318
- Notes on the State of Virginia* (Jefferson), 336
- Numantine treaty, Scipio Aemilianus  
and, 123
- Numa Pompilius, Rome and, 70
- Numitor (king of Alba Longa), 68
- Observations on the Importance of the Ameri-  
can Revolution and the Means of Making it  
a Benefit to the World* (Price), 300
- Oceana, Harrington’s, 251–52, 254, 255–57,  
260
- Oceana and Britannia* (Marvell), 264
- Octavian: Antony and, 174–77; Antony  
versus, 177–79; fall of Roman Republic,  
179–80; Restoration of the Republic, 180;  
war against Marc Antony, 40
- Octavius, Cn.: Sulla and, 156; threatening  
Cinna and Marius, 156–58
- Octavius, Gaius, Antony and, 173–74
- Octavius, Marcus: Land Bill and, 123, 124;  
Tiberius and, 126–27
- Ohio State University, 379
- oligarchy, rule by few, 17
- On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic*  
(Wordsworth), 235
- Opimius: exile of, 146; repeal of lex  
Rubria, 136
- Optimates: Jugurtha and, 144–46; Marius  
and, 147, 148; partisan warfare of Populares  
and, 127–30, 133–35, 143, 144–46; Pompey  
and, 167; Populares and, 162, 174, 362;  
Sulpicius and, 153
- Orseolo, Pietro (doge), 198–99
- Otto I (King of Germany), 197
- Otto II (King of Germany), 198
- Ottoman Empire, 228
- Ovid, education of young men, 290
- Papirius Carbo, Land Commission, 131
- Paradise Lost* (Milton), 257
- Paris, Adams in, 295–97
- Partecipazio, Agnello (doge), 195, 199
- Partecipazio, Orso I (doge), 196
- partisan warfare, Populares and Optimates,  
127–30
- Paterson, William: anti-Federalists, 323;  
Articles of Confederation, 323; New  
Jersey Plan, 323, 329
- Patriarcha* (Filmer), 267, 270
- Paul (Bishop), 190–91
- pax deorum* (peace of the gods), 85
- Pearl Harbor attack, 358, 378
- Peloponnesian League, 32
- Peloponnesian War, 31, 32; Thucydides, 14

- Pelosi, Nancy, on impeachment of Trump, 369–70
- Pence, Mike, Biden election, 365
- Pennsylvania Mercury* (newspaper), 301
- people, tyranny of the, 336–43
- Pepin (“king of the Lombards”), 194
- Pepin the Short, 193–94
- Persian Empire, 30
- Persian Wars, 30, 33
- Pesaro, Francesco, fall of Venice, 231
- Petrarch, on Falier in Venice, 226
- Pew Research Center, 361, 373
- Philadelphia: delegates in, 315; federal convention in, 320; Framers writing U.S. Constitution, 352
- Philip II (Macedon), 32–33, 52, 111
- Pinckney, Charles, South Carolina, 339
- piracy, Pompey’s campaign against, 164–65
- Plato, 304; Cleitarchus on, 48; ideal state, 15–17; on origin of civilization, 63; on rise and fall of governments, 14–17; ruling elite in imagined government, 15; on Sparta’s Ephors, 29; student Aristotle, 16–18
- Plato redivivus* (Neville), 265–67, 302
- Pliny the Elder, 51, 114–15
- Plutarch: on child sacrifice, 48; education of young men, 290; on murder of Tiberius Gracchus, 130; Spartan history, 23; on Spartans, 355; on Spartans and Temple of Fear, 104; on Tiberius, 129; on Tiberius and Octavius, 124
- Pocock, J. G. A., “Machiavellian Moment,” 240, 280
- Polani, Pietro (doge), 200
- Politics* (Aristotle), 16, 41
- polity: Aristotle, 17; definition, 17; rule by many, 17
- Polybius: Adams paraphrasing, in his *Defence*, 19–20; antithesis of mixed-government republic, 285; Aristotle and, 16; balancing desires of people and executive, 3, 304, 315, 316; on branches of government, 296; on Carthage, 45; on Carthaginian government, 46; cycle of governments, 18–20, 77, 124, 309; education of young men, 290; guide of antiquity, 302, 303; Harrington on, 252; influence on Montesquieu, 276–77; on Machiavelli’s *Discourse*, 241; on mixed-government republics, 238; on origin of civilization, 63; on Roman culture, 114–15; on Roman mixed-government republic, 77; on Rome’s republic, 20, 245, 307; Scipio Aemilianus and, 18, 62, 116; Scipio and, 12, 62; on Senate of Roman Republic, 91–92; source of republican system, 84; on Sparta’s Ephors, 29
- Polydectes (King of Sparta), 21; birth of child Charilaus, 21–22
- Pompeius, Gnaeus (Pompey): Caesar and, 170; Crassus and, 163, 166–67; First Triumvirate, 165–67; military and, 372; rise of, 162–65
- Pompeius Rufus, Quintus, Sulla and, 155
- Populares, 136; Caesar and, 167; Jugurtha and, 145–46, 148; Marius and, 147, 148; Optimates and, 162, 174, 362; partisan warfare of Optimates and, 127–30, 133–35, 143, 144–46; Sulpicius and, 153
- populism: rise of, in Rome, 120–24; tyranny and, 362–66
- Posse Comitatus Act of 1878, 373
- president, United States, 331–36
- Price, Richard, 304; Adams and, 300, 301; supporting American independence, 1, 300
- Prince, The* (Machiavelli), 240
- princeps senatus*, leader of Senate, 93
- “proconsular imperium,” rise of, 58
- prorogare*, extension of imperium, 100
- provincia* (province), term, 108
- Publius Claudius Pulcher, First Punic War, 88
- Publius Satyrius, murder of Tiberius and, 129–30
- Putin’s Russia, 378
- Pygmalion, Acerbas and, 42–43
- Pyrrhus (King of Epirus), commanding army, 106–7

- Qart-hadasht: Semitic name for Carthage, 42. *See also* Carthage
- Querini, Giacomo, 219
- Querini, Marco, Venetian commander, 218–20
- Quintus Fabius, Carthage and, 56–57
- rab (chiefs), Carthage, 47–48
- Raleigh, Sir Walter, poem on, 263–64
- Ramsay, David, copy of *Defence* (Adams) to, 301
- Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth, The* (Milton), 259
- Red Scare, 378
- Reflections on the Rise and Fall of the Ancient Republics* (Montagu), 292, 293
- Reign of Terror, France, 230
- religious nature, Roman Republic, 85–86
- Remus, Romulus and, 68–69
- Renaissance, 6
- republic(s): ancient mixed-government, 64; common definition, 4–5; fear and, 355–58, 378; forms of government, 347; lessons of past and present, 323–27; Montagu on, 293–94; politicization of military, 370–75; reverence and, 348–49, 358–62, 379–80; Spartan, 26–30; studying mixed-government, 6–7; term, 5; word, 4
- Republic* (Cicero), 84
- Republic, The* (Plato), 14
- Republic of the Seven United Netherlands, 237. *See also* Dutch Republic
- Republic of Venice, 45, 183, 183–85, 204, 278; Council of Ten, 220–21, 225–26, 305, 325; fall of, 228–35; Great Council, 213–17, 219–21, 232, 234, 235, 305–6, 350
- Republic of Venice (fall of), 228–35; failed coup and its aftermath, 221–26; reform of the Ten, 227–28; Serrata reform, 212–16; shadow of tyranny, 218–21; shape of, 216–18
- Republic of Venice (foundation of): birth of city of Venice, 194–95; chaos and doges, 195–99; doge and people, 191–94; election of doges, 209–11; Emperor Manuel Commenus, 200–202; gaining Byzantine Empire, 205–9; Roman refugees, 188–91; war and reform of republic, 199–205
- republic planners, 294; American Framers, 353; Bodin, 244–45; English Civil war and, 245–48; Harrington, 250–57; Hobbes, 249–50; Hunton, 247–48; Locke, 270–71; Machiavelli, 240–44; Milton, 257–60; Montesquieu, 273–78; Neville, 265–67; Sidney, 267–70
- res publica*, 4, 64
- Restoration of the Republic, Octavian, 180
- reverence, republics and, 379–80
- Right Constitution of a Commonwealth, The* (Nedham), 312
- Roberts, John, on lack of civics education, 360
- Robespierre, Maximilien, execution of, 230
- Rollin, Charles (*Ancient History*), 292, 315, 323, 341
- Roman Empire, 351; Augustus, 187; expansion of, 275; fall of, 208; Greece and, 116; invasions of, 192
- Roman Forum, 75, 122, 350
- Roman Republic, 6, 7, 12, 20, 31, 64; Adams's description of, 312; American citizens looking to, 291; assemblies, 86–91; Carthage and, 52; citizen armies, 328; comitia centuriata, 75; comitia tributa (Assembly of the Tribes), 88–89; concepts of, 84–86; *concilium plebis* (popular assembly), 76; consuls, 75; creation of the *tribuni plebis*, 75–76; decline of, 104; Delian League, 334; divisiveness of, 138; forging the, 75–78; magistrates, 95–102; Marcus Manlius and the fear of tyrants, 79–82; Montesquieu on, 274–77; *mos maiorum* (way of our ancestors), 86; Polybius on, 20; *provocatio ad populum* (appeal to the people), 75; religious nature of government, 85–86; Senate as aristocratic element, 91–95, 122; shape of, 102–3; Sparta and, 31; Struggle of the Orders, 76, 82–83; Sulla reforming, 159–60; tyrants of, 337; vetoes and checks, 362

- Roman Republic (fall of), 161–62, 181–82;  
Antony vs. Octavian, 177–79; Augustus  
and, 179–81; dictatorship of Caesar,  
169–72; first triumvirate, 165–67; Ides of  
March and its aftermath, 172–75; rise of  
Pompey, 162–65; the Rubicon, 167–69;  
second triumvirate, 175–77
- Romans: challenge of Carthage, 107–11;  
empire of alliances, 105–7; Sabines and,  
69–70; safety and security of, 105–6; series  
of wars, 106; shortage of women, 69
- Rome, 349; Carthage and, 56–59; Cartha-  
ginian Republic under, 59–60; Catholic  
church, 189–91; comitia centuriata, 75;  
comitia curiata and, 70–72; death of  
Gaius Gracchus, 136–38; *Defence* (Adams)  
and, 306–11; East and its riches, 111–16;  
first king Romulus, 68–70; forging the  
Roman Republic, 75–78; foundation  
of, 68–72; Greek liberty, 112–13; growth  
of affluence and wealth, 113; Land Com-  
mission, 125; Marius’ flight to Carthage,  
140–41; need for reform, 119–20; Numa  
Pompilius as king, 70; overthrow of the  
kings, 72–74; partisanship in, 351; parti-  
san warfare, 127–30; perils of prosperity,  
354–55; politics of immigration and citi-  
zenship, 150–52; politics of immigration  
and social spending, 133–36; premodern  
republic, 352–53; return of Marius, 156–58;  
return of Scipio Aemilianus, 130–33;  
return of Sulla, 159–60; rise of populism,  
120–24; Romulus and Remus, 359;  
Servius Tullius as king, 71–72; Sicily and,  
107–9; Social War, 151–52; Sparta and, 39;  
straining the constitution, 124–27; Sully  
and the politicization of the military,  
152–56; Tarquinius as king, 71; urban  
underclass in, 120; victories in Asia, 112–13
- Romulus: death of, 70, 72; Remus and,  
68–69; Rome’s first king, 68–70, 77
- Roosevelt, Theodore, populist, 363–64
- Rota Club, Harringtonians, 260, 265–66
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 304
- Rubicon River, Caesar and, 167–69
- Rump Parliament: abolition, 250; Cromwell  
(Oliver) and, 246–47; Cromwell (Rich-  
ard), 258–59
- Rush, Benjamin: on *Defence* (Adams), 301,  
302; state constitutions, 285
- Russia, as threat to United States, 378
- Rye House Plot, 269, 270
- Sabines, Romans and, 69–70
- St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, Paris, 244
- St. Heliodorus, 190
- Sallust, 315; education of young men, 290;  
on fear of enemies, 356
- San Marino, 349; republic of, 184, 238
- Sansovino, 19
- Saturninus, L. Appuleius, Roman citizen-  
ship, 150
- Savonarola, Girolamo, mixed-government  
republic for Florence, 239
- Scaevola, Publius Mancius, 121; Tiberius  
and, 121, 128
- Scipio, Publius: “Africanus,” 112; election as  
proconsul of Roman forces, 110–11; Hanni-  
bal and, 58–59, 111, 112; Masinissa and, 141
- Scipio Aemilianus: end of Carthage  
republic, 139; Jugurtha and, 142; Polybius  
and, 18, 62, 116; returning home to Rome,  
130–33; tears of, 12; Tiberius Gracchus and,  
117–18, 120–21, 123, 139; wife Sempronia, 132
- Scipio Nasica, Carthage and, 61
- Second Amendment, standing army and, 335
- Second Continental Congress, 281
- Second Punic War: Carthage and, 57–58,  
109; Scipio Africanus, 117
- Second Treatise* (Locke), 267, 269
- Second Triumvirate, Roman Republic, 175–77
- Senate, Roman Republic, 83, 91–95
- senatus consultum, 93, 95
- Serrata, 215; Republic of Venice and reform  
of, 212–16
- Sertonius, Quintus, Pompey and, 163
- Servius Tullius, Rome’s king, 71–72
- Sextus Pompey, 175

- Sextus Tarquinius, violation of Lucretia, 73–74
- Shay's Rebellion of 1786, 288
- Sheringham, Robert, on Parliamentarians, 248
- shophetim*, Carthage, 46
- Sidney, Algernon, 302, 304; republican planner in England, 267–70
- Signori di Notte*, city guards, 220, 225
- Six Books of the Republic* (Bodin), 244
- Smith, Jack, Trump and, 368
- Smith, William Stephens, Adams and, 303
- social spending, Rome, 133–36
- Social War: Rome, 151–52; Sulla and, 153
- Socrates, 13–14
- Soderini, Gasparo, on American Constitution, 287–88
- Sophocles, *Ajax* (play), 355
- Souter, David, on civic ignorance of U.S. Constitution, 360
- South Carolina: Pinckney of, 339; president and, 333
- Soviet Union, 354; fall of, 7, 356
- Sparta, 64, 349; after the republic, 38–40; Agiad and Eurypontid royal houses, 23; Assembly, 28–29; birth of Charilaus, 22; decline and fall of republic, 34–38; education in, 24–26; Ephors in, 28–30, 34–36; expansion of, 30–34, 104; Gerousia council of elders, 24, 27–29; government of, 17; helots in, 24; Lycurgus and Spartan Constitution, 21–23; Peloponnesian War, 14; premodern republic, 352; republic of, 45; Rome and, 39, 68; royal families, 27; shape of republic, 26–30; society, 26–30; territory of, 23–24; timocracy, 15
- Spartan Constitution, Lycurgus and, 21–23
- Spirit of the Laws* (Montesquieu), 267, 276, 282, 315
- state constitutions, failure of United States, 284–86
- State Inquisitors, Venice, 227
- Struggle of the Orders: Adams, 308, 309; Roman Republic, 76, 82–83
- sufetes, Carthaginian republic, 46
- Sulcius, Sulla and, 153–56
- Sulla, 332; Marius and, 149, 152, 165, 259, 310; politicization of the military, 152–56, 254, 371, 372, 374; return of, 159–60; Social War and, 153; Sulcius and, 153–56
- sussition, Spartan military organizations, 25–26
- Swiss Confederation, 5, 237, 273, 282, 283, 304, 318, 324
- Syme, Ronald, on Sulla reforming constitution, 160
- Tacitus, 3, 304, 315; education of young men, 290; guide of antiquity, 302
- Tarentines, Romans and, 106–7
- Tarquinius Superbus (“the Proud”), 72, 77
- Temple of Fear, Spartans, 104
- Tertullian, on child sacrifice, 48
- Third Mithridatic War, Rome fighting, 165
- Thoughts on Government* (Adams), 296, 299, 300, 301, 311, 316
- 300* (movie), 30
- Thucydides: on Carthage, 45; famous Melian Dialogue, 14
- Tiepolo, Bajamonte (doge), 219–20, 222; Adams on conspiracy, 305
- Tiepolo, Giacomo (doge), 212, 213, 219
- Tiepolo, Lorenzo (doge), 212
- timocracy, 15
- Titus Tatius (Sabine king): death of, 70; Romulus and, 69–70
- “Tophet,” cemetery as, 48
- Tradonico, Pietro (doge), 195–96
- Treatise of Monarchie* (Hunton), 247
- Treaty of Dover, 263
- Treaty of Paris (1783), 287, 298, 299
- tribunus plebis* (tribune of the plebeians), 101
- Trogus, Pompeius, on history of world, 42
- Trump, Donald: Hillary Clinton and, 367; populist, 364, 365; promise to “drain the swamp,” 364; prosecutorial politics, 367–70; on social media and 2020 election, 366; U.S. military and, 373–75

- Trump v. Mazars*, 368  
Tullus Hostilius, Rome and, 70–71  
Turgot, Anne Robert Jacques: Adams and, 1–2, 300–301  
Twain, Mark: maxim on history, 376; visit to Ducal Palace, 221  
Twelve Tables, 84  
*Two Treatises on Government* (Locke), 270–71  
tyranny, 15; populism and, 362–66; rule by one, 17  
tyranny of the executive: fall of ancient republics, 327; republican defect, 327–36  
tyranny of the people: fall of ancient republics, 327; republican defect, 336–43  
Tyrants of Athens, 330
- United States, 84; competing visions for reform, 288–90; Constitution of, 342–43, 349; constitutions, 280; failure of state constitutions, 284–86; failure of the Articles of Confederation, 281–84; finding answers in the classical past, 290–94; foundations of a new republic, 315–22; new republic of English colonies, 237; oldest republics meeting youngest, 286–88; perils of prosperity, 354–55; politicization of the military, 371–75; populism and tyranny, 362–66; president of, 331, 331–36; prosecutorial politics, 367–70; remedies for an ailing republic, 377–80; republic of, 238; symptoms of an ailing republic, 375–77; tyranny of the executive, 327–36; tyranny of the people, 336–43  
University of Austin, 379  
University of North Carolina, 379  
University of Tennessee, 379  
University of Texas, 379  
University of Toulouse, 244  
U.S. Constitution (1787). *See* American Constitution (1787)  
U.S. Supreme Court, 358, 360, 364, 368, 377  
Venice, 349; birth of the city of, 194–95; Carthage and, 45–46; election of doges, 209–11; premodern republic, 352; republic of, 183–85. *See also* Republic of Venice (foundation of)  
Venus, 67  
Vesta (goddess of the hearth), 85  
Villetard, Joseph, fall of Venetian Republic, 234  
Virgil: *Aeneid*, 42; *Deus nobis haec otia fecit*, 291; on Dido, 44, 67; education of young men, 290  
Virginia Plan, 320; Madison, 323; original, 341  
Vitale II Michiel, 205, 206  
Voltaire, *Candide*, 229  
von Pufendorf, Samuel, sovereignty, 283  
Votel, Joseph, military order, 373
- Washington, George: on American people, 284; cherry tree and, 359; civilian control, 372; defeat of British at Yorktown, 298; state constitutions, 285  
Whiggism, 293  
William (King of Prussia), 304  
William III of Orange (Prince): marriage of, 264; Mary and, 272  
Wilson, James, on unity of executive as president, 329–30  
Womersley, David, on Montagu, 293  
Wood, Gordon W., 292, 319  
Wordsworth, William, fall of Venetian Republic, 235  
Wren, Matthew, on Harrington, 262
- Xenophon, on Sparta's Ephors, 29
- Zachary (Pope), 193  
Zelensky, Volodymyr, Trump and, 369  
Zeus, 23  
Ziani, Sebastiano (doge), 201, 204, 205–6