
Of Arms and the Men

Gil Barndollar

Center for the Study of Statesmanship

Killing for the Republic: Citizen-Soldiers and the Roman Way of War, by Steele Brand. *Johns Hopkins University Press*, 2019. 392 pp. \$34.95.

Stacking America against Rome is a cottage industry as old as our republic. Indeed, older: the first volume of Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was published a few months before the Declaration of Independence. One assumes a few volumes were in colonial hands by then, where they would likely have only fueled republican zeal.

The subject remains an evergreen one in magazines across the American political spectrum. *Vanity Fair's* Cullen Murphy produced an erudite

little primer, simply titled *Are We Rome?*, in 2007 as the Iraq fiasco was looking like America's Varian Disaster. A few years prior, triumphant neoconservatives had dismissed the know-it-all Brits as pretenders to being "Greece to our Rome." Last year saw a cross-genre hit, Edward J. Watts's *Mortal Republic*, that combined the well-worn "are we Rome?" with the white hot new theme of populism Cassandraism. Of late, Justinian's Plague has been the (Eastern) Roman event most frequently invoked by American commentators.

Steele Brand, the magnificently monikered author of *Killing for the Republic: Citizen-Soldiers and the Roman Way of War*, is also far more interested in republics than empires. Unlike many of his predecessors in the genre, he writes from more than

GIL BARNDOLLAR is a Senior Fellow at the Catholic University of America's Center for the Study of Statesmanship, where he is researching military conscription. He served as a U.S. Marine infantry officer from 2009–2016 and holds a PhD in history from the University of Cambridge.

an armchair. Heeding that apocryphal Thucydides quote about the nation that separates its warriors and its scholars, Brand joined the U.S. Army after finishing his doctorate and served as an intelligence officer in Afghanistan. (In the interest of full disclosure: this reviewer made a similar questionable life decision a decade ago.) He thus writes about war as one who has seen it, and, more importantly, as one who clearly has devoted serious time to thinking about what he saw. Having returned from one atavistic war, he now teaches about several others as an assistant professor of history at the King's College in New York City.

Brand structures his book, in a pleasingly archaic style of military history, around set-piece battles. Aided by appropriately spartan diagrams and maps, he sketches out five key clashes of Republican Rome. The battles serve as paths to broader analysis of Roman culture, politics, and piety: New Carthage illustrates the Roman family as the bedrock of virtue and courage, while Philippi shows us how an increasingly professional army had devolved from protectors into predators.

A Jeffersonian in full, Brand extols the centrality of farming to the virtue of the Roman citizen-soldier. In the rural, self-reliant farmer, raising his sons at home with scant interference, he finds the root of both republicanism and military success. Home and hearth anchored Roman piety and patriotism and were essential to Rome's civic militarism. By contrast, thalassocratic, mercantilist Carthage

manned its armies with mercenaries, who could not win a long war against Rome, no matter the frequent battlefield brilliance of Hannibal and his Barcid clan.

It is a not-fully-convincing, romantic argument. Seapower states, as Andrew Gordon has written, are indeed weaker, unable to win a war of decision against continental powers. But it was, after all, a derided "nation of shopkeepers" that defeated Napoleon, one of the most ambitious Caesars. Urban proles did more to doom Hitler than the already-dwindling stock of American, British, and Russian farmers. The rural virtues of Egyptians and Syrians availed them little against the Israel Defense Forces in 1967 and 1973.

The case for the citizen-soldier is on far more solid ground, especially when contrasted with our modern soldier-citizens, as Brand rightly terms them. Rome's republican legions were manned by part-timers, at least in the early years when Rome fought enemies all around it in Italy. Constrained by the harvest season, Romans fought short campaigns and returned to the plow. Yet they were extremely successful: the period between the Second Samnite War and the Punic Wars saw the most triumphs in Roman history. The supply of citizen-soldiers was seemingly inexhaustible. One would-be Alexander, Pyrrhus of Epirus, was powerfully struck by this reality during his eponymous victory. Rome lost many battles but she seldom lost wars.

America's vaunted "all-volunteer force," by contrast, has inverted

the Roman paradigm. America has won virtually every battle it has fought since the Korean War but hasn't won a war in nearly thirty years. (We might ask whether the U.S. won before that period. Did the U.S. "win" in Korea? Did it "win" the Second World War? Doesn't the Soviet Union have at least as good a claim?) Though he doesn't feel the need to say it, Brand and over a million of his fellow American servicemen also lost a war in Afghanistan to mostly part-time farmer-warriors.

Ferocious discipline has always been regarded as a hallmark of Roman legions. Even the lavishly illustrated volumes one finds in middle school libraries will show foot-sore legionaries building elaborate camps at the end of a hard day's march, while a later chapter will invariably provide a gruesome description of the etymology of decimation. Yet Brand rightly points to the other side of the coin. Republican Rome's legions were in fact characterized by "notorious independence": individual combat, leadership by election, and frequent mutinies. Professionalism, that idol of contemporary America's warrior class, is perhaps not the crowning military virtue.

Brand is, however, just a bit too enamored of the colossi. The book devotes much of its time to Rome's leaders, the Scipios and Sullas whose exploits inspired young George Pattons and Calvin Coolidges alike. Roman leaders may indeed have modeled and even imprinted the stern virtues of their society onto their legions, but Brand has perhaps

too much to say about consuls and not enough about centurions.

Traditional military history from the top down is not bereft of benefits though. However debauched and self-aggrandizing they could be, Rome's elites at least had skin in the game, an increasingly foreign concept to their American descendants. To die in battle for your family and republic was a crowning glory. America's wealthy can hardly stomach increased taxes; being asked to risk shedding blood for the state might finally trigger those flights to Canada, Europe, or some warm island.

Like modern America, Republican Rome was nearly always at war: between 415 and 265 BC, fewer than 10 percent of its years did not have at least one recorded military campaign. Yet those wars were fought by part-time citizen-soldiers, conscripted from the male population and expected to serve, fight, and die for their nation. Brand closes with a stinging question: "Does the citizen of a modern republic who authorizes war but is unwilling to fight it have more respect for peace or less?" The question answers itself. America may indeed be Rome, but it scarcely resembles a republic anymore.

Steele Brand has done a service with this book. Though grounded in well-trodden sources, Brand has produced a novel examination of violence and virtue with undeniable contemporary relevance. An engaging and accessible work, *Killing for the Republic* warrants reading by all republicans.