Bush rekindles downfall of Rome

Rome wasn’t undone by the barbarians. The barbarians didn’t create a suspicious, secretive and militarized state run by power-grabbing despots. This was the doing of a pliant Senate that looked to Caesar to make the empire safe, and then gave the man-child Octavian “emperor” status in 27 B.C.

Today, another Caesar wannabe is on course to create a security state. And, as with Rome, principles that built the republic are at stake.

Today Republicans claim the president needs the power to do everything from declaring who enemy combatants are to conducting domestic spying, without oversight. Consider the following Romanesque developments:

• Emperor Status? President Bush has circumvented congressional intent, and his constitutional authority, with over 200 presidential “signing statements” where he claims he can interpret the intent of Congress.

• Personal Military? President Bush threw the Posse Comitatus Act overboard with his decision to place state militias under his control during national emergencies.

• Domestic Spying? Congress gave the Bush administration the authority to collect business records, conduct searches and engage in “trap and trace” operations if they “reasonably believe” someone from abroad is calling.

There’s more — much more. But the result of Bush’s power grab has been the gradual erosion of the checks and balances that sustained our republic for over 200 years. And all for what? Today the U.S. spends almost 50 percent of total global military spending. Yet, we’re bogged down by two small, poor Middle Eastern “barbarian” states.

“We need to be there,” we’re told, admonished that: “We face the greatest danger in our history” and/or “9/11 changed everything.” Both statements, quite frankly, are laughable.

Al-Qaida isn’t the greatest threat we’ve ever faced. They aren’t like the Europeans or other powers who harassed and killed civilians during the colonial and frontier era. Additionally, while some Americans toyed with socialism during the Depression — which, for some, justified McCarthyism in the 1950s — there’s no mass demographic bloc looking for a spiritual awakening at the feet of Al-Qaida’s Allah. And, No, Islamofascists aren’t the functional equivalent of Hitler’s Nazis.

“But 9/11 changed everything.” Wrong, again. Terrorism has always been a tactic of asymmetric warfare. The fear mongers need to realize this and grow a spine. And besides, if 9/11 did change everything why haven’t we implemented a draft? Where’s the war tax? Why have we upset allies and undermined our principles? Why don’t we have a “new energy” agenda to wean us from foreign oil?

“What about dirty bombs and rogue nukes?” cry conservatives. Consider the following: The odds of you dying in a terrorist attack are about 1: 88,000. In your lifetime you stand a greater chance of dying from riding a bike (1: 4,857), firearms (1: 4,888), being hit by lightning (1: 56,439), or riding a bus (1: 86,628). Still, we’re told to be afraid.

The Romans sacrificed many bulls to Emperor Caligula, only to have him later claim that he was a god. We can’t sacrifice our Constitution, to any president. Benjamin Franklin’s admonition “Those who sacrifice liberty in the name of security deserve neither” offers a clear message: Granting more powers to an individual is short-sighted and doesn’t bring security. Just ask Rome.

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