**Another Voice Podcast with Eric Nelson**

**to accompany Strayer/Nelson, *Ways of the World*, Third Edition**

**The Roman Republic: A Victim of its Own Success? (Chapter 5)**

**SLIDE 5.1**

Can too many military victories and conquests be a bad thing for the victorious society?

**SLIDE 5.2 [Map: The Roman Empire]**

You could argue that for Rome this was the case. Its rise from impoverished city state to enormous empire put too much stress on its republican form of government (based on the rule of law, the rights of citizens, and a backbone of land-owning freemen who both tilled the soil and served in the army).

The conquest of Carthage and then much of the eastern Mediterranean brought Rome unthinkable wealth in the form of plunder, slaves and later, taxes and tribute. But this wealth was not distributed evenly among the population. Common foot soldiers got their share, but those elites with connections secured a much larger portion of the riches. There had always been rich and poor in Rome, but now the gap between the super-rich and the average citizen was exponentially larger than in the past.

**SLIDE 5.3 [Image: Roman Slavery]**

This in and of itself need not have destabilized the Roman Republic; however, Rome was an agrarian society and so real wealth was largely tied up in the control of land. It was the concentration of land in the hands of a small elite that disrupted society as a whole. The gap between rich and poor only widened as huge new tracts of land in recently conquered regions were primarily secured by the well-connected. This same group also used plunder to buy up land around Rome to create large estates. This was relatively easy to do given the poor state of the Italian countryside following the wars with Carthage and the difficulties that many ordinary Roman families found in maintaining their small farms when the head of household was away at war.

But, in buying up land, the rich displaced many of the free small scale farmers who had been the backbone of the Roman army. When the small farmers were bought out, they lost not only their land but also their livelihoods. This was because large landowners preferred to employ slaves, freely available thanks to recent conquests. They were a cheaper and more stable form of labor than free citizens. So the plunder and slaves secured through Rome’s conquests led to the destruction of the traditional Roman way of life that had been based on small holding farms tilled by free citizens who also served in the army.

**SLIDE 5.4 [Image: Augustus (statue)]**

In reality, wealth in the form of plunder did little to spark the Roman agrarian economy, which was limited by the overall productivity of the land. Instead, with more wealth chasing a relatively fixed amount of assets, Rome experienced inflation. There was a limit to how much plunder that Rome could safely digest.

Displaced small farmers congregated in cities creating social disruption. Many became active in crowd politics as Rome’s political culture, which pitted powerful aristocrats against one another, became increasingly violent, before finally collapsing into civil war. Despite several attempts led by populist leaders to rebalance Roman society, it never returned to its pre-imperial republican past. Instead, a new system emerged in Rome under Augustus and his successors focused on a single ruler who was emperor in all but name. This imperial model proved better suited to the requirements of empire, but it no longer relied upon the citizen army that created it.

Pondering the fate of the Roman republic as it adjusted to the burden of empire poses questions about the ambiguity of success in history. What constitutes success? How might it be measured? And success for whom? Can there be too much success? None of these are simple questions, but they do raise timeless issues that are relevant to societies today.