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**Parallels to Piracy: How the United States' perspective on Vietnam during the Cold War mirrors the Roman Republic's response to piracy.**

From *Pirates of the Caribbean* to *Peter Pan*, piracy has long been present in contemporary media and fills viewers imaginations with fantastical adventures (1). However, pirates in the Mediterranean Sea during the era of the Roman Republic (507-27 BCE) seemingly do not conform to the modern romanticized notion of piracy (2). The violent plundering and raiding of these pirates threatened coastal towns and maritime trade in the Mediterranean Sea, so administrators of the Roman Republic took on the responsibility of eradicating pirates and defending the peace of the Mediterranean (3). While ancient sources describe the prowess of Republic officials in defeating the pirates, modern historians are questioning the validity of these accounts and are suggesting that Republic officials assigned a pirate's narrative to their political enemies in an attempt to strengthen their power and influence within the Republic. Interestingly, much of the reasoning, actions, and tactics that officials from the Roman Republic used to bolster their reputation in their manufactured conflicts with the pirates of antiquity parallels strategies employed by the United States during the Cold War as the U.S. government sought to increase American influence abroad. This paper analyzes the nuances of this relationship and examines why such parallels are important to identify and understand.

Context for Roman pirates should first be provided. As stated earlier, pirates understood in the classical sense as raiders did exist in the Roman Republic. A famous example of this is Julius Caesar's abduction by pirates who held him for ransom (4). However, the existence of pirates was also highly politicized. For example, the famous statesman Cicero argued that pirates were "the enemies of all mankind", demonstrating the extreme hate the Roman Republic had for anyone labeled as a pirate (5). It was this characterization that laid the groundwork for Roman statesmen and politicians to use piracy as an excuse to launch military campaigns that ultimately increased their own power and influence.

Statesmen of the Roman Republic took advantage of this definition and judgement of piracy to justify conflict taken against state enemies in the Mediterranean Sea in four key examples, one of which was the Mithridatic Wars. Mithridates VI was the king of Pontus from 120 BCE to 63 BCE, and his reign was characterized by a series of campaigns throughout the Mediterranean Sea intended to grow the Pontic kingdom (6). Eventually, Mithridates VI came into conflict with the Roman Republic which resulted in the First, Second, and Third Mithridatic Wars. The Romans struggled with winning these wars due to Mithridates VI's strong navy, so they turned to wealthy allies to finance advantages that could help them win, and they garnered this support by declaring Mithridates VI a pirate (7). This was blatant propaganda by the Roman Republic; by denouncing Mithridates VI as a pirate, the Republic was essentially informing its citizens and potential allies that if Mithridates VI were to win these wars, the land he would gain would be governed by lawlessness. To the Romans, there was nothing redeeming about the pirates, and decrying Mithridates VI as such ensured that citizens would agree with any action the Roman Republic took to defeat him and secured support from wealthy allies.

A similar plan was carried out by Octavian against Sextus Pompeius during a power struggle at the end of the Roman Republic. After Julius Caesar was assassinated, conflict broke out between various factions (8). One of these groups was the Second Triumvirate, composed of Octavian, Marc Antony, and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus who were campaigning to claim power in Rome which meant defeating anyone who could stand against them, including Pompeius (9). To counter the Triumvirate's power, Pompeius apparently turned to recruiting runaway slaves and former pirates to be part of his army and used pirate-like tactics such as cutting off supply lines to Rome to decrease support for Octavian which would increase his chances of winning. During this conflict, Octavian declared Pompeius to be a pirate with some historians suggesting he made that claim because of the makeup of Pompeius' army and the tactics he was using (7).

Nevertheless, it is indisputable that by doing this, Octavian established his side as the "right" side, the people who should win because they are good. Like the Mithridatic Wars, this was propaganda intended to decrease support for Pompeius while increasing support for Octavian solely based on moral grounds. Eventually, both sides signed the Pact of Misenum which called for peace, but the terms of the treaty were broken, and conflict began once more (7). Even though it was frowned upon to break promises with the enemy, by labelling Pompeius as a pirate, Octavian was able to retain support during the conflict because pirates were depicted as not being worthy of respect, and promises made with them did not have to be kept (3). Like the Mithridatic Wars, the Roman Republic employed propaganda that played into cultural assumptions and fears about pirates to establish support for themselves and proactively prevent any support for Pompeius.

The next example concerns Marcus Antonius' campaign and conquest of Cilicia. Before falling under Roman rule, Cilicia, a region in modern-day Turkey, fell under the rule of the

Seleucid, Ptolemaic, or Attalid kings in the centuries preceding Roman rule, and in the 140s BCE, Diodotus Tryphon, a general of the Seleucid kingdom, revolted against the Seleucid monarchs (3, 7, 10). This was the earliest example of what the Romans labeled as a pirate revolt in Cilicia as Tryphon then used Cilicia as a base for naval operations to attack the Syrian coastline, and this early classification set the stage for Romans to portray the entirety of Cilicia as a pirate's haven (7). Eventually, around 100 BCE, the Roman statesman Marcus Antonius launched a military campaign in the region to further his own political power within the Republic and brought Cilicia under Roman rule, bringing temporary peace to the region. This presents two instances of the Romans using pirates as a method to bolster their own influence. Firstly, Marcus Antonius wiping out pirates is much more likely to garner favor and support rather than Marcus Antonius suppressing rebels of another kingdom. Again, this is because pirates were the absolute evil of the Roman world, so Marcus Antonius' campaign could never be controversial in a way that would weaken his political power. Secondly, the Roman Republic bringing Cilicia under their control could give them an economic advantage as recent analysis based on Cilicia's geographic location suggests that it was economically prosperous (3). If this is true, then the Cilician campaign by Marcus Antonius is noteworthy because of its imperialistic undertones. The Roman Republic deliberately employed pirate-based propaganda to justify their conquest of a region.

The final example pertains to Quintus Caecilius Metellus' campaign in the Balearic Islands in the western Mediterranean (11). This campaign was noted for being particularly brutal as the Baleares were almost completely destroyed as Metellus' forces attacked them while the Baleares reportedly only had slings to protect themselves. Roman writers attribute this notable aggression to Metellus' efforts to eradicate piracy in the area, but some writers frame this in a

way that suggests that piracy was used only as a cover-up to justify the imperial conquest of the Balearic Islands (3). This campaign is unique from Marcus' Antonius campaign in Cilicia in that writers from antiquity note how piracy was being used to justify power grabs that statesmen and the Roman Republic sought. This admission suggests that the conclusions made about the Marcus Antonius' campaign bears some truth as these conflicts greatly mimic each other. Nevertheless, the outcome was the same as other campaigns: by labelling the enemy as pirates, whether truthful or not, and proceeding to defeat them, Metellus expanded the influence of the Republic throughout the Mediterranean as well as his own influence within the Republic (3).

The overarching theme for these four examples is that the Roman Republic and its prominent statesmen wanted power, and they found that they were easily able to win support and new provinces by simply labeling their enemies as pirates. It was an easy and effective strategy, and U.S. policy during the Cold War appears to unintentionally mimic it through their own propaganda and wartime strategies.

At the end of World War II, the Soviet Union began to install communist puppet governments in eastern Europe in an attempt to create a buffer zone between them and Germany should Germany become a threat once more (12). The U.S. was concerned about this because they viewed it as an attempt by the Soviet Union to establish ideological and strategical influence throughout the world (13). This concern was bolstered by the Red Scare which was a fear in the U.S. that communism would worm its way into the U.S. and subvert democracy as the primary governing principle, a fear that was fed by China's fall to communism and cases of espionage in the U.S. (14). Anti-communist propaganda in the form of art, books, and even movies like *The Red Menace* furthered these fears and created an association between communism and tyranny in the minds of U.S. citizens which bolstered support for any measure taken to prevent the spread of

communism (13). This fear of communism at every level of life in the U.S. is the first parallel to piracy in antiquity. Like piracy, communism did seem to be a very real threat. For example, in the middle of the Cold War, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) launched the Great Leap Forward, a campaign which eventually killed twenty million people due to starvation (15). Even today, communist countries like China and North Korea are known for human rights violations, so the threat of communism had genuine roots, the same way threats of piracy loomed over coastal communities in antiquity (16, 17).

However, the U.S. *did* engage in policies that historians now denounce such as the Domino Theory. The Domino Theory, in its most basic terms, postulated that once one country falls to communism, neighboring countries will fall, as well (18). This meant that preventing communism in one country was a safeguarding measure for the entire region, but this theory has been proven to be wildly incorrect as it established communism and all countries who chose to follow it as a monolith with one guiding principle rather than viewing countries as individual entities who have their reasons and histories for choosing communism or democracy (19). Akin to Cicero's speech, the Domino Theory was a government policy that heightened fears about communism and to validated actions taken on a government level in the fight against communism.

The Domino Theory is credited as one of the causes of the Vietnam War, and the Vietnam War is an excellent example of many of the parallels between the Cold War and piracy in antiquity. The Vietnam War was a conflict between the North Vietnamese communist government supported by the Soviet Union and China and the South Vietnamese democratic government supported by the United States (20). The mere existence of the North Vietnamese communist government dictated that the U.S. take actions to either contain or eradicate

communism in this region. Beyond, the Domino Theory, one other cause of the Vietnam War is credited to be the Gulf of Tonkin incident; a U.S. navy ship was reportedly attacked by North Vietnamese boats, and retaliatory measures were ordered by U.S. forces almost immediately (21).

As a result, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution which allowed the president to repel any armed attack against the U.S.; this essentially created a scenario in which the U.S. could, in practicality, go to war with any nation at the president's discretion without going to war in theory by a resolution in Congress (22). This might have been a consolidation of power by the seated president, Truman, reminiscent of the attempts of Roman statesmen to increase their own power and influence through their own military might. It is curious that Truman pursued this policy at the midpoint of the Cold War; the Red Scare was still very much present in daily life, and it was now augmented by McCarthyism (23). Truman could have possibly used communism-based fears to garner support for policies which would have allowed for an immediate counterattack by the U.S. Indeed, the Senate passed the Tonkin Resolution with only two opposing votes while the House of Representatives passed it unanimously, but, reportedly, Congress allowed this resolution to pass under the assumption that the president would continue to seek congressional support before entering a conflict (24).

As such, America's entrance into the Vietnam War through the Domino Theory, the Gulf of Tonkin incident, and the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution point to two parallels with piracy in antiquity. Firstly, the U.S. used fears of communism to promote their involvement in Vietnam, and this involvement was framed as a method to curb communism. Again, this strategy is an almost perfect mirror of how the Roman Republic and its statesmen used the fear of piracy to invade and conquer territories throughout the Mediterranean. Secondly, the Gulf of Tonkin

Resolution represents a consolidation of power for the executive branch and the president who no longer had to adhere to the system of checks and balances established by the U.S.

Constitution (25). This paralleled the increase in power Roman statesmen sought. Granted, in the examples explored, Roman statesmen largely did this through military action and conquest that won the support of the citizens and the Republic as opposed to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which was a law, but the final effect of the statesmen's campaigns and the Resolution was the same: the strengthening of power for one political figure.

While the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution increased the executive branch's power, one of the goals of the Vietnam War was to increase U.S. soft power, the ability of countries to acquire what they want because of their favorable reputation without resorting to violence (26, 27). The Pentagon Papers were a trove of documents compiled secretly by the U.S. government concerning its involvement in Vietnam. The Papers were leaked to the public in 1971, in the middle of the Vietnam War, and U.S. citizens were shocked to learn that the information the government was providing did not align with the truth (28). One of the documents in the leak was a memo by John McNaughton, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, where he explicitly wrote that seventy percent of U.S. goals in the Vietnam War concerned avoiding a humiliating defeat to protect the U.S. reputation as a guarantor, and that one of the U.S.'s purposes in the ground effort of the Vietnam War was to "show [the] world [the] lengths to which [the] US will go to fulfill [its] commitments" (27). In every example presented and examined regarding piracy in antiquity, by defeating "pirates", the Romans safeguarded the Mediterranean and established themselves as a protector of their allies which increased their influence; in his memo, McNaughton essentially admits to this exact strategy, just with different actors. The Cold War was a battle of domination between the Soviet Union and the



U.S., and the Vietnam War was a piece of that puzzle. This, combined with the depiction of the Vietnam War as a fight against communism, meant that victory would prove U.S. ideology to be morally superior one, the same way victory over piracy reinforced the moral pitfalls of piracy and the superiority of the Roman Republic. This would then effectively increase U.S. influence on a global scale and, indeed, establish the U.S. as a “guarantor” of peace and safety.

The final parallel regarding piracy in antiquity and the Cold War revolves around propaganda. As stated prior, pirates and communists were portrayed and viewed as inherently evil through common routes of propaganda such as speeches, posters, and movies. The Romans took this a step further by labelling any enemy as a pirate, thus reinforcing the notion that pirates were naturally the enemies of the Roman Republic. One interesting aspect in the realm of propaganda is the way in which these conflicts are remembered. For example, scholars today are questioning the moral righteousness of the Roman Republic when dealing with pirates, but it does not always seem to have been this way. While conducting research about piracy in antiquity, three historians were frequently referenced as primary sources: Strabo, Livy, and Appian. These three men were historians; they were not part of the military and therefore could not provide true eyewitness accounts regarding what happened. Furthermore, they all lived years—in some cases, decades—after the events they described took place (29, 30, 31). It is highly likely that their own research and knowledge had already been twisted and influenced by propaganda that the Roman Republic employed. The common phrase “history is written by the victor” in conjunction with this hypothesis further suggests that this is how the Roman Republic’s conflicts against pirates were remembered immediately and for much of history. This must have contributed to the continued prosperity of the Romans. For instance, if Octavian did not label Pompeius as a pirate, would he have achieved victory, or would allies have flocked to

Pompeius' side instead? Even if Octavian did win without slandering Pompeius, would his reign have been as successful as it is currently remembered, and would he have still been able to establish the Roman Principate? The concrete answer to these questions will never be known, but evidence from the Vietnam War suggests that the Roman Republic would have found themselves in quite a bind if their propaganda had failed.

The media played an incredible role in the Vietnam War as scenes from the battlefield were televised into the homes of American citizens. Some believe that this influenced the outcome of the war by decreasing support for U.S. forces as citizens across America were exposed to negative reporting of the war. Beyond the television, the roughly 600 journalists in Vietnam closely documented the war, and their access to modern technologies like cameras and radios allowed them to chronicle the events of the war in a way that the people of the Roman Republic could never do (32). One of the most famous examples of this is the My Lai Massacre which resulted in the deaths of almost 500 Vietnamese civilians, and which only came to light after an reporter's investigation that led to evidence including photographs taken of the incident and increased brewing anti-war sentiment in America (33). Even in antiquity, Metellus' campaign was said to be abnormally brutal, but he was still able to return to Rome and celebrate his triumph (3). Would confirmed revelations about Metellus' brutality have changed the outcome of his campaign, the same way the My Lai Massacre contributed to the anti-war sentiment of American citizens? It is possible that his actions would have been condemned, but it cannot be wholly confirmed as the Romans regularly participated in other activities that would be frowned upon today such as slavery and entertainment through gladiatorial games. However, it seems highly plausible that had more detailed and widely circulated records regarding the Republic's campaigns against piracy been more prevalent, the Roman Republic would not have

been able to amass as much power and influence as they did based on the parallels of the Vietnam War.

Now that these parallels have been established, it is always worth asking, why is this important? Most obviously, these parallels can inform scholars about piracy in antiquity. There is very little evidence on the topic, and most sources, as stated, are just writings from a handful of Roman historians (7). Because the Vietnam War was meticulously recorded as photographs, radio programs, and news coverage—not to mention the thousands of government documents including the Pentagon Papers—there must be more parallels between piracy in antiquity and the Vietnam War that are not known simply because of the lack of evidence from the Roman Republic. It seems highly unlikely that the causes and outcomes of two events can align so well only for all similarities to end there. It would be incredibly interesting to examine more literary evidence beyond the primary sources we are already so comfortable with and hypothesize what happened based on modern parallels. Nevertheless, this analysis of piracy in antiquity and the Cold War showcases that, even 2,000 years later, history does repeat itself.

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