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David Brooks

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The Coming Trump Crackup

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*Credit...Mark Peterson for The New York Times*

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Last week Minneapolis's police chief, Brian O'Hara, said the thing he fears most is the "moment where it all explodes." I share his worry. If you follow the trajectory of events, it's pretty clear that we're headed toward some kind of crackup.

We are in the middle of at least four unravelings: The unraveling of the postwar international order. The unraveling of domestic tranquillity wherever Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents bring down their jackboots. The further unraveling of the democratic order, with attacks on Fed independence and — excuse the pun — trumped-up prosecutions of political opponents. Finally, the unraveling of President

Trump's mind.

Of these four, the unraveling of Trump's mind is the primary one, leading to all the others. Narcissists sometimes get worse with age, as their remaining inhibitions fall away. The effect is bound to be profound when the narcissist happens to be president of the United States.

Every president I've ever covered gets more full of himself the longer he remains in office, and when you start out with Trump-level self-regard, the effect is grandiosity, entitlement, lack of empathy and ferocious overreaction to perceived slights.

Furthermore, over the past year, Trump has been quicker and quicker to resort to violence. In 2025 the U.S. carried out or contributed to 622 overseas bombing missions, killing people in places ranging from Venezuela to Iran, Nigeria and Somalia — not to mention Minneapolis.

The arc of tyranny bends toward degradation. Tyrants generally get drunk on their own power, which progressively reduces restraint, increases entitlement and self-focus and amps up risk taking and overconfidence while escalating social isolation, corruption and defensive paranoia.

I have found it useful these days to go back to the historians of ancient Rome, starting with the originals like Sallust and Tacitus. Those fellows had a front-row look at tyranny, with case studies strewed before them — Nero, Caligula, Commodus, Domitian, Tiberius. They understood the intimate connection between private morals and public order and that when there is a decay of the former, there will be a collapse of the latter.

“Of all our passions and appetites, the love of power is of the most imperious and unsociable nature, since the pride of one man requires the submission of the multitude,” Edward Gibbon wrote in his 1776 classic, “The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.” He continued: “In the tumult of civil discord, the laws of society lose their force, and their place is seldom supplied by those of humanity. The ardor of contention, the pride of victory, the despair of success, the memory of past injuries and the fear of future dangers all contribute to inflame the mind and to silence the voice of pity. From such motives almost every page of history has been stained with civil blood.”

The 18th-century English historian Edward Wortley Montagu distinguished between ambition and the lust for domination. Ambition can be a laudable trait, since it can drive people to serve the community in order to win public admiration. The lust for domination, he wrote, is a different passion, a form of selfishness that causes us to “draw every thing to center in ourselves, which we think will enable us to gratify every other passion.”

The insatiable lust for domination, he continues, “banishes all the social virtues.” The selfish tyrant attaches himself only to those others who share his selfishness, who are eager to wear the mask of perpetual lying. “His friendship and his enmity will be alike unreal, and easily convertible, if the change will serve his interest.”

Those historians were impressed by how much personal force the old tyrants could generate. The man lustng for power is always active, the center of the show, relentless, vigilant, distrustful, restless when anything stands in his way.

Tacitus was especially good at describing the effect the tyrant has on the people around him. When the tyrant first takes power, there is a “rush into servitude” as great swarms of sycophants suck up to the great man. The flattery must forever escalate and grow more fawning, until every follower’s dignity is shorn away. Then comes what you might call the disappearance of the good, as morally healthy people lie low in order to survive. Meanwhile, the whole society tends to be anesthetized. The relentless flow of appalling events eventually overloads the nervous system; the rising tide of brutality, which once seemed shocking, comes to seem unremarkable.

As the disease of tyranny progresses, citizens may eventually lose the habits of democracy — the art of persuasion and compromise, interpersonal trust, an intolerance for corruption, the spirit of freedom, the ethic of moderation. “It is easier to crush men’s spirits and their enthusiasm than to revive them,” Tacitus wrote. “Indeed, there comes over us an attachment to the very enforced inactivity, and the idleness hated at first is finally loved.”

I don’t have enough imagination to know where the next crackup will come — through perhaps some domestic, criminal or foreign crisis? Though I was struck by a sentence Robert Kagan wrote in an essay on the effects of Trump’s foreign policy in *The Atlantic*: “Americans are entering the most dangerous world they have known since World War II, one that will make the Cold War look like child’s play and the post-Cold War world like paradise.”

And no, I don’t think America is headed toward anything like a Rome-style collapse. Our institutions are too strong, and our people, deep down, still have the same democratic values.

But I do know that events are being propelled by one man’s damaged psyche. History does not record many cases in which a power-mad leader careening toward tyranny suddenly regained his senses and became more moderate. On the contrary, the normal course of the disease is toward ever-accelerating deterioration and debauchery.

And I do understand why America’s founding fathers spent so much time reading historians like Tacitus and Sallust. Thomas Jefferson called Tacitus “the first writer in the world, without a single exception.” They understood that the lust for power is a primal human impulse and that even all the safeguards they built into the Constitution are no match for this lust when it is not restrained ethically from within.

As John Adams put it in a letter in 1798, “We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge or gallantry would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net.”

### **A correction was made on**

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An earlier version of this article misidentified an ancient Roman historian. He is Sallust, not Cato.

David Brooks is an Opinion columnist for The Times, writing about political, social and cultural trends.

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