



Gibbon's Future Best Seller



By John Loofbourow, MD

THIS INTERVIEW TOOK PLACE in March 2004, the result of an electronic visit with historian Edward Gibbon, author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Advanced military technology provided the means to speak with him. Unfortunately, he later hacked into the software rendering it useless. The reliable source, cannot be disclosed for reasons of national security.

Q: Mr. Gibbon, it is most kind of you to agree to this interview, particularly in view of the demands of your upcoming work, *The Decline and Fall of North America*.

A: It's actually a pleasure to communicate with someone after all these years. One-way conversations are tiring. Besides, most of the so-called West seems to be enamored of bad music, bad behavior, noise, and what they call democracy, to the exclusion of everything else.

Q: I understand you married recently after more than 200 years of bachelorhood. What brought on that radical decision?

A: Suzanne was my first love. It was mutual; but my father refused permission for us to marry. Since then I've had only my work. But recently Viagra appeared, and then I discovered video porn, so... the rest is history. The only change in my everyday life is that I bathe and change my clothes regularly. I used to be quite a slob, you know. But Maude, wouldn't like me to speak of that any further.

Q: Maude?

A: My wife.

Q: Of course. Our readers probably would agree. The modern reader sometimes finds your exacting, eloquent, and colorful use of 18th century language challenging, yet always exceptionally rewarding. I notice that in this interview you are able to use Americanized English.

A: Well, I find American quite convenient, if simplistic and imprecise. Comfortable; or easy. Language reflects the time; yours is a sound bite culture, not concerned with depth, or breadth. You don't seem to have much interest in complex writing or speech, except in technobabble, as some call it.

Q: Mr. Gibbon, in 1787 you completed what is sometimes called the world's greatest historical work. Its scope, documentation, and eloquence are incomparable. In my copy, for each of 1,270 pages of text, there is at least a half page of fine print commentary and quotation citing original sources from the original languages. None the less, some critics feel you overemphasize that blood has too often been spilt for power and greed in the name of God, not excepting Christ. In chapter 64, I think, you use the term "*history of blood*" referring to those 1,300 or more years in Asia and Europe. How do you respond to that criticism?

A: Well I think the pages are indeed very bloody. And most great religions helped write those pages. Unfortunately, it appears that unrestrained religious zeal often has led to earthly power. I won't claim that to be good; or bad; merely that it is. I think you will be able to reconfirm that in my upcoming book, your people were pretty sanguinary when they started off more than 200 years ago. Perhaps a bloody flood and ebb of zealots is the natural course of human events. Or, maybe religion is like any other great invention. It cuts both ways.

Q: Do you think we invent Gods?

A: Of course. We need them. They give us power, and we give them life. Yes; we create them. But again, I'd better not go down that path, Maude doesn't approve; she is a devout Christian. (Niel) Gaiman's book, *American Gods*, basically makes that point. Juvenile, but clever.

Q: He writes that immigrants' Gods get to America and remain immortal, but become neglected and destitute, while new Gods, like Techno, and Money, take over. In the *DaVinci Code*, Dan Brown restates some of your observations about the early Christians, but emphasizes the lost primacy of female gods. Weren't you a bit demeaning of women, and of Jews also?

A: I wrote in the 18th Century, unconscious of my own blind spots and prejudice; I know better now. I suggest that we all should be concerned about our own preconceptions or misconceptions. Today I still fail to understand my own prejudices, because I'm trapped in the now, for now. We all are.

Q: Mr. Gibbon, we in the USA seem to be spread pretty thin, all over the world. The Middle East, and particularly, at the moment, Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan. Have you any advice for us?

A: In the American vernacular: Nope.

Q: But surely you can share your...

A: In the first place, my agent insists I ask you to buy and read my book. But you might ask yourselves some questions: Recall that early Rome in its fullest power only lasted a few hundred years; then it split into East and West; then both halves split further. Actually, the Eastern "Roman" empire, Byzantium, whose capital was what you now call Istanbul, was Greek. They didn't even speak Latin. Byzantium survived, barely, for over 700 years, until the 14th Century. Meanwhile, Rome was sacked multiple times, usually by "barbarians," sometimes by their own colonies, and once by the Byzantines. Rome was further structurally destroyed by the Christians, who wanted to do away with Roman gods, and then slowly the magnificent buildings of ancient Rome were cannibalized by Romans themselves. The many branches and factions of Christianity warred for centuries over whether God was one or two or three, whether images were profane, whether God was born of Mary or just passed through her, and so on.

Q: I see. But you were going to suggest some questions...

A: Yes: Rome's armies were successful so long as composed almost wholly of her own citizens, so long as her citizens themselves were capable of sacrifice. It appears that to defeat an enemy that is willing to die, one has to be in a like frame of mind. Like the US in WW II perhaps. First question: What are Americans willing to risk or to sacrifice for one another?

In order to maintain power, all the various empires of those times ultimately taxed their own people, and conquered peoples, so heavily that rebelliousness and ultimately weakness resulted. Second question: Is it likely that your nation may overtax its people to remain a/the world power?

When she hired or bribed others to fight for her, Rome was betrayed repeatedly. Last question: Can your "empire" rely on allies like Pakistan, Russia, or France? Or on the mercenaries in Afghanistan and Iraq that you are arming and training? By the way, didn't you already arm and train the Taliban, the "students." They were your students as well as those of Allah.

Q: Fair questions. But I have one for you. People in those countries live in misery, in bondage. Why don't they knock off their oppressors?

A: People live within the limits of their own reality, including religion, which is most certainly real. It's said that Tamerlane, in the 14th or 15th Centuries, used to pile up the heads of conquered peoples; in Baghdad alone he left a pyramid of 90,000 heads. His empire, which was huge, lasted less than 100 years, yet he was only one of many who wrote the same history of blood over and again. So the people of the mid-East have had, and still have, a very different reality than that of the US. Reality is not the same everywhere. I note in my new book that in WW II, 200 airplanes were said to be lost in Lake Michigan alone, the result of accidents during military training of pilots at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center. What would be the reaction to that sort of loss today, when some people become violent or incensed about the rights and lives of pets, or livestock, or trees; that reflects a very different mindset than existed a half century ago. In the US today, people live, most properly, within their own reality, with great economic, technologic, and sociologic advantages. These offer great freedoms, great strength; but also great weakness, because of dependence on them. Realities change slowly. OK, sorry. One more question: India's democracy and economy now seem to be maturing gradually. How many years has it been since it was taken by Britain? Do you think you can build a new mid-East in just a few years?

Q: Perhaps not. Do you think we were wrong to oust Hussein in Iraq?

A: Whoah! I'm a historian.

Q: But even a historian must have thoughts about...

A: I do. But as the saying goes, "it's wiser to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to speak and remove all doubt."

Q: You refused to communicate with Benjamin Franklin because he was a revolutionary, and you favored the British Monarchy. He is reported to have replied that he would gladly provide you with information about the Decline and Fall of the British Empire. Yet you never did write that book.

A: No, I'm too close, too involved with Britain to do so. That was just Franklin's way of twisting my tail. His best feature was his sense of humor. I don't have any. None whatsoever.

Q: Mr. Gibbon, thank you once more for speaking with me.

A: My pleasure. Good luck with World Power. You will surely need it.

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1. An example of Gibbon's "purple prose": "The Alaric Goths rolled their ponderous wagons down the broad and icy back of the indignant Danube." One just **has** to savor that twice, though the sharp wit and brevity of Mark Twain became the standard in English shortly thereafter

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