

# The New Feudal Age

Cullen Murphy

Judging from news accounts and interviews, numerous people in and around the Trump administration are beguiled by [imperial Rome](#). They see themselves as [interpreters of its lessons](#)—beware immigration; [uphold masculinity](#); make babies—and inheritors of its majesty. A banner at this year’s Conservative Political Action Conference, in Washington, D.C., [depicted Donald Trump in Augustan profile](#), his brow garlanded with laurel leaves. Elon Musk styles himself “Imperator of Mars” and [has named](#) one of his many children Romulus. Steve Bannon [keeps a bust of Julius Caesar](#) in his Capitol Hill office.



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Two decades ago, when *maga* was just a Latin word for “enchantress,” I [wrote a book](#) about ancient Rome and modern America. The book didn’t touch on masculinity or the birth rate, and it didn’t try to explain the fall of Rome; the idea was just to [sift through the story of a past society](#) for clues to the one we live in now. Researching a bygone empire brought me into contact with prominent scholars who generously gave me their time. One man I think about often is the late Ramsay MacMullen, a historian at Yale and the author of the classic 1988 study [Corruption and the Decline of Rome](#)—a book whose lessons retain their grip.

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MacMullen was nearing 80 when I met him, still an active outdoorsman, and at the time considered the greatest living historian of the Roman empire, an honorific bestowed by the American Historical Association. We got together initially for lunch in New Haven, Connecticut, and afterward kept up by phone and email. I already knew him as a jaunty writer, spelunking

among funerary inscriptions and papyrus fragments and bits of ancient poetry. In person, his short, tousled white hair complemented the way he spoke: confident, casual, polydirectional. At lunch, MacMullen brought up a wide range of topics—perhaps dwelling too long on early Church councils—but again and again came back to a single theme: what happens to a polity when central control and common purpose are eroded by expediency, self-interest, and profit. This had been the subject of his book on corruption—a word, as MacMullen used it, with connotations broader than bribery and graft.

What interested him, he explained, were the mechanisms that kept the Roman empire functioning, and how grit worked its way inexorably into the cogs. Rome never had an administrative state as developed as anything we know today, but when it worked, it worked pretty well. What MacMullen called a “train of power” linked authority at the center to faraway commanders and distant magistrates, to minters of coin and provisioners of ships—all the way “to a hundred cobblers in the Bay-of-Naples area, a hundred peasant owners of ox-carts in Cappadocia.”

[From the October 2003 issue: Cullen Murphy on medieval characteristics of the present day](#)

And then it came undone. MacMullen described the problem: Over time, layers of divergent interests came between command and execution, causing the train of power to break. The breakage could come in the form of simple venality—somewhere along the way, someone found it profitable to ignore distant authority. Or it could occur because a public task was put into private hands, and those private hands had their own interests to protect. The military was largely farmed out to barbarian contractors—*foederati*, they were called—who did not always prove reliable, to put it mildly. In many places, the legal system was left to the marketplace: A bronze plaque survives from a public building in Numidia listing how much a litigant needed to pay, and to whom, to ensure that a lawsuit went forward. MacMullen had many examples of such breakage—a whole book of them.

A political scientist might use the phrase *externalization of state functions* to capture much of what MacMullen was looking at. A more familiar term would be *privatization*, the word MacMullen himself used. By the early 2000s, after two decades of deregulation and denationalization, the term had gained wide currency in a different context: to describe the path taken by governments in the West, notably the United States and Great Britain, as ever larger chunks of public responsibility—for security, finances, education, infrastructure, data—were lopped off and put into private hands. Independent fiefdoms were coming to life everywhere. I [had written about this process](#), and it became a big part of my book.

I found myself returning to *Corruption and the Decline of Rome* in the early days of the current

Trump administration, and wondering how MacMullen would have reacted to the rapid dismantling of government agencies and the mass firing of government workers. More and more public functions are now likely to be outsourced. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has been [pushing for years to privatize health care](#) for veterans. Another administration official, Mehmet Oz, has [argued for privatizing Medicare](#)—a program he now oversees. The administration has shown interest in [taking apart the National Weather Service](#) and spinning off some of its functions. It is looking into [fully privatizing Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac](#), which underpin the nation's mortgage industry.

The president has [floated the idea of privatizing](#) the United States Postal Service. On his first day in office, he issued an executive order allowing the Justice Department to again [send inmates to prisons run by private companies](#), reversing the Biden administration's policy. He has promised to deport millions of undocumented people, and elements of that effort are also being privatized. *Politico* reported this spring that investors led by Erik Prince, the founder of the mercenary group once known as Blackwater, had sent a proposal to the White House [arguing for the creation of a private military entity](#) to set up “processing camps” and conduct roundups, possibly with the help of private citizens deputized to make arrests. The administration has as yet said nothing about that idea, but it did [award a \\$151 million contract](#) to the charter company CSI Aviation to operate deportation flights—an opportunity “[too valuable not to pursue](#),” according to an executive of one of CSI's subcarriers.

### [Adam Serwer: The new dark age](#)

MacMullen died three years ago, so I can't ask him about any of this. I do remember two questions I posed when we met. The first I had thought almost preposterous: Could he summarize the evolution of imperial Rome in a single sentence? He said he could do it in three words: “Fewer have more.”

The second question was about privatization, and where it leads. MacMullen was too careful a scholar to venture any grand pronouncement. There is no “must” in history, he explained. He could speculate only about how certain processes had played out in ancient Rome. That said, he liked comparing cultures and time periods (he later sent me [a paper he'd written on corruption](#) in Rome, India, and China in three different eras), and he liked to explore ideas. He thought about my question, then bounced it back: “Are you thinking about the Middle Ages?” he asked. “Or are you thinking about right now?”

The Middle Ages and I had a deal, or so I thought. For my part, I gave them sincere respect (the rise of universities, the revival of philosophy, the invention of eyeglasses) and romantic admiration (the mossy arches, the mottled stained glass, the wafting aroma of spit-roasted boar).

I studied medieval history in college and for many years [collaborated with my father on \*Prince Valiant\*](#), a comic strip set in the Middle Ages. Dank masonry and a roaring fire [still bring a feeling of peace](#).

#### [From the February 1994 issue: Cullen Murphy on Prince Valiant's England](#)

In return for my love, the Middle Ages were supposed to stay where they were. But they have not. With the accelerating advance of privatization, they seem to be moving our way in the form of something that resembles feudalism. Medievalists argue over what that word really means, parsing it with contentious refinement. Was it even understood at the time? Stripped bare, though, the idea is simple enough.

In Europe, as imperial power receded, a new system of organization took hold, one in which power, governance, law, security, rights, and wealth were decentralized and held in private hands. Those who possessed this private power were linked to one another, from highest to lowest, in tiers of vassalage. The people above also had obligations to the people below—administering justice, providing protection. Think of the system, perhaps, as a nesting doll of oligarchs presiding over a great mass of people who subsisted as villeins and serfs.

The idea of governments as public ventures with a public purpose and some degree of public voice—what the Mayflower Compact called a “civill Body Politick”—took a long time to claw its way back into existence. Most people in the developed world have been living in a civill Body Politick, or something that aspires to be one, for several centuries. I won’t overstate how successful this experiment has been, but it’s the reason we have police forces rather than vigilantes, and safety nets rather than alms thrown haphazardly from horseback by men in tights.

In the 1980s and ’90s, privatization started gaining traction again, and it had plenty of help. Anti-government sentiment created opportunities, and entrepreneurs seized them. Privatization was also pushed by policy makers who saw outsourcing as inherently more efficient. And besides, the public sector can’t do everything. Case by case, privatization of this or that may well make sense. The problem comes in the sheer accumulation. In the U.S., even before Trump took office a second time, there were [roughly twice as many](#) people employed by private contractors to [do the federal government’s business](#) as there were federal employees.

As the pace of privatization picked up in the 21st century, the idea of “neo-feudalism” or “techno-feudalism” began to interest scholars and theorists—[Joel Kotkin](#), [Jodi Dean](#), [Robert Kuttner](#), and [Yanis Varoufakis](#), among others. Most of the scholars are profoundly wary: They foresee an erosion of transparency, a disregard for individual rights, and a concentration of power among an ever smaller group of wealthy barons, even as the bulk of the population is relegated to service

jobs that amount to a modern form of serfdom. For their part, theorists on the techno-libertarian or neo-reactionary fringe, observing from egg chairs in the Sky Lounge, see all these same things, and can't wait.

The meaning and consequences of privatization may be up for debate, but the phenomenon itself can't be argued away. To run through a few examples:

Holding a monopoly on control of the money supply was once a hallmark of public power. In the span of a decade, [private cryptocurrencies have undermined that control](#) while at the same time enabling a wide range of illicit activities. Cryptocurrencies are [hard to regulate](#) even when there's a will, which there often isn't. In the U.S., Trump and his family are heavily involved in the crypto business. In April, [the president announced](#) that he would invite the top 220 investors in his \$TRUMP meme coin to a private dinner; the value of the meme coin rose within hours by 60 percent.

A monopoly on the legitimate use of force—replacing the knights and pikemen of sundry vassals with professional standing armies—was another traditional hallmark of public power. [Donald Rumsfeld famously observed](#) that “you go to war with the army you have,” but another option today is “the army you rent.” Globe-spanning [private military companies](#) such as the Wagner Group and Triple Canopy recall the roving mercenary *Landsknechte* of yore. The world is awash with mustered-out veterans of recent wars. Governments and corporations alike often want kinetic solutions without legal oversight. (“Like medieval mercenaries,” [a 2019 report from National Defense University](#) observes, today's freelance personnel “can prove overly brutal when executing contracts.”) From 2007 to 2012, the U.S. alone spent \$160 billion on private security contractors. Growing up alongside them—an industry even larger in size—are the [private intelligence-gathering companies](#), such as Palantir, on which the U.S. spends a significant portion of its intelligence budget. The very name Palantir seems to harken back, via Tolkien, to a feudal world.

Public police forces with a mission to protect everyone are largely a 19th-century invention. But police forces [are shrinking](#). In the U.S., anyone with money and a need now [hires private security guards](#), who [outnumber police officers](#) by a ratio of 2 to 1. Among companies based in the U.S., the [third-largest global employer](#)—after Amazon and Walmart—is a private security firm, Allied Universal. Private guards patrol small towns and swaths of entire cities. A consortium of hundreds of businesses in Portland, Oregon, [hired a company](#) named Echelon Protective Services to secure their downtown precinct, day and night. During the fires that devastated Los Angeles in January, the wealthiest residents of Brentwood called in [the secretive security firm Covered 6](#) to protect their homes from looting. As for personal protection, the market has no ceiling. Mark

Zuckerberg's [reported annual budget for personal security](#) is \$23 million, five times more than the pope pays for the Swiss Guards.

As in medieval times, the affluent withdraw behind barriers. If it were built today, Windsor Castle would be described in the sales prospectus as a “privately governed residential community.” In the 1990s, when the economist Robert Reich began writing about “the secession of the successful,” some 3 million American housing units were lodged inside gated communities, which protected a population of about 8 million. Today, [gated communities](#) encompass 14 million housing units. On its website, a real-estate company in Florida earlier this year asked readers, “Is a Moat Right for You?” It was an April Fools’ joke, but not a very good one, because modern moated residences already exist. Perhaps the most exclusive gated community in the world is actually an island—[Indian Creek Village](#), in Biscayne Bay, Florida, with 89 residents (including Jeff Bezos, Ivanka Trump, and Jared Kushner) and a perimeter-security radar system designed by the Israeli company Magos. Officers in speedboats intercept anyone venturing too close.

Privatization has also upended the law. One example from an ambitious survey by Robert Kuttner and Katherine V. W. Stone in *The American Prospect*: the growing use of compulsory arbitration, written by corporations into private contracts, as a way of settling consumer and employment disputes. The public court system is clogged. Arbitration—the “outsourcing of jurisprudence,” as the authors call it—creates a parallel private system, one in which efficiency may be more highly valued than public oversight or due process.

Oversight more broadly—of the environment, food, drugs, finance—has been drifting for decades into the hands of those being overseen. In their 2021 book, [The Privatization of Everything](#), Donald Cohen and Allen Mikaelian documented the loss of public control over water, roads, welfare, parks, and much else. The deliberate dismantling of government in America in recent months, and its replacement with something built on privatized power and networks of personal allegiance, accelerates what was long under way. Its spirit was captured decades ago in a maxim of Ronald Reagan’s economic adviser Murray Weidenbaum: “Don’t just stand there—undo something!”

One of the most watched television programs in the U.K. last year was the ITV series *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*, a [dramatized version of events](#) that took place starting decades ago. Britain’s postal system, once overseen directly by a government minister, became a (government-owned) statutory corporation in 1970. In time, parts of it were spun off—since the days of Margaret Thatcher, the nation has pursued privatization more aggressively than most other countries—and the legal and oversight structure was subjected to continual tinkering. In [a deal originating as a “public-private partnership”](#) arrangement, the Post Office in the late 1990s computerized its

accounting and other operations; the system was supplied by a U.K. company that was then acquired by the technology giant Fujitsu. Glitches in the software soon resulted in hundreds of rural postmasters being falsely accused of theft and summarily fired. Several went to prison. A number committed suicide. Fujitsu has acknowledged the errors; [it does not accept blame](#) for the entire cascade of injustice. [Inside the Post Office](#), corporate opacity and dispersed responsibility made concealment easy and accountability hard. Without [investigative reporting by the trade publication Computer Weekly](#)—and, of course, the TV series—there might have been no accountability at all.

In the end, the head of the Post Office suffered an ironically feudal fate: Formerly a Commander of the Order of the British Empire, she had her CBE status revoked by King Charles III. And Mr. Bates, the local postmaster who organized resistance by the subpostmasters, was knighted.

*Mr Bates vs the Post Office* enjoyed great storytelling advantages—a gnomish hero, angry villagers, and all that verdant countryside. But grit working its way into the cogs of government is rarely cinematic or even in public view. The consequences may reveal themselves slowly, and often come down to the fine print. In 2008, desperate for cash, [Chicago privatized its parking meters](#), selling off the rights to all the revenue for 75 years to a group of investors led by Morgan Stanley. A “true-up” provision in the contract requires the city to compensate investors for lost revenue when meters are taken out of service—a provision that [weighs on decision making](#) whenever the city considers projects that would eliminate meters or favor mass transit over cars. The rights to operate toll highways have been sold off by some jurisdictions to private companies, including foreign ones. The [fine print in the contracts often prevents improvements](#) to adjacent roads on the grounds that such enhancement would create undue competition. [Private prisons generally put a quota clause](#) into their agreements. States and municipalities may be hoping, as a matter of policy, to reduce their prison populations, but the beds in private prisons must be filled regardless.

Evoking the train of power that enables effective government, MacMullen wrote: “At every point of connection the original intent must be transmitted as it was received. Otherwise it will come to nothing.” Control and accountability are the bedrock. Control: Who makes the decisions and who decides whether they will be executed—and for whose benefit? Accountability: Who determines whether something has gone wrong, and who determines whether the problem is fixed? In a privatized world, government becomes “diffuse, unstable, unpredictable,” and the skein of responsibility more and more attenuated. Contractors hire subcontractors, who hire subcontractors of their own. “I can’t tell you about the sub to the sub to the sub,” [a NATO official told The New York Times](#) in 2010 when asked about convoy guards in Afghanistan who turned

out to be in league with the Taliban. Throughout much of our spun-off government today, “the sub to the sub to the sub” is almost a job description.

Is feudalism our future? There is no “must” in history, and the present is as much a riddle as anything that lies ahead. A privatized world may be a temporary aberration, a new stage of development, or just the default setting of human society. Our own era doesn’t have a name yet, and it won’t be up to us to give it one. From the perspective of some far-distant vantage point, the age we inhabit may even come to seem “Middle.” With contentious refinement, historians will parse what “privatization” might have meant, and wonder whether we understood it at the time.

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By Cullen Murphy

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