**[LIVE CHAT: Barry Strauss, Professor of History and Classics, Thursday May 18th at 1:00pm EST](http://forums.talkingpointsmemo.com/t/live-chat-barry-strauss-professor-of-history-and-classics-thursday-may-18th-at-1-00pm-est/55860)**

Barry Strauss is Professor of History and Classics, Bryce and Edith M. Bowmar Professor in Humanistic Studies at Cornell University, and a military and naval historian and consultant. As the Series Editor of the Princeton History of the Ancient World and author of seven books on ancient history, Professor Strauss has written extensively on the subject of leadership and the lessons that can be learned from the experiences of the greatest political and military leaders of the ancient world (Caesar, Hannibal, Alexander among many others).

Professor Strauss is also an expert on geopolitics including the Middle East, terrorism, Europe, the Mediterranean and US alliances. He is currently director as well as a founder of Cornell’s Program on Freedom and Free Societies, which investigates challenges to constitutional liberty at home and abroad.

Barry will be in The Hive Thursday May 18th at 1 PM EST for a chat about leaders of the ancient world and corporate leadership in today's world. Submit your questions below at any time or feel free to join us on Thursday!

--

**bragadin**

Professor Strauss, the works that I've read so far on the subject of ancient Rome tend to focus on emperors or other famous leaders, rather than the singular, talented, and perhaps rakish types who may have worked on their behalf. What inspired this thought is that we know Petronius Arbiter famously hung around in Nero's circle, and we know the historian Suetonius was on hand for Hadrian's activities. Yet, Tacitus only gives us a few paragraphs on what Petronius was really like, and I've struggled to get a read on Suetonius, apart from what he wrote. There was that lost book of his, something like, "Lives of Famous Whores." The goal would be to find a work that better describes these two Romans, or some other Roman of distinction who nevertheless lived a full, raffish cycle. (Rakes make good first-person narrators.) Perhaps the only path is to read the well-known books and use conjecture and imagination for the rest. The goal is to penetrate the world to the extent that a fictional work might be written from the POV of one of these peripheral Romans who nevertheless got in the soup. At any rate...I'm shooting craps here--if you can't think of anything, no worries. The British furnished us with a work already: "Rogues, Villains and Eccentrics: An A-Z of Roguish Britons Through the Ages." Yet Rome continues to fascinate. Cheers, Bragadin.

**cristina\_cabrera**

Hi Professor,

Several questions:

1) Would ISIS have been able to grow in its numbers and impact without social media/internet recruitment tools? Could the terrorist organization exist in its current form in say, 1997?
2) Is the motive behind Russia's interference in Western elections to keep Western powers off Russia's back, or to propagate Russia's far-right ideology to as many countries as possible?
3) Do the leaders (not the rank-and-file members) of terrorist organizations such as ISIS and Al-Queda genuinely believe they will successfully start a global jihad, or is there primarily a financial/political motive for the violence that somehow benefits them?
4) How do ancient leaders compare to today's corporate leaders? I'm interested in hearing the connection between them.

Thank you!

**jackiewilhelm**

Hey Professor Strauss,

What kind of connections can be made between the current global leaders and those you discuss in your book. You talk about how Caesar and Alexander are both top-down leaders who exhibit both power and ego in their leadership roles, and I'm curious if there are any current leaders in the world, both in business or politics, that you can think of that compare to Caesar or Alexander?

How was Cornell's Program on Freedom and Free Societies learned to function under a Trump administration and how does the program go about investigating challenges to constitutional liberties under this new president who seems to spend his time trying to pass laws that shrink those rights?

Many of the leaders you write about are seeking to be disrupters, whether through militaristic actions or political ones, what kind of connections are there, if any, between people like Hannibal and Alexander and say Russia's attempt to disrupt the American election, or ISIS and Al-Queda and the War on Terror?

**cristina\_cabrera**

Hi Barry, welcome to The Hive! Feel free to answer the questions in any order you'd like.

**barry\_strauss**

Hi, Bragadin, thanks for your questions. We know very little about Petronius and the best way to approach him is to read his Satyricon. You might also find grist for your mill in Petronius: A Handbook. On Suetonius there is a good book by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill. You'll also find some tidbits about a rakish Roman in Plutarch's Life of Lucullus.

**barry\_strauss**

Thanks. Will do!

**annierees**

Do populist movements in Europe always mean a pivot towards pro-Russia policies?

**barry\_strauss**

Successful leaders, whether in ancient times or today, employ a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches. Even Julius Caesar, a dictator, paid a lot of attention to ordinary soldiers. For example, he made sure to pay them generously and to honor them in his propaganda. Likewise, nowadays even charismatic leaders have to treat followers generously and offer real rewards.

**barry\_strauss**

There's no question that social media/internet recruitment has helped ISIS grow but there were terrorist and other non-state international organizations before the digital age, and ISIS could surely have had some success in an earlier era. I don't think we should underestimate the genuine religious convictions of ISIS leaders. Of course, some of them might be motivated by money or power but it's religion that moves most.

**barry\_strauss**

Disruptive leadership can be a good thing or bad thing, depending on the context and your point of view. For instance, driverless cars, if successful and widespread, will be highly disruptive to the economy and could put millions of drivers out of work. And yet, they could also create many new jobs and liberate both the elderly and young people who now can't drive. Disrupting another country's election is a different matter, of course. Yet probably every country, including the US, does so from time to time.
Like Putin, Hannibal tried to get into his enemy's head and to disrupt Roman plans. Alexander was a master of propaganda and of appealing to foreign (actually, conquered) constituencies.

**barry\_strauss**

Freedom & Free Societies has been on hiatus this year while I've been on leave. We will invite speakers and hold conversations next year about the rapidly changing American political scene and its challenges.

**barry\_strauss**

Populist movements in Europe often but not always mean a pivot toward pro-Russian policies. Attitudes toward Russia play little role in Brexit, for instance. In Italy, most of the parties tend to be friendly toward Russia. Again, Russia policy plays little role in Italy's populist Five-Star Movement.

**barry\_strauss**

Some of the topics for Freedom & Free Societies to discuss in the fall might be: what are the rights of undocumented aliens and does the Trump administration respect the, ditto for refugees, has the president violated the rule of law or is he behaving within constitutional limits, what is the difference between resistance and opposition and which is appropriate. But I suspect there will be new and additional topics by the fall.

**annierees**

That makes sense re: Brexit and Italy, thanks, and is interesting. There has been some reporting that Russia tried to destabalize the French election between Le Pen and Macron, but less for political gain (the EU is Russia's biggest trading partner) than as a kind of PR power move. Is that a characterization you'd agree with? It seems as though Russia has been a major destabilizing force and yet wouldn't Russian trading be put into jeopardy if the EU were to become more fractured? (For example, if Le Pen somehow were to win the parliamentary election in June)

**barry\_strauss**

The Russians use interference in elections and digital media more generally as a force multiplier. With their weak economy they are limited in their ability to project power otherwise, so digital interference is extremely cost-effective. Their motives are mixed. In part they are defensive, in part they want to project power. Also, the regime wants victories in order to justify itself in the eyes of its own people. The more it can show western democracies as hollow or broken, the more it can justify its own system of government.

**cristina\_cabrera**

So then Russia's election interference doesn't necessarily have the end goal of "converting" Western democracies to more authoritarian regimes? It's more about Russia flexing its muscles?

Speaking of Russia, how much of its population is pro-Kremlin? If the government feels like it's necessary to justify itself to the people, isn't that a sign they're getting sick of it? And if they have a weak economy, is their current system of government sustainable?

**barry\_strauss**

Good questions, thanks. Huge political advantage for Russia if LePen had won. The combination of EU and NATO represents the strongest opposition to Russia's geopolitical goals in Europe, that is, to rebuilding the old Tsarist/Soviet sphere of influence/security zone/empire. LePen promised to pull France out of both EU and NATO, which would have been great for Putin, especially if he thought she owed her victory to Russian support. As far as economics, Putin might have figured that European countries would trade with Russia anyhow, EU or no EU, because of Russia's energy reserves. I see it not as PR power move but a geopolitical power move!

**barry\_strauss**

Good questions, thanks. I have no doubt that Russian leaders have contempt for democracy. But I think they are more interested in showing their own people the weakness of democracy than in converting other regimes. There is real opposition to the regime in Russia and the regime knows it, which is why it is continually engaged in repression of its opponents. Russian politics since 1989/1991 and the failure of democracy has been tragic. At the moment, unfortunately, the regime looks sustainable. They make propaganda hay out of military success abroad in Syria and muscle-flexing in the Baltic, for example.

**cristina\_cabrera**

With the rise of protests like Occupy Wall Street and Bernie Sanders, who ran on a platform of fixing income inequality, it seems like our current leaders aren't following the model you're describing (generous pay and rewards for labor) based on people's attitudes towards politics. Even Trump seemed to catch onto that ("I'm bringing jobs back" etc).

If successful leaders have to reward the people at the bottom sufficiently and (based on the attitude I described) the working class doesn't feel like they are, will this inevitably lead to a post-capitalist society if leaders are pressured to fairly compensate their workers?

**barry\_strauss**

Another excellent question. In my opinion the rise of inequality and how to address it is one of the major issues of our time. As you say, Trump as well as Bernie rode that wave in last year's election. I think that voters will demand results from the politicians. If Trump and the GOP don't bring those results, count on them being quickly voted out of office. In that case, the interesting question is whether the Democrats will rise to the occasion with leaders and policies that speak to what people want and need. Of course, there's a healthy debate as to what mix of market-driven and/or redistributionist policies would yield a more just society.

**bragadin**

Professor, in today's world, in which we see the campaign results of Citizens United, is it more difficult for a democratic leader to speak truth to the electorate? What leader from the classical world could arguably have managed it? Does it depend on the persuasive power of the speaker? Or do outside propaganda campaigns make it all but impossible, especially during election season?

**barry\_strauss**

Great question. It's always difficult to speak truth to the electorate! I think that both the improbable success of Trump and Bernie's great run show that there is room for outsiders. Maybe. It is exceptionally difficult to bring change. Doing so requires a combination of Ciceronian eloquence and Machiavellian force and fraud. Pericles is a relatively optimistic example of someone who brought democratic change to his country (Athens) but he ended up starting the disastrous Peloponnesian War. In Rome, sadly, the change agent was Julius Caesar, a dictator and warmonger but one cared more for ordinary people than most Roman politicians. History is no bowl of cherries.

**cristina\_cabrera**

Great, thank you so much for being with us and giving valuable insight today, Barry!

**barry\_strauss**

You're very welcome, Cristina. Thanks for hosting me!

**bragadin**

Thanks for your thoughts as well as the book recommendations.

**barry\_strauss**

You're very welcome.