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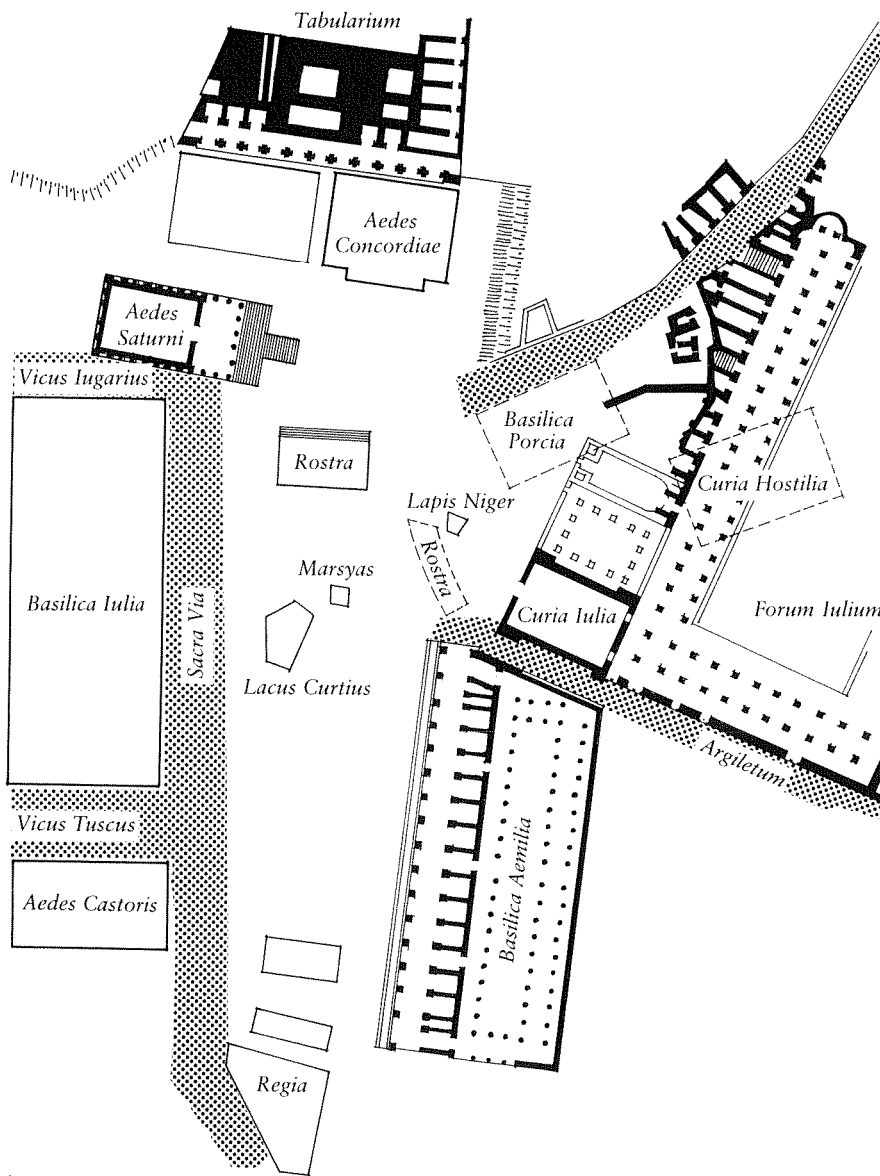
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Reflections on Political Space: The Roman Forum and Capitol Hill, Washington, D.C.

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I Roman Forum about 42 B.C.

Drawing by Kyle Thayer
Adapted from drawing by Paul Zanker,
Forum Romanum (Tubingen: Ernst Wasmuth
Verlag, 1972)

From Citizens' Forum to Museum of the Emperors

Among the many products sold by vendors outside the Forum are transparency overlays showing what the Forum looked like at different times in the Roman era. The overlays make clear how much of the story of the Forum's transformation entails the contraction of usable space, the creation of monumental forms, and the appearance of connections to new institutions.

In the republican period, legal institutions were, even in a visual sense, the organizing center. The Senate, the Comitium (the chief place of assembly of the Roman people) and the Rostra were the central organizing elements. The Comitium, in the northeast corner of the Forum, consisted of a circular piazza with a stepped incline, on which the people's representatives met to debate and vote. Located to the north were the Curia Hostilia and the Senaculum, meeting houses of the Roman Senate. The platform from which the magistrates addressed the people—the Rostra—was located just to the south.¹ The large space opening out from this area—what we usually think of as The Forum—was the stage for legal trials, electoral campaigns, sacrifices, important funerals, and served also as a meeting place where all varieties of personal business were conducted.

Places of civic and religious significance surrounded this center. From the beginning, the sacred spaces included symbols of the early history of Rome. Among the venerated symbols placed there were a mysterious black stone,

the *Lapis Niger*, marking a place of ill omen, and a fig tree commemorating Romulus, Rome's mythical founder. The Regia, where a "king of Sacred Rites" served the Roman State cult, was another important space dating from this early period when Rome was ruled by kings.² The Vestal Virgins also lived in the Forum beginning in these earliest times. The Vestals, who still intrigue the modern imagination, had responsibility for guarding the eternal flame, symbol of the Roman hearth and state.

In the Republican period that followed the overthrowing of the kings, the Romans established new places of civic worship: a temple to Castor and Pollux, twin deities associated with the founding of the Republic; a temple to Saturn, where the state funds were kept; and the Sacred Way, on which so many triumphant generals entered as gods—painted even in godlike purple—and left as servants of Jupiter and the State, ritually humbled on the steps of Jupiter's temple on the Capitoline Hill.

The collapse of the Republic was prefigured in the growing power of military men in the first century B.C. The military dynasts—Marius, Sulla, Pompey the Great—refused to accept the traditional subservience to the Senate and accumulated great personal wealth and power at the expense of the state. Cato the Younger was one of the heroic figures of this last period of the Republic. In a stream of speeches and letters, which are preserved only in fragments now, he set forth views on public responsibility and

institutional renewal aimed at securing the Republic's survival.³ Cato's words proved useless, however: the century-long weakening of the republican institutions finally culminated in the dictatorship of the greatest of the military dynasts, Julius Caesar.

Caesar's reorganization of the Forum marked the beginning of its transformation from citizens' meeting place to imperial museum. His expressed motives were to create more space in the Forum and to improve the existing structures, but his work resulted in the substantial reduction both of civic spaces and of the role of representative institutions. He reoriented the Forum space slightly toward the northwest and began building the Basilica Iulia in which to house the formerly open-air law courts. He destroyed the republican Rostra. As its foundations disappeared under new pavement, so did the political importance of the magistrates, the people's elected representatives. On the old site of the Rostra, the pavement was prepared for a new and smaller Comitium, an action made possible by the removal of the legislative assembly from the Forum to a location in the Campus Martius across town. Not even the Senate House was sacrosanct; Caesar also started the construction of a new Curia.

Caesar's assassination put a temporary halt to the reshaping of the Forum. After the turmoil of the civil wars had subsided, a new leader and a new form of government emerged. These

changes were expressed spatially in the Roman Forum. Augustus, the adopted heir of Caesar, completed many of his stepfather's programs. He completed the new Curia, and the rostra he erected is the one whose remains we see today. Augustus also erected a memorial column on the spot where Caesar's body was burned by his assassins. Later the column was replaced by a temple to the by then-deified Julius Caesar. This allocation of public space to a temple for a mortal man was an outward sign of a profound political change.

The concern for maintaining an attitude of exalted veneration toward Caesar and other heroes of the Roman past explains much of Augustus' work on the monuments of the Forum. A telling instance is his rebuilding of the Column of Gaius Duilius. The column had been erected originally to commemorate Gaius' great naval victory over the Carthaginians in the third century B.C. The inscription it bore described the circumstances of the victory. Augustus rebuilt the monument and had the inscription recarved. In doing so, he was careful to maintain the archaic third-century spelling, but he substituted rich luna marble for the less expensive stone of the original. Here he revealed what would become the characteristic imperial concern: that the Forum have appropriate monuments and that they be visually magnificent.

Under Augustus, as under Caesar, the usable space in the Forum shrank, a physical change reflecting

the shrinking political role of the people and the Senate. The Senate continued to meet in the Curia, but its role was increasingly symbolic and its endorsement of imperial decisions increasingly *pro forma*. The voting and legislative assemblies of the people gradually lost even their symbolic role in supporting the emperor. Under Augustus' successors, they were effectively abolished. The new Rostra was a spectacular, richly marbled monument, but its role in political life became increasingly marginal.⁴

As civic activity declined in the Forum, the number of commemorative monuments continued to increase. In the later years of Augustus' long reign, the central area of the Forum acquired a new triumphal arch in honor of the emperor, another triumphal arch dedicated to the military heroes Gaius and Lucius, and a Golden Milestone to symbolize the point of convergence of the great roads of Rome.

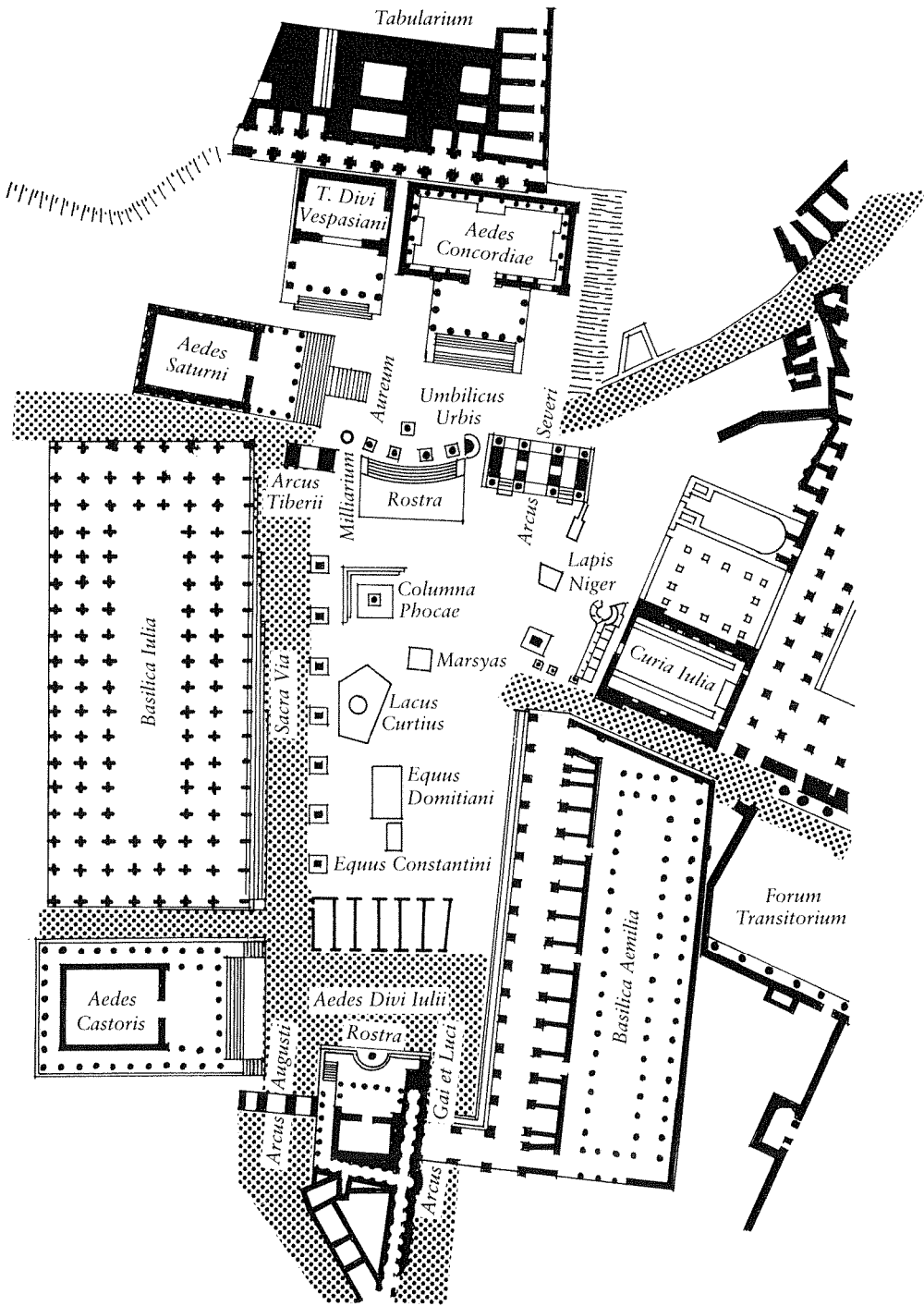
Later emperors imitated Augustus' example. Tiberius built another triumphal arch in the Forum. Domitian erected an equestrian statue of himself. Septimius Severus erected the grandest arch of all between the Curia and the Rostra. Diocletian had seven honorary columns dedicated to private citizens. In the fourth century Constantine was honored by an equestrian statue, and later in the century Stilicho received a monument now represented only by its inscription. Emperors continued to leave their marks on the Forum

as late as the sixth century. The Column of Phocas, the last known addition, still stands like an arrow in the breast of the surrounding ruins. All through these centuries, while the Forum acquired new imperial monuments, the archaic Roman civic symbols—the *Lapis Niger*, the *Lacus Curtius*, the Fountain of Iuturna, and the statue of Marsyas—were kept up, looking very much as they had in the centuries before Christ. In this way, the Roman Forum was maintained at imperial expense and filled with imperial monuments; essentially, it served as a museum of the Empire.

A visitor to the Roman Forum today finds the ancient space dotted with tourists who saunter among the monuments and wander down the stone streets. Most of these modern visitors are there to “take in” the remains of the Roman past just as they would go to any museum to see the show on Van Gogh or the exhibit on King Tut. In this role, the modern tourist comes close to the experience of the visitor to the Roman Forum during the period of the Empire. The citizens of the Empire had rights, but their magistrates were no longer the deciding force in government. Instead, citizens went to the Forum to see the sites just as any tourist on holiday might today. Indeed, the Forum was an even greater tourist attraction in the imperial period than it is today. Visitors to the capital came to admire the Phrygian marble columns of the Basilica Aemilia, to gaze at the *Lacus Curtius*, or to make a small offering for the welfare of the revered Augustus.

2 Roman Forum between A.D. 203 and 608.

Drawing by Kyle Thayer
Adapted from drawing by Paul Zanker,
Forum Romanum (Tubingen: Ernst Wasmuth
Verlag, 1972)



The Forum as a Window on the Modern World

The emperors' museum is an evocative metaphor for many Americans, because we have come to feel some apprehension about the vitality of our own popular institutions and civic connections. Books appear about the "imperial presidency" and the "managerial state," and these make us wonder whether the trajectory of American political life has been (or will in the end be) analogous to that of the Romans: a story of crumbling civic connections, increasing executive power, declining popular institutions, and the gradual transformation of citizens into passive spectators.

Often these fears are overstated. Our voluntary organizations and legislative bodies are far more than popular shells; and our voting, campaigning, and protesting hardly constitute passivity. Yet if we give our American Forum a sharp appraisal, with the skeptical eyes of a modern Cato, these reassuring signs of republican vitality are not all we see. Let us compare Washington and Rome as a latter-day Cato might compare them.

Platonic Forms

As we walk through the Roman Forum, we are impressed by the sense of intimacy it conveys. There is a human scale to the Forum. The forms are densely packed, cast together in an amiable jumble and far from overwhelming in their proportions. For a citizen of republican Rome, the Forum must have had something of the messy familiarity of a well-lived-in home. It is what heaven might look like if

designed by E. M. Forster or some other novelist devoted to the meaningfulness of accumulated traditions and the rich texture of familiar detail.

From the perspective of the Forum, it is remarkable that so few links to unifying symbols, important events, or great deeds exist in the public spaces of Washington. Washington is a curiously barren place. It is a pristine city, made for governing, somehow aloof from history and any civic imagination that looks for concrete symbols of cultural identity. It is also an imposing city, self-consciously larger than life. In Washington, we see vast green spaces, long walkways, and reflecting pools setting off a few massive monuments. The great buildings of our governing institutions and our great presidential monuments have a larger-than-life and unchanging quality about them. There is none of the fussiness of a citizen-made history and little that is human-sized in the environment.

From a purely spatial point of view, it is striking that our democratic capital (at least since its reconstruction after the War of 1812) is what heaven might look like if it had been designed by a particularly dignified nineteenth-century monarch. Public Washington, in its unchanging grandeur, seems to represent unchanging ideals of government separate from the particular manifestations of the nation's history and the wills of men. It is, in short, a Platonic space: an ideal sphere of timeless forms.

There are important implications in this difference between Rome and Washington. It seems likely to us that the intimate, cluttered environment of the early Roman Forum encouraged feelings of familiarity and psychological "ownership" among citizens in relation to their political institutions.⁵ In contrast to the Forum, public Washington was clearly never intended to spark a sense of direct possession or intimate familiarity. In Platonic Washington, our experience of the political order is as something abstract, with no direct connection to our own lives, or even to our nation's history. There is a potential both for moral inspiration and profound alienation from such an abstract and distant government. Public Washington, consequently, is a place in which to be inspired and/or humbled by government, but not a place in which to feel a concrete and familiar connection to history, deeds, and purposes.

The Television Rostra

As we walk past the Rostra area, we are struck by how little importance crowds now play in political life and how, too, the importance of crowd-stirring rhetoric has declined. The great addresses and passion plays of political life are now reserved for televised performances. Television can reach the largest numbers of people, and it is therefore inevitably the medium of choice for those who have access to it.

Not many of our sages would wish to reinstate the public rostrum

as the primary base of contact between leaders and citizens. At least since the days of the French Revolution, the public rostrum has had a bad reputation as the cradle of demagoguery. Books on crowd psychology dating from that era describe the violent emotions and loss of judgment to which normal men and women were vulnerable when they stood armpit to armpit in the hot sun, electrically engaged by one another's enthusiasm and the coursing rhetoric of a skillful demagogue.

Television is, as is well-known, a "cool medium." Crowd-stirring rhetoric works about as well on television as it does at a family barbecue. The man who can look us square in the eye and address us frankly, yet in a genial manner, that is the man we trust at the barbecue. And he is also the man we tend to trust on television. Because television is a cool medium, the political dangers of the medium come from being overly sedated rather than from becoming overly excited. Whereas in Roman times the main danger was demagoguery, in modern times lullagoguery is the primary problem posed by the TV rostrum.

This problem arises not simply from the earnest yet genial tone of voice of the effective television communicator. It also reflects the several layers of filtering that political communications on television receive. First, we hear it. Then the reporters tell us what it means. Then the commentators analyze it in a measured way. Then the editorialists gravely applaud

or criticize it. Then the pollsters conduct a poll on it and show us the average response, the amount of skepticism, and the scientific margins of error in their estimates.

One almost needs to be a firebrand on the order of Stokely Carmichael to emerge from these successive cooling chambers with any political passion remaining. Some do, of course, but not many. If everything goes well, the system of communication based on the television rostrum is a wonderful mechanism for maintaining moderation (and even somnambulism) in the citizenry.

However, the cooperation of the media is necessary for the system to work in this way. The most important crowd—and perhaps the only important crowd now—is the media crowd. Consequently, for a politician, poor command of the media or poor relations with journalists (the latter a fairly cynical breed) assures controversy and passionate discontent, however virtuous the reign. By contrast, the political leader who can manage good relations with the media crowd can get away with extraordinary blunders, misjudgments, backtrackings, mendacity, irresponsibility, and disorder—as the examples of Kennedy and Reagan seem variously to demonstrate.

The television rostrum promises cool and rational discourse, a major improvement in the nature of our contact with political leaders. But this promise has been only partially fulfilled. We may have diminished demagoguery, but we have yet to

find a safeguard against passivity. And we often give presidents who work well with the media almost a blank check on public regard.

Executive Spaces

If we had a book of overlays for modern Washington similar to the one we can purchase at the Roman Forum, we would see an equally impressive record of change, but one that is more mixed in its implications. We would see a modest growth in congressional space, a sharp growth in presidential space, and a tremendous growth in both executive department space and space occupied by lobbyists and representatives of interest groups. Executive office buildings, in particular, would begin to roll like rippling muscles down Independence Avenue and into the Maryland and Virginia suburbs. If we could also look at traffic patterns on the overlays, we would see the main arteries swollen with the traffic of government officials and occasionally occupied in a dramatic way by demonstrators. In the summer months, these arteries would be clogged with people on their way to take pictures of their government's monuments.

The analogy with Rome is easily overstated. The swelling of executive power in the United States has not been accompanied by the same decline in representative institutions that we see in imperial Rome. Organizations like the Sierra Club, the National Rifle Association, the NAACP, and the Business Roundtable represent the

economic interests and ideals of specific segments of the American public, and they have grown nearly as fast as the executive departments.

At the same time, the spatial record speaks eloquently about the dilemmas of the legislative branch. The current Washington overlay would be generously splashed with executive blue and interest group red, but only lightly sprinkled with congressional white. Among its other functions, Congress is expected to monitor the executive branch and to respond judiciously to the interests groups. On the basis of the spatial record alone, we would have reason to wonder whether Congress still has the resources to do either job well.

If we look beyond the spatial record, we can see just how much decision-making power and governing functions have swung to the executive since the 1960s. The executive is capable of organization in a way that Congress is not. Moreover, on issues that require quick responses or constancy in policy, there is a natural tendency for the executive to dominate. At the end of a long period of decline, Congress is still something more than a shell of representative government. But it long ago ceded leadership to the executive, and it now seems weaker in its oversight functions as well. Because of this, America leans progressively toward a still more completely executive-centered system.

Presidents have argued that Congress lacks the unity, the

breadth of vision, and (often) the seriousness of purpose to provide effective leadership. The vanity and parochialism of many individual Congressmen seem to confirm these opinions on too many occasions. Yet an effective legislative branch is essential as a check on presidential power and as a strong center in its own right.

The question is whether Congress can ever again provide the kind of leadership it was intended to provide when faced with doubtful executives. In his letters, Cato once argued that to end the erosion in the powers and functions of the Roman Senate would require a return to the traditional Roman values—virtue, constancy, seriousness, and restraint. If balanced by a proper appreciation of what most Congressmen still do well, which is to represent the interests of their regions and major supporters, his recommendations seem appropriate to the United States as well.

False Analogies and Legitimate Concerns

Do our concerns about the trajectory of American politics, symbolized by the metaphor of the emperors' museum, have substance? Again, we would emphasize that they can be overstated. Our executive system is, after all, a popular system. Presidents do not operate in a vacuum. When the media is alert, debate on policy is relatively serious and unrestrained. And while few of us feel a comfortable sense of "being at home" in Washington, our views are avidly followed by our approval-conscious politicians.

Still, there are significant points of concern. Our most important forums are not designed to develop a sense of psychological "ownership" of the civic order, but rather to inspire or to humble us. There is a special vulnerability in our dependence on a media "crowd" that tends to be overly submissive and overly pettish by turns. Moreover, there is a worrisome correspondence between the increasing marginality of the American Congress and the decline of the Roman legislative bodies.

And there is another, even more direct way in which the imperial museum metaphor is relevant to modern Washington. Like so many other places in the country, Washington is becoming a treasure trove of the creative arts and a great conservator of the creative acts of the past. Our greatest national library and our greatest national history museum are located in Washington, and the Hirschorn and the National Gallery have grown to become important collections in the

visual arts as well. Other important institutions devoted to studies of the past now also exist in Washington. The critic George Steiner has gone so far as to suggest that the United States may be destined to become the great “museum culture” on the planet. Steiner worries about the possible substitution of preeminence in preservation for preeminence in creation. He also notes, with irony, that the United States, so long the symbol of the new and the progressive, is now becoming the most “active watchman of the classic past.”⁶

The concern is still more relevant to the political sphere, however. Beginning with the Kennedy Administration, a cult of executive control has flourished in the United States. For the first time since the Federalist era, leading advisers to American presidents no longer feel compelled to state a basic faith in democratic participation via representative government. It is out of this atmosphere that candidates for high appointive office can speak publicly and without embarrassment of an overabundance of democracy—of a “democratic distemper,” which tends to weaken the capacity of government executive to achieve its goals.⁷ There is something odd, and indeed chilling, about these expressions of distrust in the creative acts of today’s citizens, if they are looked at in juxtaposition with our increasingly avid collection and appreciation of the creative acts of the past. With regard to these points of concern, the history of the imperial museum

remains a cautionary tale worthy of reflection and the figure of Cato, the proponent of civic responsibility, a relevant exemplar.

Notes

- 1 The Rostra was given its name in 338 B.C. when beaks of ships—in Latin, *rostra*—were attached to the front of the speaker’s bridge as a symbol of a recent naval victory.
- 2 Other symbols of Rome were in the open meeting space of the Forum: the olive, fig, and grape vine, which were native plants important to Roman agriculture; a statue of the mythical figure Marsyas who was suspended from a tree, awaiting punishment for having challenged Apollo to a musical contest (often seen as a symbolic warning against presumption); and the *lacus Curtius*, which was a sacred swamp or pit associated with several legends of civic heroics.
- 3 The public Cato addressed were members of his own class—the hereditary nobility—who represented the people as magistrates and senators.
- 4 When Augustus died in A.D. 14, Tiberius gave his funeral oration from a rostrum in front of the Temple of Caesar, a clear statement of dynastic continuity. Augustus claimed to have reinstated the Republic on more secure foundations. Later emperors dropped that pretense.
- 5 Of course, the physical environment is but one influence on perceptions. The same environment can evoke very different feelings, depending on its connection with the larger social setting. The Forum is a good example of this principle. In the imperial period, the Forum was even more cluttered and “intimate”; but, with the withering of popular institutions, the effect was to develop a sense, not of possession, but of continuous marvel—a sentiment appropriate to a tourist attraction.
- 6 George Steiner, *A Reader* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 429–430.
- 7 Samuel Huntington, “The Democratic Distemper,” *The Public Interest* 41 (1975), p. 30. Huntington softened his

views somewhat in his later book on the same topic, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981). Many other examples of similar statements exist in the writings of presidential advisers, especially since 1970.