This essay examines the political, economic, and social structures of ancient Greece and Rome and explores how these systems influenced modern Western civilization.

**An Enduring Legacy**

The American political system, like those of many other Western nations, is profoundly influenced by ideas from ancient Greece and Rome. Our ideas about democracy and republican government come from these ancient governments. Our values of citizen participation and limited government originate in these ancient societies.

Why were the founders of the United States so deeply influenced by ancient Greece and Rome?

_They were steeped in, soaked in, marinated in, the classics: Greek and Roman history, Greek and Roman ideas, Greek and Roman ideals. It was their model, their example. And they saw themselves very much like the Greeks and the Romans, as actors on a great stage in one of the great historic dramas of all time, and that they, individually and as a group, had better live up to these heroic parts in which history had cast them. That’s a powerful motivation._

—Historian David McCullough, in a speech at DePauw University

The founders of the United States had all received a classical education. As they were forming their own ideas about the world, they were learning about and absorbing the ideals of ancient Greece and Rome. It is no wonder that when they were building the foundations of American government, they looked to ancient Greece and Rome for inspiration.

**Political Systems: Democracy in Athens**

Ancient Greece was not a single, unified nation. The mountainous terrain of the Greek peninsula made travel and communication difficult. Therefore, local communities began to form their own political units, known as city-states. Separated from each other by the rugged terrain, each city-state developed its own kind of government. Some, like Corinth, were oligarchies; that is, they were ruled by a group of powerful leaders. Some city-states had mixed forms of government. Sparta, for example, had two kings, a council of 30 nobles, and an assembly of all Spartan males—which meant that Sparta blended elements of monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy. But the city-state that influenced modern Western civilization the most was Athens, the birthplace of direct democracy.

Democracy developed in Athens in the 500s B.C.E. during periods of conflict and unrest. In attempts to achieve peace, reforming rulers gradually allowed citizens to take part in the city-state’s government. A series of reforms took power from a handful of noble families and gave it to the citizenry.

The government of Athens included three major bodies: the Assembly, the Council of 500, and the People’s Court.

**The Assembly** All male Athenian citizens were members of the Assembly, which met regularly to discuss and vote on issues that affected every aspect of Athenian life. Citizens were paid for their participation in the Assembly, so that even the poorest citizens could take time from their work to participate in government.

**The Council of 500** Each of the 10 tribes of Athens sent 50 citizens to serve on the Council of 500 each year. The Council’s main function was to set the agenda for the Assembly, although it could issue some decrees on its own.

**The People’s Court** In the People’s Court, juries of citizens listened to cases, determined whether their fellow citizens were guilty or innocent of breaking laws, and set punishments for those found guilty.

The democracy of ancient Athens was different from our democracy in two important aspects: participation and eligibility. Democracy in Athens was direct. Rather than choosing politicians to represent the citizens in government, Athenian citizens directly participated in government themselves. Eligibility for the political rights of citizenship was also greatly restricted. To have political rights in Athens, a person had to be an adult male whose parents were both Athenians. No women, immigrants, or slaves were allowed to be Athenian citizens.
Political Systems: The Roman Republic

While Athenians experienced direct democracy, the Romans developed a form of government known as a republic—a form of government in which elected officials govern the state and are responsible to the voters who elect them. Romans established a republic in 509 b.c.e. after revolting against a tyrannical king.

The Constitution of the Roman Republic Until 450 b.c.e., the Roman Republic had no written constitution. Instead, it had a complex set of unwritten laws and traditions that defined the political structure. In 450 b.c.e., Romans created their first legal code by formally writing down some of their laws, which collectively became known as the Law of the Twelve Tables. Having a written legal code was a victory for the plebeians, the ordinary citizens of Rome. The wealthiest Romans, known as patricians, had long kept Roman law secret from the plebeians, who had often been punished severely for laws they had not even known about. Having the law written down protected the rights of all citizens.

Major Offices The major political bodies in the Roman Republic included the office of Consul, the Senate, and the assemblies. Only men participated in government by holding office or by voting; women were excluded from formal political activity by law.

• Consuls The highest-ranking officials in the Roman Republic were the two consuls, who shared both civil and military power in Rome. They set taxes, initiated legislation, and commanded the army. The power of the consuls was limited in two ways, however. Each consul had the power to veto the other’s actions—an early example of checks and balances. Secondly, consuls were elected annually by the Centuriate Assembly, so if they wanted to maintain power, they had to seek reelection each year.

• Senate The Senate was the most significant governing and advisory council of Roman government. During most of the republic, it consisted of roughly 300 influential men who controlled financial and foreign policy. The Senate could not formally make laws; instead, it issued decrees, which were then voted on by the Centuriate Assembly. However, the Senate’s influence was so strong that the assembly often routinely approved decrees issued by the Senate. Roman senators usually held their positions for life.

• Assemblies There were a number of assemblies that performed many different roles in the Roman Republic. Two of the most significant assemblies included the Centuriate Assembly and the Tribal Assembly.

— Centuriate Assembly The Centuriate Assembly was primarily a military assembly. It enacted legislation, decided whether Rome was at war or peace, and elected all officials who held military power, including the consuls. All Roman citizens were members of the Centuriate Assembly. The membership was divided according to economic status into nearly 200 groups called centuries. Members did not vote individually. Instead, they voted by century, with the wealthiest centuries voting first. Once a majority had been reached, voting stopped. The wealthiest centuries could form a majority in the assembly without the support of any other members, which gave them considerably more power in the assembly.

— Tribal Assembly The Tribal Assembly elected officials who did not hold military power. It also conducted trials during most of the republic. Membership in the Tribal Assembly was distributed among the 35 tribes—groups into which all Roman citizens were placed according to where they lived. Like the Centuriate Assembly, members of the Tribal Assembly voted by group, with one vote for each tribe. Within the Tribal Assembly was a smaller body, called the Plebeian Council, which passed laws for the plebeians and elected plebeian officials.

Certain principles of the Roman political system are similar to those of the American system. Roman government was republican, in which the leaders were elected to their positions by citizens and were accountable to those citizens. During the time of the Roman Republic, the power of Roman leaders was limited. Not only did Roman consuls have to maintain the support of the Centuriate Assembly in order to hold their positions, but also the veto power of each consul made sure that neither could grow too powerful.

The Roman form of government did have some important differences from our own. First and foremost, the definition of citizenship was much more restricted. Only freeborn adult men born in Rome were eligible for citizenship. Women, residents of outlying Roman territories, foreigners, and slaves were not allowed to participate directly in the political system. In addition, members of the assemblies did not vote as individuals, but as groups. This gave more power in government to the wealthier classes and weakened the power of poorer Roman citizens.

Economic Systems: Ancient Greece

In ancient Greece, the economy was much simpler and smaller than modern economies. Agriculture played a major role, but trade became increasingly important as Greeks found ways to get the items they were unable to produce themselves.
**Economic Activities** The most common economic activity in ancient Greece was agriculture, which employed about three-quarters of the population. The Greek peninsula was rugged and mountainous, making farming very labor intensive. Olives and grapes grew abundantly, but farmers were unable to produce enough wheat to satisfy demand.

Some Greeks turned to trade, selling wine and olive oil to other Mediterranean traders in order to buy other foods to feed the growing population. Ancient Greeks also produced and traded pottery—not only ordinary items, such as dishes and oil lamps, but also vessels intended for religious or ceremonial uses. In addition to importing wheat, Greeks also traded for papyrus, spices, fabrics, and metals.

**Taxation** Ancient Greeks did not have a systematic method of taxation. Instead, their governments applied taxes generally as needed. For example, some city-states taxed the wealth of the richest citizens in times of great financial need, such as in times of war. They imposed other kinds of taxes just on certain citizens to maintain public buildings or pay for public festivals. Sometimes, taxes were levied on houses, slaves, and livestock.

**Currency** From the 500s b.c.e., Greek city-states began minting their own coins from silver, bronze, or an alloy of gold and silver. Before the use of currency, people used the barter system, exchanging objects or services. As trade grew, however, the barter system became impractical. Using coins facilitated trade with other Mediterranean traders, who accepted coins in exchange for the goods the Greeks needed. Initially, coin usage was limited to certain large-scale transactions, such as those involving overseas trade. The value of coins was quite high, making them impractical for smaller transactions. Coins in small denominations were not used until the 400s b.c.e.

**Economic Systems: Ancient Rome**

As in ancient Greece, the economy in ancient Rome was simpler than modern economies. Agriculture remained important as a means to feed the growing Roman population, but trade became very important as the republic expanded its control from the city of Rome itself to a grand empire.

**Economic Activities** In early Rome, most people were farmers who produced most of what they needed, including tools, clothing, and furniture. They traded very little. Eventually, farmers began growing more food than they needed and sold it at local markets. Over time, enough surplus food became available so that people could make their livings in other ways. Craftspeople, potters, and metal smiths began creating luxury goods, which could be exported or sold locally. Eventually, middlemen began transporting goods, and moneylenders created a banking system by lending and exchanging money.

As Rome conquered more and more territory, its trade networks grew increasingly complex. Sea routes crossed the Mediterranean and Black seas. Land routes spanned the vast territories under Roman control. At the height of its power around 200 c.e., Rome controlled a massive empire spanning from England in the west to northern Africa in the south and to Armenia and Iraq in the east. Trade routes linked the far-flung territories together. Romans not only traded extensively within the empire, but with India and China as well.

**Taxation** The Roman government imposed a number of taxes to pay for its military and other governmental needs. Romans had to pay tax on the value of their land as well as a poll tax to finance the census taken by the local administration. Romans had to pay taxes on inherited wealth, and merchants had to pay customs taxes and duties on goods brought from overseas. Payment of taxes was generally made with Roman money, but sometimes the government imposed another form of taxation: taxes-in-kind, in which taxes are paid with goods instead of money.

By the 100s b.c.e. the Roman republic had become so wealthy that it no longer needed to tax Roman citizens in Italy. It began collecting taxes only from the provinces. This system worked for several centuries. Eventually the soaring costs of financing the government and the military led Roman emperors to reimpose land taxes on Italian landowners in the late 200s c.e.

**Currency** Before the Roman Republic, economic transactions took place using the barter system. Around 289 b.c.e., Rome began minting bronze coins with differing weights and values. As Roman armies marched southward, they encountered the silver coinage used in the Greek colonies there. By 269 b.c.e., the Romans established a mint in Rome to produce their own silver coins. A few decades later, however, a series of military defeats led to a virtual collapse of the coinage. Around 211 b.c.e. a new system of gold, silver, and bronze coins arose. This system lasted for the next 400 years.

**Social Systems: Ancient Greece**

Greek society was divided into two major groups: free people and slaves. Free persons consisted of citizens and metics, or people of foreign birth.
• **Citizens** Citizenship was given only to adult males in Greek city-states. To be a citizen, a man generally had to be the child of two freeborn parents who had been born in that city-state. Citizens had the right to own property, keep slaves, and belong to the Assembly.

• **Metics** Foreigners who were allowed to live in a Greek city-state were called metics. They could not vote, marry citizens, or own property, but they were still required to pay taxes and do military service. If a slave were freed, he or she would join the metic class.

• **Slaves** Slaves were the lowest-ranking people in ancient Greece. They had no legal or political rights. This meant, for example, that they could not have their own family or own property. Members of this class were either born into slavery or became slaves after being captured in war or seized by raiders.

**Gender Roles** Greek society was patriarchal, or dominated by men. Women’s ranks in society were based on those of their fathers and husbands. However, they generally did not enjoy all of the same rights as their male relatives.

Most women in Athens, for example, were not taught to read or write, nor could they own property. They generally remained under the control and protection of their fathers, husbands, or other male relatives, and they did not participate in politics.

In Sparta, on the other hand, women were not only literate, but they could own and control their own property. Spartan society was military in nature; from boyhood, males lived in barracks apart from their families and trained for warfare. Because men were away from the home, Spartan women had more freedom both in their home life and in public life.

**Social Systems: Ancient Rome**

Roman society was hierarchical, or arranged in an order by rank. It was possible to move between social ranks, although it was often quite difficult to do so. There was a large gulf between the upper and lower classes.

**Upper Classes** Belonging to the upper classes gave Romans a number of privileges and opportunities not available to other Romans. The upper classes consisted of the senatorial and the equestrian classes.

• **Senatorial Class** The senatorial class was the highest in Roman society, and membership in this class was determined by a man’s political status. All men who served in the Senate were members of this class, as were their families. Senators had to prove they held a certain amount of property, and they were prohibited from earning money through trade or other business. Men of this class were allowed to wear a tunic with broad stripes as a visible sign of their rank.

• **Equestrian Class** To be a member of the equestrian class, a man had to prove he held a certain amount of property. This rank in society, therefore, was determined by a man’s economic status. Equestrians often earned their money through successful business or trade. They were allowed to wear a tunic with narrow stripes as a visible sign of their rank. The equestrian class had its origins in the military, when only wealthy men in the army could afford to keep horses.

**Lower Classes** All other Romans—the vast majority—belonged to the lower classes. These classes included the commons, Latins, foreigners, freedpeople, and slaves.

• **Commons** Members of the commons were the highest-ranking people in the lower classes. All freeborn Roman citizens not already in the senatorial or equestrian classes belonged to this group, and the men in this group wore the toga as a sign of their rank.

• **Latinus** Freeborn Romans who lived in far-flung military outposts were known as Latins. They enjoyed some legal rights but were not full Roman citizens. During the later years of the Roman Republic, this group was granted full citizenship, and the Latins became members of the commons.

• **Foreigners** This group included freeborn men and women who lived in territories controlled by Rome and who were not full Roman citizens. They were granted full citizenship in the 200s c.e. and became members of the commons.

• **Freedpeople** Women and men who had been slaves but had become free were called freedpeople. They had low social status and could not leave this class, no matter how wealthy they might become. After they became free, however, their status would not be passed on to their children, because the children of freedpeople were members of the commons.

• **Slaves** Members of this class were either born into slavery or sold into slavery. Unless slaves bought their freedom or were manumitted (granted their freedom by their slaveholder), they had no option to leave this social class. Slaves were the lowest-ranking people in the Roman Republic.
Gender Roles As in the Greek city-states, Roman society was also patriarchal. The father was the head of the family. He held authority over his wife and children as well as all servants and freedpeople who worked for the family. In addition, all property and land was under the authority of the father.

Women’s ranks in society were based on those of their fathers and husbands. However, they did not enjoy all of the privileges, such as voting or holding public office, that their fathers and husbands did.

Acceptance of Inequality In Roman society, inequality was publicly recognized in many distinct ways. For example, men of the upper classes demonstrated their high rank by the clothes that they wore. Freedpeople conveyed their status through their names.

Another example was the system of patronage, which affected many aspects of Roman daily life. Under this system, wealthy patrons provided support to clients—either to individuals or to groups within the community. Patrons provided clients with protection, legal advice, or financial assistance. In exchange the client gave the patron something of value to that patron. For example, a politician might wish for his client to support him with his vote. A patron of the arts might wish for his client to dedicate a book or work of art to him. Being a patron enhanced the prestige of an upper-class person because of the public way in which the patron-client relationship was expressed.

Lasting Contributions to the Modern World

The ideas of ancient Greece and Rome have had a lasting impact on modern society, most notably in the realm of politics. The ancient Athenians gave us the ideal of democracy, in which citizens participate in their own government. Athenian citizens created their laws and sat in judgment of those who broke those laws. The Roman Republic gave us the concept of republican government, in which the leaders of government are elected by, and accountable to, the citizens.

These two ideals of democracy and republicanism became a great influence on the Western world during the 18th-century movement known as the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was a time of great learning and intellectual development. Thinkers began exploring and challenging concepts that had previously been accepted as undisputed fact. What is the nature of being human? How should society be structured? What is the best form of government?

The founders of the United States were part of this movement. Grounded in a classical education, they were inspired by their understanding of the ancient Greek and Roman world when building the foundations of this nation. They held many of the values of these ancient civilizations in great esteem, but they were also aware of the limitations of ancient Greek and Roman governments. When creating the structure of the United States, they drew on the strengths of ancient Greece and Rome—namely, democracy and republican government—while making changes to improve the weaknesses of those ancient governments. For example, the founders expanded the definition of citizenship, so that the citizenry included a larger group of adult men. (They did not, however, extend citizenship to women or African Americans.) They also created more checks and balances in the political system to ensure that no single branch of government would become too powerful.

The movement toward democracy and republican government took hold in the decades after the founding of the United States. Some nations such as France and Colombia endured revolutions in their quest for democracy and republican government. In other nations, such as Great Britain, the movement toward greater democracy took place more peacefully. Although the way in which the modern world experiences democracy and republican government has changed from how it was in the ancient world, modern Western civilization owes a great debt to ancient Greece and Rome.
1. List and discuss at least three contributions made by ancient Greece or Rome to modern Western civilization.

2. Complete the Venn diagram to illustrate the similarities and differences in the political systems of ancient Greece and Rome.