The Unsinkable City That Sank Itself

A very long time ago, a group of explorers founded a remote settlement while exploring newly discovered territory. The small settlement attracted groups of prospectors looking for a new life and religious groups fleeing persecution in their own villages, looking to practice their religion and their way of life in peace. The settlement lay in a fertile valley with an ideal climate and abundant natural resources. It had everything it needed to grow into a rich, prosperous city, and soon it would. It would become the richest, most powerful city-state people had ever known, in fact. It would become too rich and spoiled for its own good, and this would eventually cause it to fall in on itself.

But in the beginning, it was just a small settlement. It was ruled over by a powerful city-state; an oppressive colonial power that ruled from a long distance away. The settlers resented this oppression and soon expelled the ruling city. They founded their own town. A group of wealthy intellectuals took up the helm in creating a government and set of laws to govern the small town. They aimed to preserve the town's status as a safe haven for religious groups and a place for prospectors to prosper.

They based their new government on a set of values in accordance with these goals. They decided they would let the townspeople govern for themselves. They would elect their own leaders. It was a completely revolutionary form of government, based on revolutionary ideals. "We found this town on the principles that all are equal, and that all people are entitled to a fundamental set of rights and freedoms," declared the group of founders to a cheering crowd. "May these be our guiding principles from hence forth!"

The town slowly began to expand. It acquired vast tracts of land from the surrounding countryside and used it to cultivate crops and extract resources. People came from far and wide to take advantage of the opportunities and freedoms it provided. New settlers from impoverished backgrounds got rich from the town's agricultural and mineral wealth and from the booming economy sustained by this wealth. The new settlers worked through great hardship and poverty to earn their fortunes. The town offered unparalleled opportunities for the poor to get rich.

It grew into a powerful city-state. It used its wealth to build the most advanced and powerful army anyone had ever seen. It used it to build up its infrastructure and industrial base. It used it to invest in education to ensure it would retain a well-educated workforce to continue its prosperity. It used it to provide basic goods and services to the townspeople and to provide social services to take care of the poor, the elderly and the disabled.

The city's leaders knew all of these things were essential to preserving and maintaining their city's wealth and success. Their city was built on good governance from competent leaders. Leaders who looked after their fellow townspeople. Leaders who believed in their city's ideals of freedom and equality. Leaders who kept their city united in times of strife and division. The city went through many periods of economic or political instability, but it always seemed to have the right leader in the right place at the right time to ensure it pulled through and came out stronger than before.

As time went on the townspeople and their descendants accumulated vast amounts of wealth while their city continued to grow and prosper. But their wealth and prosperity began to take a toll on them. The more money they earned, the more they wanted. The more goods they purchased, the more they needed to have. Getting rich became the most important goal of every townsperson. It was not enough to live comfortably or be self-sufficient. The townspeople took on a singular focus, obsessed with the pursuit of money, power and material goods. They said it was what made their city great. They called it a capitalist consumer culture. But in reality, it was nothing more than pure greed and selfishness.

The city took on a key leadership role abroad. Other villages looked to it for help, for leadership and for guidance. It became the envy of every other city and town. Other townspeople and their leaders viewed it as a role model, as something to aspire to. Its very name became synonymous with money, power and success. It became synonymous with prosperity and stability.

But the city's success started to go to its head. The townspeople came to believe that their success was due to their own personal superiority. They came to believe they alone had made their own fortunes and built their city from scratch to make it into the great economic and military power it had become. They failed to appreciate their good fortune, the city's abundant natural resources and strong, competent leaders who governed wisely. They failed to appreciate the money they inherited from their own families. They took great offense at the notion that such factors had enabled their success or that of their city. The townspeople took all the credit for themselves.

Naturally, some were able to acquire more wealth than others. The townspeople became divided into different social classes. At the top were the very rich, those who lived in mansions and often owned multiple properties. They were the elites, and they were the ones with the most power and influence. They competed with one another over who could amass the most money and power. They passed their fortunes on to their children so they could expand upon them. Then there were the people in the middle. Their wealth was quite modest compared to that of those at the top, but they too had amassed some pretty impressive fortunes which they also passed on to their children. But rather than appreciate what they had, most were resentful that they were not as rich and powerful as the city's elites.

At the bottom were those who had been unable to acquire a personal fortune but still managed to do quite well for themselves. In any other city or town they would be considered rich, but here they were considered poor. They typically worked in trades or industrial professions. They considered themselves the common people. They believed they were more humble and modest than other townspeople, but in truth they were just as obsessive about the pursuit of wealth. They bitterly resented their lack of money and status. In a society obsessed with money and power, where getting rich was seen as an entitlement, they felt they'd been left out.

These class divisions continued to grow as the city grew wealthier. The rich grew richer at a far greater rate than anybody else. They grew greedier too, and many used dubious and dishonest means to increase their wealth at the expense of everybody else. Businesses looked for any way they could to take money from the townspeople. The individual took priority over the city, and it was perfectly acceptable to do whatever it took to get ahead, no matter how detrimental it may be for others. The city's founding ideals of freedom and equality were all but dead.

But rather than take action to fix the injustices in their city, the townspeople grew complacent and tuned everything out. They got used to having everything given to them and done for them. Whenever they found themselves in trouble, they could always count on somebody else to fix everything for them. They developed a sense of bliss, a naïve sense that no matter what happened, everything would work out well in the end. They thought it was a given that they would continue to grow their family's fortune and obtain more wealth. They lost the ability to distinguish reality from fairytale. Kids grew into adults, but they remained mere children at heart.

This impacted their political views and decisions. Unable to acquire the massive fortunes they felt they were entitled to, the townspeople grew angry. They took out their anger on their elected leaders. They blamed their leaders and their government for their perceived shortcomings. They failed to appreciate the fact that their government had made their success possible in the first place.

The city's government had always been run by a group of wealthy elites. They were politicians, focused on their careers and growing their fortunes. Many of them were corrupt, but most were capable of governing effectively enough to preserve their city's prosperity. But in a city so self-centered, it was only a matter of time before more opportunistic, self-serving individuals came into politics. Individuals whose sole motives were the pursuit of money and power. Individuals who cared more about winning elections and acquiring wealth than about governing. Individuals who, like so many others, merely wanted to get ahead at the expense of their city and fellow townspeople. But rather than hold them accountable and stand up for their city's founding ideals, the townspeople rewarded them, electing them to key positions in the government. The townspeople put their own personal interests ahead of what was best for their city, and the city's politics grew increasingly polarized and dysfunctional.

Soon a new wave of leaders swept into office on a wave of anti-establishment populism. They fed off the townspeople's anger at the city's establishment. They fed off the townspeople's hatred for others and their disdain for foreign townspeople who had come to the city to take advantage of its opportunities, just as everyone's ancestors once had. The townspeople elected leaders who promised to build a wall around the city to keep out foreigners. They elected leaders who promised they would make the city great again.

The townspeople voted them in without thinking about it beforehand. It failed to occur to them that such a decision could have serious consequences. "What could go wrong?" they asked. "Our city will always be the greatest city on earth, no matter who runs the government!" Other townspeople did not bother to vote at all. "Why bother? The leaders we have now are just as bad," they said.

But the leaders they elected proved to be far worse than any they had ever had before. Unlike their predecessors, they had no regard for the values their city was founded on. They had no regard for the future or prosperity of their city or the well-being of their fellow townspeople. Their sole desire was to enrich themselves. Worst of all, they had no idea how to govern or run the city.

Everything was thrown into chaos and turmoil. With leaders incapable of governing and utterly indifferent to the fate of their city, everything began to fall apart. Services stopped working properly. The economy began to contract. It all started out slowly. At first, nobody noticed, but suddenly it began to spiral out of control. Stores closed up and went out of business. Workers lost their jobs and their houses. The streets became full of homeless people. The townspeople's wealth began to dry up.

The city had always been able to count on a strong leader to pull it through in times of need. But now it was devoid of that type of leadership. All their life, the townspeople had been able to count on others cleaning up after their mistakes, but now they were on their own. There was nobody to clean up after them.

The townspeople grew poorer and poorer as the city's wealth grew more and more depleted and its government more dysfunctional. Its economy was decimated. All but the very rich or the very lucky lost all or most of their fortunes. Many lost everything they had. Some starved as they struggled to find food. The city was too weak and dysfunctional to defend itself from threats. Rival cities and towns exploited its internal chaos to weaken it further. Bandits launched attacks on it to plunder its spoils.

Other towns watched in horror as the city they had once viewed as a role model and a symbol of prosperity and stability imploded on itself. They struggled to contain the fallout from the crisis as their own economies suffered as a result. They began to wonder how much of a role model it really was. If they continued to emulate it, would they too suffer the same fate?

The townspeople had become too rich and spoiled for their own good. They had become so rich and selfish that they had lost the ability to govern themselves. Now they had to face the consequences. The protective bubble they had lived in for so long had been shattered. Suddenly they discovered that in the real world, actions do have consequences. Suddenly they discovered that stories don't always have happy endings.

As they walked about the ruins of their once grand houses, looking at what was left of their once grand fortunes, they looked for somebody to blame. Naturally, they blamed the leaders they had elected. "How dare they lie and take advantage of us!" cried the townspeople. Suddenly these leaders found they were the target of the very anger and hatred they had exploited to take power. They were blamed for all their city's problems and misfortunes and their names would forever live in infamy. These leaders would pay a heavy price for their actions at the hands of the angry and violent townspeople who had once supported them.

But was it really fair for the townspeople to blame the leaders they themselves had voted into office? In a society so obsessed with the pursuit of money and power, was it really fair for them to vilify people who were but mere reflections of themselves and the society they all lived in? Was it fair for them to vilify people who merely did what so many other townspeople would have done had they had the chance? After all, winning, and amassing as much money and power as possible had long been deemed more important than anything else. It had long ago been deemed acceptable to do whatever it took to get ahead. Such selfish actions were regularly rewarded rather than punished.

The city had grown from a small, humble settlement founded on revolutionary ideals of freedom and equality, into a massive city-state that had completely lost sight of such ideals. The city's revolutionary form of self-government was never perfect, but it had always held up until its people turned their back on the ideals such a model was based on. Freedom and equality had been replaced by greed and selfishness, and a society built on such sinister ideals cannot be sustained and is doomed to implode.

The townspeople had been saved by luck whenever they had made irresponsible choices in the past and it was only a matter of time before their luck ran out. They would forever blame their leaders for what happened to them, but they failed to appreciate that in a democracy, it is the people themselves who bare the ultimate responsibility for the actions of the leaders they elect.

A city so rich and powerful had been thought to be indestructible. It was an unsinkable ship, considered immune to the dangers of the open ocean. But while it was strong on the outside, it was quite weak on the inside, and in the end, the greatest civilization anybody had ever seen was sunk by the greed and selfishness of its own people.