Decline in Morals and Values

The morals and values that kept together the Roman legions and thus the empire could not be maintained towards the end of the empire. Crimes of violence made the streets of the larger cities unsafe. Emperors like Nero and Caligula became infamous for wasting money on lavish parties where guests ate so much they became ill. The most popular amusement was watching the gladiatorial combats in the Colosseum. These were attended by the poor, the rich, and frequently the emperor himself. As gladiators fought, vicious cries were heard from the audience. One contest after another was staged in the course of a day. If the ground would become too soaked with blood, it was covered over with a fresh layer of sand and the performance went on. The virtues of hard work and self-control that had made Rome strong lost out to greed, laziness, and pleasure. Fewer people attended school and a large portion of the empire’s people were enslaved.
Public Health

There were many public health and environmental problems. Many of the wealthy had water brought to their homes through lead pipes. Previously the aqueducts had even purified the water but at the end, lead pipes were thought to be preferable. The wealthy death rate was very high. The continuous interaction of people at the Colosseum with constant blood and death helped to spread disease. Those who lived in the streets, which was skyrocketing, were in continuous contact and allowed for an uninterrupted spread of disease. The plague swept through the empire killing 1 out of every 10 people.
Political Corruption

One of the most difficult problems was choosing a new emperor. The Romans never created an effective system to determine how new emperors would be selected. Generals used private armies to take control of the government. For 50 years following AD 235 Rome went through 22 different emperors. Many of those were removed by assassination. Many government officials took bribes. Many talented people refused to work in the government. As the government weakened, law and order broke down. It had been said that “the law is the art of the good and the just.” Now the law was the tool for the greed and corruption that turned the public against their rulers.
Economics

During the latter years of the empire, farming was done on large estates called latifundia that were owned by the wealthy who used slave labor. A farmer who had to pay workmen could not produce goods as cheaply. Many farmers were forced to sell their farms and fled to the city to try and find work. Cities were overrun with people searching for work when none were to be found. The Roman economy was also struck with high inflation that started after the reign of Marcus Aurelius. As the Romans stopped conquering new lands and began reducing the size of the empire, the flow of gold into the economy decreased. The wealthy continued to lavishly spend gold on luxury items. Many of the wealthy stopped paying taxes. This made it incredibly difficult to pay for the military. The Romans began putting less gold in their coins which dramatically decreased the value of currency. By putting less gold in coins they were able to produce more coins. People learned that the government was making inferior coins and stopped using money all together. As people bought fewer goods, artisans and shopkeepers had to shut down continuing the downward spiral of the economy.
Urban Decay

Wealthy Romans lived in elaborate houses filled with luxurious items. Most Romans were not rich. They lived in small smelly rooms in apartment houses with six or more stories called islands. Each island covered an entire block. At one time there were 44,000 apartment houses within the city walls of Rome. These apartments were hot, dirty, crowded and dangerous. Anyone who could not pay the rent was forced to move out and live on the crime-infested streets. Rome did not have the money to keep soldiers throughout the city to protect the people. Over 1 million people lived within the walls of Rome and most were unemployed or severely underpaid. Fires would spread quickly and kill many. There was a wide gap between the rich and the poor. The wealthy were not concerned with the situation of the poor. Because of this cities began to decay.
The Military

Maintaining an army to defend the border of the Empire from the barbarian attacks was a constant drain on the government. Military spending left few resources for other vital activities such as providing public housing and maintaining quality roads and aqueducts. Frustrated Romans lost their desire to defend the Empire. The empire had to recruit from the unemployed city mobs or worse from foreign countries. Such an army was not only unreliable, but very expensive. The emperors were forced to raise taxes which in turn led to more increases in inflation. This army was also not loyal to Rome or its people. These soldiers were not as good of soldiers as the previously Roman legionnaires. Soldiers would at times raid the countryside and harass the citizens.
Barbarians

As the Roman Empire grew larger they conquered nearby lands and the people living there became part of the empire. Eventually, many more of these people poured into the empire for protection and the search for warmer climates. The main groups were several Germanic tribes. They did not want to become part of Roman society, but living within the borders of the empire placed them under the laws of Rome. The empire could not afford to take care of all these people for free. They began taxing the Germanic tribes and enslaving some of their people. The tribes responded by rebelling.
Wrap Up

1. Rate these problems on a scale from 1-7 with 1 being the main reason you think the empire fell and 7 being the reason you think mattered the most.

2. Explain why you think the problem you ranked as 1 was the main reason the empire fell.

3. Choose 2 of the problems above and explain how they might apply to the United States today.