Empire Under Strain

Tracing the connected causes of Rome's western decline

9-12.WC.14 "Analyze the reasons for the gradual decline of the Western Roman Empire after the Pax Romana."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline three pressures that weakened the Western Roman Empire. Number them in an order that shows how one pressure could make another worse.

Why the Western Empire Weakened

1. During the Pax Romana, roughly 27 BCE to 180 CE, the Roman Empire enjoyed long stretches of relative peace and stable rule. Roads carried taxes, grain, and soldiers across its vast territory. After this period, defending distant borders became more expensive while wars and disease disrupted farms and trade. Emperors raised taxes and sometimes reduced the silver in coins to pay the army. Less silver in the currency contributed to rising prices and weakened trust in money. As resources grew harder to collect and spend effectively, the western government struggled to maintain the forces that protected its borders.

2. Political struggles made these problems harder to solve. In the third century, rival generals repeatedly fought for the throne, and some emperors ruled only briefly. Civil wars consumed soldiers and money that could have defended frontiers. Later emperors reorganized the government, but the western and eastern halves developed different strengths. The wealthier east could draw on more prosperous cities and tax revenue, while the west faced a thinner financial base. When western officials could not reliably pay troops, they increasingly relied on allied groups to provide soldiers. Such alliances could help defend territory, but they also made control depend on negotiated loyalty.

3. Meanwhile, groups pushed toward Roman territory for several reasons, including pressure from the Huns. In 376, Goths crossed the Danube seeking refuge inside the empire. Roman mistreatment helped spark a revolt, and Goths defeated a Roman army at Adrianople in 378. Later, fighting and shifting alliances strained western defenses, and Rome was sacked in 410. In 476, a Germanic commander removed Romulus Augustulus, the emperor ruling in Italy. This is a common marker for the end of western imperial rule, not the moment every Roman institution vanished. The eastern empire continued for centuries. Western decline was gradual because military pressure interacted with tax troubles and political conflict over generations.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did disruptions to farms and trade make the western borders harder to defend?

2. How did struggles for the throne increase the empire's military problems?

3. Why did the west have more difficulty paying troops than the east, and how did western officials respond?

4. How do the events from 376 to 476 support the claim that western decline was gradual rather than one sudden defeat?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a 75 to 100 word memo to a museum curator explaining why an exhibit should present the Western Roman Empire's decline as a long process, not one sudden defeat. Connect at least three developments from at least two paragraphs, and explain what 476 marks.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · 9-12.WC.14

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline three pressures that weakened the Western Roman Empire. Number them in an order that shows how one pressure could make another worse. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did disruptions to farms and trade make the western borders harder to defend?	**The disruptions made resources harder to collect, leaving the western government less able to pay for forces defending its borders.**
2	How did struggles for the throne increase the empire's military problems?	**Rival generals fought civil wars that used soldiers and money needed to defend the frontiers.**
3	Why did the west have more difficulty paying troops than the east, and how did western officials respond?	**The east had more prosperous cities and tax revenue, while the west had a thinner financial base. Western officials increasingly relied on allied groups for soldiers.**
4	How do the events from 376 to 476 support the claim that western decline was gradual rather than one sudden defeat?	**The Goths entered in 376, defeated a Roman army in 378, and Rome was sacked in 410. These events strained western defenses well before the emperor ruling in Italy was removed in 476.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

To the curator: Your exhibit should show a chain of pressures rather than a single collapse. After the Pax Romana, wars and disease hurt trade and farming, making border defense harder to fund. Rival generals then used soldiers in civil wars instead of protecting frontiers. The west also had fewer tax resources than the east, so it relied more on alliances with armed groups. Pressure at the borders and unstable alliances added to the strain. The removal of Romulus Augustulus in 476 marks a common end point for western imperial rule, not the end of every Roman institution.

Accept different causal chains if they accurately connect at least three developments from at least two paragraphs. Responses should distinguish the event in 476 from the longer process of decline.