The Fall of the Roman Empire

**Question:** Why did the Roman Empire fall?

**Document 1**

"The decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight . . ."

Source: *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon (1788)

**Document 2**

“. . . the decay of trade and industry was not a cause of Rome’s fall. There was a decline in agriculture and land was withdrawn from cultivation, in some cases on a very large scale, sometimes as a direct result of barbarian invasions. However, the chief cause of the agricultural decline was high taxation on the marginal land, driving it out of cultivation. Jones is surely right in saying that taxation was spurred by the huge military budget and was thus ‘indirectly’ the result of the barbarian invasion.”

Source: *The Fall of the Roman Empire: The Military Explanation* by Arther Ferrill (1986)

**Document 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roman Emperors, 235-285 CE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emperor</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gordian I &amp; II (co-rulers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balbinus &amp; Pupineus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gordian III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip the Arab</td>
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<tr>
<td>Decius</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hostilian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gallus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aemilianus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Valerian &amp; Gallienus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quintillus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aureliian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tacitus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Florianus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Probus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numerian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carinus</td>
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</tbody>
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Document 4

“[Before the year 400 CE] footsoldiers wore breastplates and helmets. But when, because of negligence and laziness, parade ground drills were abandoned, the customary armor began to seem heavy since the soldiers rarely ever wore it. Therefore, they first asked the emperor to set aside the breastplates . . . and then the helmets. So our soldiers fought the Goths without any protection for chest and head and were often beaten by archers. Although there were many disasters, which led to the loss of great cities, no one tried to restore breastplates and helmets to the infantry. Thus it happens that troops in battle, exposed to wounds because they have no armor, think about running and not fighting.”

Source: Concerning Military Matters by Vegetius (c. 450 CE)

Document 5

“There can be little doubt that the weaknesses of the late Roman Army were largely due to the eventual failure . . . to enforce regular conscription [draft of soldiers] . . . The exempted categories were . . . numerous. Hosts of senators, bureaucrats, and clergymen were entitled to avoid the draft; and among other grouped who escaped were cooks, bakers, and slaves.”

Source: The Fall of the Roman Empire: A Reappraisal by Michael Grant (1982)

Document 6

[Map of Invasions of the Roman Empire 100 - 500 CE]

- Invasions of the Roman Empire
- Western Roman Empire
- Eastern Roman Empire
- Rome
- Carthage
- Constantinople
- Hun Capital
- Chalons 491
- Angles
- Saxons
- Franks
- Goths
- Vandals
- Visigoths
- Ostrogoths
- Huns
- Ostrogoths
- Franks
- Saxons
- Angles
- Vandals
- Visigoths
- Ostrogoths
- Huns
- Angles, Saxons
- Franks
- Goths
- Vandals
- Visigoths
- Ostrogoths
- Huns
- Vandals

[Map Legend: Invasions of the Roman Empire 100 - 500 CE]