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Struggling US faces the dangers that toppled Rome, says commentator

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The US is overstretched militarily, the social fabric is fraying because of privatisation and corruption, the country is hobbled by its ignorance of the outside world and it is unnecessarily fearful of foreigners and immigration.

This is the view of Vanity Fair editor and political commentator Cullen Murphy, who believes the US is facing all the temptations and dangers of ancient superpower Rome, which fell despite its seemingly unassailable position.

"You cannot draw an exact parallel between the US and Rome but there are enough similarities to give Americans pause for thought," he said yesterday while in WA as a guest at the Perth Writers Festival.

"After the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the US emerged as a superpower without competition. Since then it has been struggling to figure out its role in the world."

Murphy believes the event that called into question America's imperial role in the world was not 9/11 but the disastrous adventure in Iraq.

So troubled is the average American by the quagmire in Iraq that Murphy believes the current election is one of the most important in the nation's history, with the potential to change its nature and destiny.

Specifically, if either Democratic candidate makes it into the Oval Office there will be a major shift in American foreign policy, from arrogant unilateral approach to one that involves co-operation with regional powers.

"The experience of Iraq has shown Americans that whatever we think of our power, and it is



Cullen Murphy: Lessons in history

extensive, it isn't the only determining factor in our world," Murphy said.

The chest-beating approach of the current administration hasn't always held sway, he says.

"There was a candidate in the 2000 presidential elections who, in a celebrated debate with Al Gore, said that what America needed was a humbler foreign policy. This man was George W. Bush," he said.

Murphy believes the humiliation of the US in Iraq has a startling parallel in the massive defeat suffered by the Romans at the far reaches of its empire. In a single day in AD9 in Germany, local tribes wiped out three Roman legions, representing 10 per cent of the empire's military might, in an event he compares to 9/11, Pearl Harbor and Little Bighorn combined.

His book *The New Rome: The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* is a plea to his countrymen to look back to ancient history as a guide to future decision-making.

Murphy will be discussing his book at 12.30pm today at the University of WA.