

ROAD TO THE RUBICON: ANALYZING THE BUILDUP OF CAESAR'S CIVIL WAR

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Introduction

It is common knowledge that when Caesar and his thirteenth legion crossed the Rubicon River on the 10th of January in 49 BCE, he plunged Rome into a civil war that would transform the Roman Republic into the Roman Empire. Modern media and even historians paint this fateful decision as the cause for the fall of the Roman Republic. They further portray Caesar as the victim, forced to march on Rome or face prosecution from the senate. Yet, have historians perhaps misidentified the origins of the civil war?

The Roman Civil War (49 – 45 BCE), also known as Caesar's Civil War, was one of the last and most dramatic politico-military conflicts of the Roman Republic before its reorganization into the Roman Empire. Fought between Gaius Julius Caesar (100–44 BCE) and Gnaeus Pompey Magnus (106 – 48 BCE), this great conflict saw Caesar triumph against the Roman Senate. In the immediate aftermath, Caesar was proclaimed dictator for life by the senate, but was, shortly thereafter, assassinated in a conspiracy of pardoned senators. Although his reign was short, Caesar left a power vacuum that would eventually be filled by his adopted grandnephew Gaius Octavius (later known as Augustus), who would go on to become Rome's first and longest-reigning emperor.

To this day, the origin of the Roman Civil War is subject to contentious debate, with Classics Professor Erich S. Gruen calling the motives of the conflict “nowhere to be found.”¹ Even the Romans themselves were uncertain about the causes of the war.² But the civil war is most often attributed to the notion that Caesar—if he returned to Rome—would have been criminally prosecuted by a clique of hardline senators for his crimes during his consulship. Historians thus assume that Caesar was forced to march on Rome in order to protect himself from condemnation. This is commonly known as the prosecution theory. Many scholars like Allan Massie even go on to argue that Caesar faced certain death if he returned to Rome.³ The belief has historical merit, yet further scrutiny challenges this notion. Most importantly, Massie along with other esteemed historians including Mary Beard and Adrian Goldsworthy, fail to analyze the prospect of prosecution and the validity of ancient sources.

Building upon the research of previous scholars, this paper traces the buildup of the Roman Civil War and Caesar's decision to cross the Rubicon Riv-

er in 49 BCE, emphasizing the role Roman culture played in precipitating the civil war and refuting the popular prosecution theory. This paper then argues that it was the gradual deterioration of the Roman Constitution, the formation of the First Triumvirate, and the political stalemate between the *populares*⁴ (populist elites) and *optimates*⁵ (senatorial establishment) that catalyzed this great conflict. Through the analysis of 1st century BCE correspondence and ancient Roman chronicles spanning from the 1st to 3rd century CE, this paper concludes that Caesar was, in fact, *not* vulnerable to prosecution. Rather, Caesar marched on Rome to maintain his *ratio absentis*⁶—his right to run for the consulship *in absentia*—which granted him both a Roman triumph and simultaneous consulship.

The Destruction of the Roman Constitution

The root cause of the Roman Civil War was the degradation of the Roman Constitution. An uncoded and unwritten set of principles passed down through precedent, the Roman Constitution guided procedural governance of the Roman Republic and was upheld by the *mos maiorum* (“the way of the ancestors”). The *mos maiorum* too was an unwritten code of ancestral tradition that underpinned all aspects of Roman life and can be shortened into eight relevant values: *Fides* (Fidelity), *Pietas* (Piety), *Disciplina* (Discipline), *Gravitas* (Gravity), *Constantia* (Perseverance), *Virtus* (Manliness), *Dignitas* (Dignity), and *Auctoritas* (Authority). For almost a millennium, these quintessential values protected Rome in times of unparalleled vulnerability, but the eventual fall of the republic’s enemies, which in turn undermined the need for the *mos maiorum*, undermined this fragile constitution. The republican constitution would be further damaged by the tribunes and murders of the Gracchi brothers, the military reforms by Gaius Marius, and Sulla’s march on Rome. These four pivotal developments culminated in the destruction of the Roman Constitution.

The republic’s failure to adhere to the *mos maiorum* was precipitated by the fall of Carthage and Rome’s conquest of the East. At the end of the Third Punic War (149 – 146 BCE), Rome triumphantly destroyed and sacked the city of Carthage—bringing an end to what the 2nd century BCE Greek historian Polybius notes, “the longest... and most severely contested war... in history.”⁷ Yet Rome’s victory over the Carthaginians would paradoxically lead to its own demise. The fall of Carthage meant that Rome no longer had an external power capable of threatening it, and with no other rivals in the Mediterranean, a sense of confidence and security flooded the streets of Rome. But this came at the cost of the *mos maiorum*. As Sallust, a 1st century BCE Roman historian, argued,

before the destruction of Carthage the people and senate of Rome together governed the republic peacefully and with moderation. There was no strife among the citizens either for glory or for power; fear of the enemy preserved the good morals of the state. But when the minds of the people were relieved of that dread, wantonness and arrogance naturally arose, vices which are fostered by prosperity... Thus the peace for which they had longed in time of adversity, after they had gained it proved to be more cruel and bitter than adversity itself. For the nobles began to abuse their position and the people their liberty.⁸

Since the Roman elites' wealth and power were vested in the republic, the fear of external rivals like Carthage had previously ensured that all classes in the republic acted in the best interest of the state. But without a rival power capable of instilling the nobles with enough fear to follow the *mos maiorum*, the motives of the wealthy magistrates naturally drifted. Now, magistrates became more focused on advancing their own wealth and glory than that of the republic's. This, of course, went against the *mos maiorum*, particularly the values *fides*, *pietas*, *disciplina*, and *gravitas*, which all stressed the prioritization of the republic.

Additionally, in his 2nd century CE *Epitome of Roman History*, the Roman historian Florus explains that the conquest of the East stood as a catalyst for the corruption which would lead to the Roman Civil War between Caesar and Pompey:

It was the conquest of Syria which first corrupted us, followed by the Asiatic inheritance bequeathed by the king of Pergamon. The resources and wealth thus acquired spoiled the morals of the age and ruined the State, which was engulfed in its own vices as in a sewer... Finally, when did the lust for power and domination arise save from excessive wealth? It was this which armed Caesar and Pompey with the fatal torches which kindle the flames that destroyed the State.⁹

Florus argues that the excessive indulgence of Asiatic luxuries and treasures created a "lust for power and domination," and that magistrates no longer sought office for the good of the republic, but to line their own coffers with riches. However, this endless desire for power and wealth did not only affect the Roman elite; *all* classes were infected with this avarice. Sallust believed that "riches had become the honored goal [of the Romans which directed] them towards greed and waste and [deprived] them of all principle and moderation."¹⁰ Materialism now took precedence over the teachings of the *mos maiorum*. Evident in the final century of the Roman Republic, this desire for power and wealth guaranteed societal turmoil between political factions and would eventually tear the republic apart.

Yet it was not until the ascension of Tiberius Gracchus that the Roman Constitution was truly crippled. Successfully elected as a *tribunus plebis* (plebeian tribune) in 134 BCE, Tiberius took on a populist agenda to advance his political power and prestige.¹¹ The plebeian tribunes were originally established to safeguard the interests of the plebeians, all non-patrician (non-aristocratic) Roman citizens who were typically poor. Over the course of three centuries, however, the position became more and more corrupt, with many tribunes using their term in office to elevate their own political and monetary standing.

By the late 2nd century BCE, Rome's economic situation had severely deteriorated. As a result of the republic's territorial expansions and lack of foreign rivals, greedy, land-owning Romans sought to "outbid and drive out the poor by [raising rents]," which, correspondingly, replaced the idealized citizen farmer class with "gangs of foreign slaves."¹² This demographic shift in Rome's countryside resulted in an oversupply of labor which forced the rural poor to find work in urban centers. Yet at the same time, Rome experienced a decline in the number of public works being undertaken, leading to a shortage of work for the increasing urban poor.¹³ This, of course, angered the lower classes, which in turn, impelled them to rally behind the *populares*. While unfortunate for the plebs, this combination of economic downturns provided an ideal opportunity for a populist politician like Tiberius Gracchus.

With economic unrest among the plebeians, Tiberius seized upon the opportunity and proposed the *lex Sempronia agraria*, a law that limited the amount of land someone could own at 500 *iugera* (310 acres) with excess being redistributed to the poor.¹⁴ While naturally popular with the Roman poor, the bill triggered bitter opposition from the landowning elites, who saw their wealth and power threatened.¹⁵ Unable to curb Tiberius' popularity, the senate counted on his colleague Marcus Octavius to veto the bill.¹⁶ But Tiberius could not back down. As noted by German historian Jurgen von Ungern-Sternberg, "[Tiberius] had played a role in the catastrophic Roman defeat at Numantia [and any] further failure would have been a disaster for the [public image] of the young [noble] and for his future political career."¹⁷ This previous Roman military failure had alienated Tiberius from the *optimates* (Rome's senatorial establishment), impelling him to pursue political glory through alternative means—a reformist agenda.¹⁸ Inflamed by the senate's filibuster and never capitulating, Tiberius did what no Roman had ever done before; he defied the will of the Senate and brought the bill before the *concilium plebis* (the plebeian assembly).¹⁹ While technically legal, it was entirely unprecedented. Although the plebeian assembly decided the adoption of legislation, it was always done with the approval of the senate. Since the Roman Constitution was unwritten, the Roman Republic functioned on tradition and custom that took "mutual cooperation rather than

[politicians] making use of their full legal powers.”²⁰ This act to save his own *dig-nitas* broke centuries of tradition and countered the *mos maiorum*. By demonstrating that law could be passed by circumventing the senate’s approval, Tiberius diminished the authority of the senate. A precedent was set, and men who aspired to political prominence would follow in his footsteps. Tiberius’ further attempt to secure a second and consecutive term further violated the norms-based constitution.²¹ But Tiberius was not the only one to break custom.

Publius Cornelius Scipio, infuriated with Tiberius’ strong-arm politics, killed the tribune with a lynch mob in 133 BCE.²² Scipio’s violent reaction legitimized the use of mob violence for political ends. Tiberius’ younger brother Gaius Gracchus, who later won unprecedented consecutive terms as tribune, would meet a similar fate. After a brawl that killed a consul’s servant, the senate executed the *senatus consultum ultimum* (the senate’s ultimate decree) and killed Gaius.²³ Never before had the senate used a decree against a fellow Roman, and the consequences would be devastating. The *optimates* had shown that state-sanctioned violence, as Classics Professor Harriet Flower notes, was a more “logical and more effective alternative to political engagement, negotiation and compromise within the parameters set by existing norms.”²⁴ Any political threat to the *optimates* now faced the possibility of utter destruction. The murders of the Gracchi brothers, Gaius and Tiberius, were the last straw in exposing the Roman Constitution’s fragility and set in motion a series of aristocratic violence against populist politicians.

One populist general by the name of Gaius Marius took matters into his own hands. Through a series of military reforms, Marius forged an army more loyal to their commander than to the republic itself. The most important and influential of Marius’ military reforms was the alteration of the legionary recruitment process, which permanently changed the demographics of the legion. Prior to the Marian reforms, the Roman army was a conscript levy of all property-owning, male citizens who served in the pre-Marian legions “out of a sense of duty and loyalty to the state.”²⁵ But in 112 BCE, the effectiveness of this conscript army was called into question. Rome found itself at war with the kingdom of the Numidia (modern day Tunisia and Libya), yet there was one major problem: Rome’s reserves of military manpower were depleted. In response, Gaius Marius, the commander of the Numidian campaign, levied new legions from the *capite censi*,²⁶ who were previously barred from enlisting in the legions.²⁷

With the freedom to join the legion, Rome’s poorest citizens were now able to escape poverty. But this also meant that, by enrolling in the legion, the *capite censi* were forced to become dependent on their commanders. Once these legionaries were discharged, they had little to no livelihood to return to, and since the senate did not provide retirement upon discharge, they had to rely on their

commander for profit and plunder.²⁸ This consequently shifted the loyalty of the legions from the republic to their general. *Capite censi* legionaries were also more willing to serve in longer campaigns than the previous generation of militia levies. This gave generals like Gaius Marius and Julius Caesar more time to refine their recruits into a veteran fighting force.²⁹ By the time of Caesar, the pool of recruits had further changed. It was now possible to enlist legions of non-Italians from the provinces; these recruits would have even less loyalty to the Roman state.³⁰ It was only a matter of time before a general took advantage of his soldiers' unwavering devotion to further his own political ambitions.

Since military success brought popularity and prestige, as well as the votes of the legions, military success became the best and most abused political instrument for high office. Marius was able to achieve his unprecedented five consecutive consulships through successfully leading campaigns against the Numidians and Germans.³¹ Yet his consecutive consulships also violated Roman law, weakening the precedent-based constitution. As a result of military success, generals became officials rather than officials becoming generals, going against traditional governance of the republic. Pompey and Caesar would eventually capitalize on this trend to secure political prominence. While the intentions of the Marian reforms were to protect the republic, the effects did the exact opposite. Instead of a defensive measure, the legions transformed into a political tool. Now, successful generals had the most influence in Roman politics, which would put the power of the state into the hands of the few. With a complete disregard for the norms-based constitution, Rome was left in a precarious state. Rather than the usual quarrel in the Forum, conflict between powerful generals could now spiral into a bloody civil war.

Soon enough, conflict did indeed come when in 88 BCE renowned Roman general Lucius Cornelius Sulla made an unprecedented march on Rome. Born a patrician in 138 BCE, Sulla defeated the North African kingdom of Numidia and saved the Roman Republic from its rebellious Italian allies. As a result of his military success, Sulla reached the consulship in 88 BCE, where he then assigned himself the command against Mithridates, the king of Pontus whose territorial ambitions threatened Roman allies in Anatolia.³² But Gaius Marius *also* desired this lucrative campaign. Through the plebeian assembly and political violence, Marius deprived Sulla of his province and transferred the command of the campaign to himself.³³

This was entirely unprecedented yet technically legal. Never before had a Roman general had his authority denied through a rogue tribune. Sulla was furious, and if he did not reclaim his command, his *auctoritas* (authority) as consul would be diminished. Sulla had already made concessions to Marius and Sulpicius, the tribune who had supported Marius' rebellion, but had faith that a suc-

cessful war paired with a triumph could recuperate his prestige.³⁴ However, Sulla no longer bore the campaign, and if he relented now he would be exposed to political extinction.³⁵ There was only one way out if he wanted to retain his *dignitas*: marching his legions on Rome. In Irish historian Arthur Keaveney's account, Sulla "had little choice but to act," and his march on Rome was not "a cold-blooded and premeditated act," but rather "the act of a frightened man who had been cornered and driven to desperation."³⁶ The popular general had struggled strenuously for the past decade to prove himself to the senatorial order and was not going to tolerate the fate of a demagogic tribune. So, in the end, Sulla marched on Rome, consolidated control, and reclaimed leadership of the campaign against Mithridates.

However, Sulla's march on Rome would present grave consequences to the republic. Sulla had shown that a successful general could defy the will of the state and rule Rome as a dictator, which went against the Roman Constitution in its entirety. This complete disregard for the precedent-based constitution would plunge the republic into a cycle of civil wars: only a year later in 87 BCE, a civil war between Cinna and Octavius ended with Cinna taking control of Rome; six years later, a civil war in which Sulla retook Rome and proscribed his enemies; a decade long rebellion in Spain and North Africa by Quintus Sertorius; an unsuccessful rebellion instigated by Marcus Aemilius Lepidus after demanding the consulship; and a conspiracy by Lucius Sergius Catilina to seize the consulship to restore his family's honor and prestige. The repetition of these civil wars and rebellions only ingrained the use of military means to achieve a political goal.

The Rise and Fall of the Triumvirate

It was in this political environment that the triumvirate then emerged. Formed in 60 BCE, the triumvirate was an informal three-way alliance among Pompey, Crassus (a general and financial patron), and Caesar. Crassus was an established statesman and bankrolled the alliance. Pompey was Rome's most accomplished general which brought him the loyalty and votes of the veterans. Caesar, on the other hand, was *pontifex maximus*, the highest religious official in Rome. Additionally, Caesar was one of the leading *populares*, which brought him the support of the masses. By combining their various bases, the triumvirate quickly achieved insurmountable power. The triumvirate was not a pact of similar political ideals nor one of friendship, but an arrangement that would politically benefit each triumvir.³⁷ Caesar was already indebted to Crassus through previous loans and political favors, and his alliance with Pompey was further solidified with Pompey's marriage to his daughter Julia in 59 BCE.³⁸ Though never official, the triumvirate controlled almost every aspect of political life in Rome.

As a result, the triumvirate directly challenged the authority of the senate and transferred political power into the hands of three ambitious individuals. In his 2nd century CE *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, Plutarch maintained that Caesar and Pompey first “worked together to destroy the power of the aristocracy and only when this had been accomplished quarrelled amongst themselves.”³⁹ Instead of power divided among hundreds of senators, the triumvirate created an unstable political rule in Rome. This instability was made worse by the longstanding enmities between Crassus and Pompey. Almost fifteen years before, Pompey had stolen credit for defeating Spartacus and ending Rome’s Third Servile War, when it had actually been Crassus who killed Spartacus and concluded the war. Of course, both men still loathed each other, with Pompey even accusing Crassus of trying to assassinate him.⁴⁰ The alliance further deteriorated when Julia died in 54 BCE, which severed the personal bond between Caesar and Pompey.⁴¹ While Pompey and Caesar continued to work together, the motives to retain the alliance became ever more political. Finally, in 53 BCE, the triumvirate totally collapsed when Crassus died at the Battle of Carrhae in a disastrous military campaign against the Parthian Empire (modern day Iran). Crassus’ death fundamentally shifted the political balance in Rome since many leading men of the republic depended on him for loans and favors; his son was neither old enough nor talented enough to assume his father’s position, which led to many of Crassus’ clients dispersing between Pompey and Caesar.⁴² As a result, power was now divided between the hands of Rome’s two most influential men, and a power struggle was now inevitable. Lucan’s 1st century CE poem *Civil War* is a perfect epitome of this:

Their rivalry in valor gave them motives: Magnus, you fear your former triumphs might be dimmed by novel exploits, that your laurels for the pirates might give way before conquered Gauls. And you are being roused by skill, your series of spoils, and a fortune that cannot stand to be second place. Caesar could bear none better, Pompey no equal.⁴³

As Lucan suggests, Pompey had enjoyed unprecedented fame and prestige thanks to his conquest of Asia and eradication of the Cilician pirates, but Caesar’s own rise to prominence through the Gallic Wars now overshadowed and challenged Pompey’s influence.⁴⁴ While Pompey and Crassus governed Rome, Caesar was off campaigning in Gaul (modern day France). As a result of his military success, the Gallic campaigns brought Caesar immense popularity, wealth, and power.⁴⁵ Caesar was now on par or even superior to Pompey himself, undoubtedly making Pompey jealous. Pompey craved prestige and superiority above all else, and his envy fractured the already fragile alliance. Pompey’s willingness to sour relations for the sake of political power could be best exemplified when he

stole credit from Crassus for defeating Spartacus, and consequently, left Crassus to be rewarded a mere ovation rather than triumph.⁴⁶ Rome had no room for two ambitious politicians.

Pompey's Drift to the Optimates

Pompey's growing allegiance towards the *optimates* further widened the political rift between the delicate alliance. Ever since the Gracchi brothers, political and state-sponsored violence had become a problematic norm, and in the 50 BCE, the greatest agitator of this institutional violence was Clodius Pulcher. Clodius was a plebeian tribune who had learned the effectiveness of political violence and had orchestrated mob gangs to rule Roman politics.⁴⁷ While a populist, he presented a direct threat to the triumvirate, going as far as to attempt an assassination on Pompey and question the validity of Caesar's legislation as consul.⁴⁸ In response, Pompey supported his rival, Titus Milo, who formed his own gangs.⁴⁹ Though weapons were forbidden in the city of Rome, both sides secretly armed themselves with swords and even employed gladiators.⁵⁰ And for the next five years, the two tribunes and their followers clashed and filled the streets of Rome with blood and terror. Rome's situation was made worse when it was unveiled that the elections were fraught with bribery.⁵¹ Eventually, the rivalry between Clodius and Milo culminated in the former's death, which only increased chaos in the city. In response to his death, Clodius' supporters rioted and brought his body to the senate house to be burnt on a pyre, which destroyed the senate house itself.⁵² Rome was in crisis.

In desperation, the senate turned to Pompey, and passed the *senatus consultum ultimum* in 52 BCE, which appointed Pompey as sole consul and gave him extraordinary powers.⁵³ Pompey then marched legions into the streets of Rome, held trials under armed guards, and condemned the leaders of the chaos (Milo included). This was unprecedented but effective, and order was restored. As a reward, the senate gave Pompey an extended governorship of Spain with powers similar to those that Caesar held in Gaul.⁵⁴ Pompey's success in quelling the disorder had brought him the adoration of the *optimates*, and he had no intention of giving it up, so he left his deputies to govern Spain while he remained in Rome.⁵⁵

Pompey's drift towards the *optimates* naturally made him less politically dependent on Caesar. While Pompey had previously fallen out of favor with Rome's aristocracy by hoarding all the glory for himself, and then again by divorcing his aristocratic wife, the calamities in 52 BCE presented the *optimates* no other option than to support Pompey. Pompey's marriage to Metellus Scipio's daughter further consolidated the alliance, and the fact that Pompey had initiat-

ed the marriage with Scipio's daughter himself clearly exemplifies his desire to join the aristocracy and leave behind Caesar's political allyship.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, Pompey had previously rejected a marriage proposal to Caesar's great niece, indicating that their alliance was uneasy.⁵⁷

The Political Stalemate Between the *Populares* and *Optimates*

By the end of his Gallic War in 50 BCE, Caesar had amassed 12 seasoned legions and had conquered all of Gaul (modern day France). The main issue at hand now was how Caesar, who had accumulated so much power and wealth, was to be re-integrated into Roman politics.⁵⁸ One aristocrat made his answer clear. Consul Claudius Marcellus, who resented Caesar's political monopoly, berated Caesar and argued that since his conquest of Gaul was over, he should be recalled, and his armies disbanded. By referring to Pompey's law in 52 BCE, Marcellus further declared that Caesar's privilege to stand for election *in absentia* was no longer justified and consequently be terminated.⁵⁹ While Marcellus' actions had no immediate effect, they would instigate a series of political attacks against both dynasts. On the other hand, Pompey was stuck in a perilous situation. His alliance with Caesar had brought him what he desired, but he also wanted to gain the respect and adoration of the *optimates*.

The center of attention was now on the termination of Caesar's provincial governance. Since the law extending Caesar's governorship in 55 BCE was vague and never actually specified a deadline, the *populares* and *optimates* interpreted it differently: to the *optimates*, this date was 50 BCE, while for *populares*, this was 49 BCE; and naturally, the *optimates* demanded that the populist Caesar resign.⁶⁰ In the middle of this political clash, Pompey tried to appease both sides through compromise as he still wanted to retain his political relationship with Caesar even as he increasingly catered to the *optimates*, but the circumstances that followed would make a neutral position impossible.

In the end, the *populares* and *optimates* would tear the dynasts apart. In 50 BCE, despite opposition from both the Pompeians and Caesarians, Curio was successfully elected to the tribunate.⁶¹ Even up to his election, Curio had politically attacked both Pompey and Caesar; Caelius, a contemporary politician of the period, expected the newly elected Curio to "remove some of Caesar's authority while offering a paltry sop to Pompey."⁶² Yet within only three months of his tribuneship, Curio ceased to attack Caesar and now began instead to act on his behalf. Tensions heightened when Curio began to "[advocate] Caesarian interests while assaulting Pompey."⁶³ This, of course, damaged the already splintering relations between Pompey and Caesar. Like Clodius, Curio could not be

controlled, and yet Caesar had to rely on him since he could not leave his province.

With his governorship soon to expire, Caesar surprisingly decided not to run for the consulship in 50 BCE.⁶⁴ But this choice also meant that Caesar's term, according to the *optimates*, would expire before he could run for the consulship the following year: 49 BCE. Consequently, Caesar would be stripped of his *imperium*, deprived of a triumph, and lastly, precious time in reorganizing Gaul into a Roman province. In light of this affront, Caesar faced total political extinction. If he wanted to maintain his *dignitas* and *auctoritas*, Caesar could not yield to the *optimates'* demands; only Pompey could decide Caesar's fate.

As a concession that would allow Pompey to maintain his relationship with the *optimates* while also undermining their agenda, he offered a seven-month long extension to Caesar's governorship.⁶⁵ However, Curio despite being an ostensible advocate for Caesar, could not let this slide or face a dissolution of his plans. He was, as Gruen states, "determined to establish his own political base on the wreckage of [Caesar and Pompey]."⁶⁶ Curio believed that if he could force the two most powerful men in Rome into conflict, he could rise to prominence in the resulting power vacuum, and so he promptly vetoed Pompey's proposal and exacerbated tensions by claiming that Caesar would defend his veto with force.

When Caesar's term expired in the interpretation of the *optimates* (November 50 BCE), Caesar maintained his post in accordance with the law, which infuriated the *optimates*. Yet since Caesar aspired to further political endeavors, he had no choice but to resist the *optimates'* demands. Pompey's hands too were tied. He had already offered concessions to Caesar against pressures from the *optimates*, but if he wanted to maintain his cherished relations with the aristocracy, he could not offer any more exceptions.⁶⁷ Pompey became further impatient with and suspicious of Caesar when the distant leader requested further honors, perceiving it as an attack on his own position.⁶⁸ His loyalties were splintering, and it was inevitable that he had to choose a side.

The final nail in the coffin came when Curio advocated that *both* men resign from their command, which received overwhelming senatorial support: 370 senators in favor to 22 against.⁶⁹ But Pompey would not back down. While Caesar's term was nearing expiration, Pompey still had many years left in his command. Although designed to appear as a dual attack, this vote was effectively a sole and targeted attack on Pompey's position, and if he conceded now, his resignation would disparage his *dignitas* and influence with the *optimates*. Yet, even in the end, Pompey was willing for Caesar to return to Rome with honor and glory.⁷⁰ Pompey knew that the *optimates* had only sided with him to counter Caesar, so his presence could be leveraged to his benefit. But Caesar's tribunes

founded the idea. When Curio retired, Mark Antony took his stead and delivered a fierce tirade against Pompey, condemning his entire career and openly issuing threats of war.⁷¹ The situation further deteriorated when senatorial meetings were being deadlocked with the tribune's veto, creating a political stalemate.

Crossing The Rubicon: Point of No Return

Yet even in this perilous time, peace would have been possible if not for the *optimates'* unyielding opposition. In the summer of 50 BCE, the senate requested that each dynast provide a legion to bolster Rome's forces in the East.⁷² While Caesar willfully obliged, Pompey decided to recall the legion that he had loaned to Caesar in 54 BCE.⁷³ This effectively meant that Caesar lost not one, but two legions. To Caesar, the affair seemed even more suspicious when his two legions marched back to Italy, and simply remained there ineffective, with no one making the effort to send them overseas.⁷⁴ Caesar knew that the *optimates* were trying to diminish his military might and political influence, but he continued to hope that this concession would satisfy the *optimates* and the senate. It did not, and Caesar was now left with only ten understrength legions, approximately 30,000 men.⁷⁵ Moreover, as tensions increased, Caesar even offered to give up two of his three provinces and nine out of his ten legions, as long as he was allowed to retain his privilege to stand for the consulship in absentia.⁷⁶ This was a good deal for the senate, who had been desperately trying to limit Caesar's power for nearly a decade. However, even after offering to keep just one legion, *optimates* like Cato and Scipio continued to refuse, unwilling to accept any proposal that would allow Caesar a potential pathway to the consulship.⁷⁷ Peace was possible, but a small minority in the senate forced war instead.

Further rumors and misinformation by the *optimates* only exacerbated the situation. In October of 50 BCE, a narrative rapidly circulated that Caesar had converged four legions in Cisalpine Gaul, which was perceived as Caesar preparing for war. In reality, Caesar had only one legion in the province that was patrolling the border areas from raiding. In early December, another report came to Rome claiming that Caesar had already invaded Italy.⁷⁸ While the story was false, the consul Marcellus urged the senate to act but was brushed off. In desperation and panic, he went to Pompey, presented him with a sword, and called on him to protect the Republic. Pompey then assumed the command of the two legions that Caesar had given up and instructed to raise more legions.⁷⁹ Of course, none of this was legal, since the senate had not granted Pompey permission to do so, but the Roman Constitution had been forsaken and previous rules were now obsolete. In early January of 49 BCE, Metellus Scipio proposed a motion commanding that Caesar must lay down his command or be considered an

enemy of the state.⁸⁰ The senate passed the motion, but it was promptly vetoed by Caesar's tribunes.⁸¹ With tensions at a precipice, Lucius Calpurnius Piso, Caesar's father-in-law, offered to travel to Cisalpine Gaul with a praetor (Rome's second highest magistracy) to directly consult with Caesar; yet once again the *optimates* refused the proposal for peace making.⁸²

Caesar was simply too powerful: even after its slow depletion, his army was too large to be confronted head-on, and his popularity was too great for him to be defeated in an election. With partisan gridlock paralyzing the government and political strife going no-where, the senate passed the *senatus consultum ultimum*, calling upon all magistrates to ensure the safety of the republic and declaring Caesar an enemy of the state. The senate had forced Caesar into a cross-roads: surrender with disgrace or civil war. With no other choice, Caesar crossed the Rubicon and marched on Rome.

For the next three months, Caesar blitzed through Italy, capturing a multitude of towns who surrendered without a fight, many championing the Caesarian cause. Always the populist, Caesar adopted a policy of clemency that shocked everyone: he forgave and released his enemies. Many expected Caesar to behave like Sulla or Marius and retaliate against the city populace.⁸³ Instead, Caesar kept his army under tight discipline and pardoned his opponents, which became a central part of his propaganda campaign. The longer the senate resisted, the more justified Caesar's grievances became in the eyes of the Roman people.

After many months of cat and mouse in Europe, Asia, and Africa, Caesar finally defeated Pompey's colossal army at Pharsalus, as well as the last two remaining Pompeian armies at Thapsus and Munda. With the support of the people, Caesar assumed the authority of the republic and crowned himself dictator in perpetuity, paving the way for the Roman Empire and ushering in over half-a-millennium of imperial autocracy.

The Prosecution Theory: Why Did Caesar Cross the Rubicon?

Although most historians agree that Caesar was forced to march on Rome, not all historians agree on *why* Caesar maintained his right to stand for the consulship *in absentia*. Being the foremost root of the Roman Civil War, Caesar's decision must be carefully examined. The prevailing narrative for the last 2,000 years was that Caesar needed his *imperium* to maintain his legal immunity, and in doing so, could avoid criminal prosecution by the *optimates*. Caesar was vying for the consulship once his governorship expired, but candidates had to be inside the *pomerium* (a religious boundary surrounding a section of Rome). Yet crossing the *pomerium* meant waiving his *imperium*, which exposed him to prosecution. To bypass this, Caesar had requested to stand for the consulship *in absentia* which was passed by the plebeian assembly. This would allow Caesar to step directly from his governorship to the consulship while maintaining *imperium*, and therefore immunity from prosecution. However, the *optimates* had stripped him of this privilege, which accordingly forced him to march on Rome. The theory has merit. The basis of this view comes from Suetonius in his 2nd century CE biography *Divus Julius*: if Caesar returned to Rome, he would have to “plead his case like Milo in a court ringed around with armed men.”⁸⁴ Suetonius even cites Asinius Pollio, a partisan of Caesar, who writes, “They brought it on themselves. They would have condemned me regardless of all my victories—me, Gaius Caesar—had I not appealed to my army for help.”⁸⁵ If Suetonius and Pollio are to be taken at face value, then Caesar was forced to march against the senate to save himself from a conviction in the Roman courts. British historian Adrian Goldsworthy agrees with this theory and suggests that “Caesar could easily have suffered [condemnation in the courts], but at the very least would have been politically damaged, when any hint of vulnerability would attract further prosecutions.”⁸⁶ Goldsworthy believes that just being on trial would have dented Caesar's *dignitas* and *auctoritas*. Classics Professor Fritz Heichelheim goes even further and claims that Caesar would have been executed if he resigned his command.⁸⁷ For many classicists studying Caesar, the histories teach this narrative as a fact. Yet was this true or even likely?

The short answer is no. While it is undeniable—he himself confirmed this in his commentaries—that Caesar had to march on Rome to protect his *dignitas* and political career, he was not actually exposed to prosecution or execution as many historians make it out to be. Simply referring to Asinius Pollio does not confirm this case. Moreover, the literal interpretation of ancient sources makes the validity of this theory doubtful at best. Most strikingly, the only two contemporary sources of the era, Caesar's *Bellum Civile* (Commentaries on the Civil War) and Cicero's *Epistulae ad Atticum* (Letters to Atticus), are silent on the

matter.⁸⁸ If it is presumed real that Caesar—according to Asinius Pollio—justified marching on Rome to avoid prosecution, then why did he not mention this in his writing? The commentaries are the same place where Caesar voiced his other woes and misfortunes, yet there is no mention of the threat of prosecution. On the other hand, Cicero’s correspondence hints nothing of a prospective trial, let alone the possibility of a conviction.⁸⁹ Cicero’s silence is even more telling. In his letter to his friend Atticus written on the 27th of December, 50 BCE just two weeks before disaster, Cicero arduously lays out all the possible resolutions to the ongoing conflict between Caesar and the *optimates*. Yet *nowhere* in his thorough analysis does he mention the possibility of a prosecution and fully assumes that Caesar would become consul if he did not lay down his command:

(1) Caesar’s candidature may be admitted while he still retains his province and army either by favor of the Senate or of the Tribunes. (2) Caesar may be persuaded to hand over his province and army and so become Consul. (3) If he be not so persuaded, elections may be held without admission of his candidature, he not obstructing and meanwhile retaining his province. (4) Should he obstruct this by means of the Tribunes but not resort to violence, there will be an interregnum. (5) If he brings up his army before his candidature is not accepted we must fight him. Now he may begin military operations (a) at once, before we are properly ready, or (b) at the elections, when his friends demand that his candidature be admitted according to the law and the demand is rejected. Further he may resort to arms either (a) on the single pretext of the rejection of his candidature or (b) on some additional pre-text, if it should happen that a Tribune obstructing the Senate or stirring up the people and being censured or curtailed in his functions by senatorial decree or removed from office or expelled or claiming to have been expelled should take refuge with him.⁹⁰

If Caesar was indeed vulnerable to prosecution, why did Cicero not mention this? The prosecution theory argues that once Caesar relinquished his command, he would have been prosecuted by the *optimates*. Yet, Cicero writes that Caesar would have directly stepped into the consulship—likely due to his popularity with the people—if persuaded to lay down his command. This, of course, goes against the prosecution theory. Furthermore, the only device Cicero anticipated being used to block Caesar from becoming consul was through force: “we must fight him or allow his candidacy in accordance with the law.” If preventing Caesar’s candidacy through trial was truly a viable prospect, then it would have been mentioned in Cicero’s “complex strategic discussion.”⁹¹ Yet, it is nowhere to be found. Cicero was well connected with the *optimates*, so even if a plan existed to prosecute Caesar, then Cicero would have known about it. Even when Cato

proclaimed—and took an oath too—that he would personally prosecute Caesar on his return, Cicero decided to forgo this information.⁹²

Further assessment of Cato's denunciations against Caesar reveal that his proclamations were mere rhetoric rather than tangible plans of political annihilation. His most notorious call for Caesar to be handed over to the Germans for an alleged treaty violation in 55 BCE serves as a perfect example of this. He even went as far to say that Caesar was a greater threat to Rome than the Germans themselves.⁹³ Obviously, as Plutarch presumes, "nothing was done" and the issue never resurfaces again.⁹⁴ Even if Cato wanted to prosecute Caesar, there was no viable way to do so as noted by Plutarch: "Cato could accomplish nothing, since the people wished all along that Caesar should have the chief power; and although Cato had the senate under his influence, it was afraid of the people."⁹⁵ As the most popular man in Rome because of his populist legislation and conquest of Rome's greatest threat (Gaul), the senate could not prosecute Caesar in fear of inciting a plebeian mutiny. Cato must have known this—which is why he never made an effort to pursue his declarations—and is why his remarks can be regarded as purely rhetorical and futile.

Even if the *optimates* tried to prosecute Caesar, achieving a conviction would have been slim to impossible. As Adrian Goldsworthy explains in his biography on Caesar, the innocence or guilt of a person rarely determined the outcome of a trial—with many former governors, accused and guilty of corruption, evading punishment;⁹⁶ Caesar could have easily done the same. Through the plunder of his Gallic conquests, Caesar funded public spectacles—such as gladiatorial games—that captivated all classes of Roman society.⁹⁷ United with his unrivaled popularity, it is hard to believe that anyone would even attempt to convict Caesar.

If the *optimates* controlled the court, Caesar could rely on jury intimidation and bribery to elude conviction. Clodius Pulcher, who was put on trial for sacrilege after a religious scandal, did just this despite his obvious guilt and evaded punishment after he and his allies launched a hail of threats and bribes at the jury.⁹⁸ Why could Caesar not do the same? Even in a situation where the *optimates* successfully prosecuted Caesar—an unlikely to even impossible situation—Caesar could repeal his conviction just like Cicero had done in 57 BCE, and then go on to win the consulship. As professor Erich S. Gruen notes, "far lesser men than Caesar had eluded condemnation in the past."⁹⁹ Through his tribunes, he could have enacted legislation to recall himself, which would have undeniably passed given his immense popularity with the people.¹⁰⁰ Taking that into consideration, some scholars, including Fritz Heichelheim and Alan Massie, even believed that Caesar faced imminent death if he returned to Rome, since it was the only way to prevent Caesar from escaping with impunity.¹⁰¹ Yet,

if this was in fact true, then in no way could Cato or the *optimates* expect Caesar to give up his command.

Like Suetonius, many historians such as British historian Tom Holland believe that the trial of Milo served as precedent for Caesar's conviction, yet this was definitely not the case. As the killer of Clodius, a champion of the people, Milo was extremely detested. Popular pressure for his conviction had been intense, and the armed guards that lined his trial were not to force a conviction, but to ensure that the violent popular pressure to convict him did not intimidate the jury. On the other hand, Caesar was a popular war hero and the crowds in the Forum could be expected to pressure for an acquittal.¹⁰² This criterion therefore gives no reason to believe that a court surrounded with soldiers could have imposed an unpopular verdict upon Caesar.

Furthermore, prosecuting Caesar would have put Pompey's own interests at stake. Pompey had allied with Caesar solely for him to pass through his legislation such as the settlement of his veterans—which the *optimates* had fiercely opposed. Yet a conviction would have rendered all of Caesar's laws during his consulship invalid, and therefore went against Pompey's own agenda.¹⁰³ Even more striking, the *optimates* did not even attempt to repeal Caesar's laws as consul, likely due to their fear of retribution from the people. Therefore, the belief that the *optimates* were genuinely willing to prosecute Caesar, which would have brought even greater uproar from the crowd, is unsubstantiated.

Many details further prove that Caesar was, indeed, not vulnerable to prosecution. First, if Caesar's *ratio absentis* was to protect him from prosecution, why is this threat never mentioned in and before the year 52 BCE? Moreover, Cato did not filibuster his request to stand in absentia like in 60 BCE, which reinforces the fact that he did not have plans for prosecution if Caesar was still in a position to maintain his *imperium*. Weeks into the war, Caesar even offered to surrender his *ratio absentis* if Pompey accepted peace terms.¹⁰⁴ This would supposedly put him at odds with the prosecution theory, since he could then be prosecuted. Even when Caesar did march on Rome, he never actually crossed the *pomerium*. By ordering the senate to meet outside of the religious boundary, Caesar bypassed this obstruction.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, all of Caesar's enemies had already fled with Pompey to Greece, and no one dared to chastise him while at the head of a vast army. Yet he still did not cross the *pomerium*. This indicates that Caesar, in fact, wanted his *ratio absentis* to celebrate his triumph. While crossing the *pomerium* may have made no real change to Caesar's power, it had a symbolic one. Religion was the central pillar of Roman society and if Caesar were to symbolically lose his command (since crossing the *pomerium* automatically ended a magistrate's *imperium*), then it could have had massive ramifications and render his triumph invalid and his actions illegal in the eyes of the Roman people (since

he no longer held *imperium*). This would have undoubtedly dented his *auctoritas* and *dignitas* with the Roman people. But if Caesar did not maintain his *ratio absentis* to avoid prosecution, then why did he need it?

Rather than the idea that Caesar needed his *ratio absentis* to avoid prosecution, he instead needed it to secure a triumph and the consulship. While Pompey had triumphed on three separate occasions, Caesar had yet to celebrate one, which hampered his political reputation. While praetor in 60 BCE, Caesar had earned a right to the triumph after a successful campaign against the Spanish natives, and since he was also vying for the consulship, he requested to stand *in absentia*.¹⁰⁶ Yet this was filibustered by none other than Cato, which forced Caesar to relinquish Rome's greatest military honor for the consulship instead.¹⁰⁷ This disappointment demonstrates why Caesar placed such emphasis on maintaining his *ratio absentis*, which ensured a triumph and a circumvention from the painful dilemma of 60 BCE.

Caesar also wanted to follow his famous uncle's footsteps, Gaius Marius, who was elected consul *in absentia* in 101 BCE after decisively defeating the Germans at the Battle of Aquae Sextiae. Given Caesar's efforts in his early career to stress the connection with his famous relative, whose powerful union of military prowess and populist politics served as a paragon for his own political career, there is every reason to believe that the Marian precedent was important to him.¹⁰⁸ Additionally, Caesar would also be following the steps of his former triumvir, Pompey, who ran for the consulship and triumphed *in absentia* in 71 BCE. Caesar may also have wanted his *ratio absentis* so that he could arrange his Gallic triumph independently of his consular candidacy, which presented the attractive possibility of following in the footsteps of Marius—not to mention Caesar's rival Pompey—by enjoying the unparalleled honor of a triumphal entry into the consulship.¹⁰⁹

In addition, Caesar needed more time to organize his newly conquered territories, and his ability to stand for the consulship *in absentia* gave him just that. There is every reason to believe that this was one of Caesar's principle reasons for marching on Rome; in his own words, he “was being robbed of six months of [his] command and dragged back to Rome.”¹¹⁰ This is the most probable reason for why Caesar postponed his candidacy from 50 to 49 BCE.¹¹¹ Pompey too, in the aftermath of his conquests of Asia minor, requested the privilege to stand for the consulship *in absentia*, and there is every reason to believe that Caesar wanted this advantage. If Caesar completed a successful provincial organization, it would stand as a lasting monument to his legacy.¹¹² Yet with the senatorial blockade, achieving this would be impossible. In other words, the *optimates* had just stolen not one, but two of the greatest honors a Roman could achieve: the Roman triumph and organizing a province. This was a grave affront to Caesar's

dignitas, and considering that protecting his *dignitas* was his principal reason for marching on Rome, it is obvious why this was one of his core reasons for leading his legions across the Rubicon.

While not vulnerable to prosecution, Caesar was prone to political extinction and humiliation if he surrendered to the *optimates*. As shown previously in Cicero's *Letters to Atticus*, Caesar's *ratio absentis* was, in fact, legal. It is true, as Caesar notes in his *Bellum Civile*, the senate had ignored "the will of the people."¹¹³ Like Sulla in 88 BCE, if Caesar conceded the aristocracy's repeal of his privilege to stand *in absentia*, then more concessions would follow, and he would eventually find himself reduced to nothing. Furthermore, Roman *virtus* dictated that Caesar could not back down. Roman aristocrats were taught from childhood that to "give in even in the face of defeat" meant certain disgrace.¹¹⁴ In foreign wars, this attitude had served the republic well, shocking both Pyrrhus (a Greek general who invaded Rome in 280 BCE) and Hannibal (a notorious Carthaginian general who marched across the Alps and invaded Rome in 218 BCE), neither understanding why the Romans would not yield in the face of defeat. But in the age of civil wars, this ensured that these internal conflicts were waged with the utmost ruthlessness.¹¹⁵ Once a struggle began, both sides knew that they must win or die. As a result, many generals in the last century of the Roman Republic fought to the end—and to the death. Caesar was no different.

Not only did Caesar march against the senate to preserve his Gallic command, but he also marched because it was strategically prudent to do so in January 49 BCE. Even though his legions had been reduced in recent times, Caesar still had crushing military superiority: five veteran legions across the Alps compared to Pompey's twenty-two raw cohorts (two legions) in Italy.¹¹⁶ The more time Caesar spent idling, the more legions Pompey would procure; he had to march now. Moreover, Caesar's vicinity and the winter weather compromised Pompey's communications network. Since Caesar controlled the land routes to Spain and the sailing season began only in spring (early May by the Roman Republican calendar), no messages could be relayed between Pompey and his legates, which, as a result, impaired Pompey's military capacity and left his best legions leaderless.¹¹⁷ Caesar, seizing the opportunity, implemented the *divide et impera* (divide and conquer) stratagem and even joked that he was going to fight "an army without a general in Spain and then a general without an army" in Greece.¹¹⁸

Pollio's testimony, or rather Suetonius' dubious account, if presumed genuine, should, therefore be interpreted as a *casus belli*—or rather a justification for war. The prosecution theory rose as the dominant thesis for Caesar's march on Rome because it suited the agenda of both the *populares* and the *optimates*: for those who favored Caesar, they believed he had no choice but to appeal to his

army in the face of a rigged tribunal; for his critics, Caesar started a civil war to escape accountability for his crimes in a court of law.¹¹⁹ By the end of the civil war, Caesar had killed roughly 50,000 Romans in the field of battle, and as a result, Caesar desperately needed a justification for waging war against fellow Romans; the prosecution theory provided just the cover. As professor Gruen notes, “such a statement—whether or not Caesar ever made it—was an obvious apologia for the massacre at Pharsalus.”¹²⁰ 6,000 Romans died at the Battle of Pharsalus— a colossal death toll for the time—and it is quite accepted that Caesar needed a justification for this bloodshed. Given that Pollio wrote this testament after 35 BCE, it is also possible that the supposed statement Caesar made, as Pollio notes, was actually “later embellishment or invention.”¹²¹ This is quite plausible. It is hard to imagine that Pollio would have recalled Caesar’s exact statements from over at least a decade ago, possibly even two decades perhaps. The prosecution theory thus makes the perfect defense for Caesar’s Civil War.

Conclusion

This paper complements three larger historiographical trends, notably those that trace the fall of the Roman Republic, the origins of the Roman Civil War, and then lastly, Caesar’s motives for marching against the senate. However, this paper also differs from others in the field. Many scholars discuss which events took place as opposed to why said events took place. For instance, many papers and books pertaining to the republic’s demise typically record Tiberius’ tribuneship, Marius’ military reforms, and Sulla’s march on Rome and their impact on precipitating the end of the republic, yet they typically never analyze *why* they occurred. Rather, this paper does the inverse and analyzes why certain decisions and events came to fruition. Most notable in this paper is the case of Caesar, which shows the reasons for his need of the *ratio absentis* and his decision to march on Rome, details that many historians either ignore or overlook completely.

Furthermore, many historians who write on the Roman Civil War, and more broadly the fall of the Roman Republic, tend to discuss the causes of the events in a separate fashion rather than link together how they relate. Scholars writing about the legacy of the Gracchi brothers, but also ignoring how this directly caused the extensive use of political violence in the 80s and 50s BCE is a case in point. Instead, this paper investigates the far-reaching chain of events that paved the foundations for the Roman Civil War as one continuous narrative, analyzing how the events in one period precipitated the events of the next.

Beginning in the 2nd century BCE, Rome experienced a period of moral decline that culminated in the destruction of the Roman Constitution. The events

that took place from 134 to 88 BCE are thus best viewed as manifestations of this decline; rather than actively serving the interests of Rome, nefarious figures like Tiberius, Marius, and Sulla used their positions of power to increase their own political standing, which set precedent for other aspiring aristocrats to use mob violence to pass legislation, achieve political success through military success, and if necessary, march on Rome to further one's agenda.

The further emergence of the First Triumvirate transferred the authority of the state from the senate to Pompey, Crassus, and Caesar. Consequently, with power in the hands of three individuals, the triumvirate's own destruction ushered in an intense power struggle between Caesar and Pompey. Even when both men desired compromise, a stalemate between the *populares* and *optimates* ensured that no agreement was possible. The additional political accusations endured by both Pompey and Caesar and then rumors of Caesar's concentration of four legions in Italy, and thus the erosion of trust, only escalated the situation. The resulting outcome was a civil war in which less than 10% of the entire Roman Senate—400 senators at this specific point in history—participated in, revealing how a small minority could destroy the state; an important lesson to remember even 2,000 years later.

This paper also rejects the commonly supported prosecution theory, which argues that Caesar was forced to march against the *optimates* to avoid a criminal trial. While Caesar was indeed *forced* to march on Rome—the direct cause of the civil war—he was never prone to prosecution. Solely based on the dubious account of Suetonius, the evidence for the theory is thin at best. There was little incentive, if any at all, to prosecute Caesar, and the evidence against the belief is logical and conclusive. The only contemporary sources available are also silent on the matter. The prosecution theory should not, therefore, be regarded as the primary reason Caesar marched on Rome. Rather, Caesar maintained his *ratio absentis* to protect his political future. But just how a civil war could be justified to the Roman people on that basis merits further research.

Therein lies the value of the Roman Civil War's—and more broadly the fall of the Roman Republic's—legacy. This episode in Roman history serves as a reminder that the robust defenses of the state will slowly erode if not regularly reinforced. This erosion is often as simple as a spike in wealth inequality, which frustrates voters, and impels them to rally behind populist politicians like Tiberius Gracchus or Julius Caesar—a phenomenon that is *still* evident today. But when authority changes hands from the traditional institutions of the state to a few powerful politicians, the inevitable outcome is war, which tears the state apart and more often than not results in a military dictatorship. And as Sulla's and Caesar's civil wars reveal, this could be ignited by something as simple as a political dispute between two powerful men or factions. The Roman Republic's

dramatic downfall therefore teaches us two important lessons: when citizens lose faith in their own institutions, those institutions become merely that—meaningless institutions, which enables personal interests to triumph over the common good; and secondly, tyranny triumphs—not by the will of one—but through the exploits of many.

Endnotes

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- ² Ibid.
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- ⁴ The *optimates* (“the best ones”) were senatorial conservatives who upheld the traditions and authority of the senate, operated mostly in the senate, and opposed the *populares* and plebeian assembly.
- ⁵ The *populares* (“supporters of the people”) were populists who believed power lay in the hands of the people, operated mostly before the plebeian assembly, and opposed the *optimates* in the senate.
- ⁶ The *ratio absentis* (“reason of absence”) was a technical term for permission to stand for election without having to be present in Rome. Typically, candidates had to be inside Rome to announce candidacy but the *ratio absentis* waived aspiring politicians of this requisite.
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- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ T. Corey Brennan, “Power and Process under the Republican Constitution,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Republic*, ed. Harriet I. Flower (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 42–43.

- ¹⁹ M. M. Henderson, "Tiberius Gracchus and the Failure of the Roman Republic," *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 31 (1968): 57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41801828>.
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- ²¹ Erich S. Gruen, *Roman Politics and the Criminal Courts, 149–78 B.C.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 57.
- ²² Mary Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (New York: Liveright, 2015), 224.
- ²³ Adrian Goldsworthy, *Caesar: Life of a Colossus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 7.
- ²⁴ Harriet I. Flower, *Roman Republics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 87.
- ²⁵ Christopher A. Matthew, *On the Wings of Eagles: The Reforms of Gaius Marius and the Creation of Rome's First Professional Soldiers*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 1.
- ²⁶ The *capite censi* ("those counted by the head") referred to the poorest class of Roman citizens and were not eligible for military service. They owned so little property that they were assessed by the "head" rather than their financial status.
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- ²⁸ Matthew, *Wings of Eagles*, 20–21.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 22–23.
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- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 21.
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- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 259.
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- ⁵⁵ Beard, *SPQR*, 285.
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- ⁵⁹ Suetonius, *Twelve Caesars*, 13.
- ⁶⁰ Goldsworthy, *Colossus*, 364.
- ⁶¹ Gruen, *Last Generation*, 471.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 466.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 479.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 477.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 480.
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- ⁶⁹ Beard, *SPQR*, 285.
- ⁷⁰ Goldsworthy, *Colossus*, 370.
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- ⁷² Anthony Everitt, *Cicero: The Life and Times of Rome's Greatest Politician* (New York: Random House, 2003), 203.
- ⁷³ Everitt, *Cicero*, 203.
- ⁷⁴ Goldsworthy, *Colossus*, 368.
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- ⁸¹ Goldsworthy, *Colossus*, 375.
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- ⁹¹ Morstein-Marx, "Caesar's Alleged Fear," 165.
- ⁹² Suetonius, *Twelve Caesars*, 15.
- ⁹³ Plutarch, *Lives, Volume VIII: Sertorius and Eumenes. Phocion and Cato the Younger.*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919), 359.
- ⁹⁴ Morstein-Marx, "Caesar's Alleged Fear," 161.
- ⁹⁵ Plutarch, *Lives*, 361.
- ⁹⁶ Goldsworthy, *Colossus*, 371.
- ⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 345.
- ⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.
- ⁹⁹ Gruen, *Last Generation*, 495.
- ¹⁰⁰ G. R. Stanton, "Cross the Rubicon?," 89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4436678>.
- ¹⁰¹ Stanton, "Cross the Rubicon?," 87.
- ¹⁰² Morstein-Marx, "Caesar's Alleged Fear," 162.
- ¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 161.
- ¹⁰⁴ Gaius J. Caesar, *The Civil War*, trans. Jane F. Gardner (New York: Penguin, 1967), 40.
- ¹⁰⁵ Cassius Dio, *Roman History, Volume IV: Books 41–45*, trans. Earnest Cary (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1916), 29–30. Dio emphasizes that Caesar was outside of the *pomerium* so that he could convene with both the senate and the people of Rome.
- ¹⁰⁶ Plutarch, *Roman Republic*, 265–266.
- ¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 266.
- ¹⁰⁸ Morstein-Marx, "Caesar's Alleged Fear," 168.
- ¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 169.
- ¹¹⁰ Caesar, *Civil War*, 40.
- ¹¹¹ Gruen, *Last Generation*, 477.
- ¹¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹¹³ Caesar, *Civil War*, 40.
- ¹¹⁴ Goldsworthy, *Colossus*, 515.
- ¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹⁶ C. T. H. R. Ehrhardt, "Crossing the Rubicon," *Antichthon* 29 (1995): 40.
- ¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹⁸ Goldsworthy, *Colossus*, 392.
- ¹¹⁹ Morstein-Marx, "Caesar's Alleged Fear," 159.
- ¹²⁰ Gruen, *Last Generation*, 494.
- ¹²¹ Ehrhardt, "Rubicon," 33.

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