THE ROAD TO CAESAR: ESTABLISHING THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC

COREY MORRELL

This essay will focus on the primary reasons for Rome's transition from a Republic to an Empire. Much has been said about this period, most of which emphasizes Caesar as the primary focal point. However, only by analyzing the events and people that led to Caesar's rule can we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the collapse of the Roman Republic. The later stages of the Republic culminated centuries of turmoil between the people of Rome and their government. Rome's citizens now demanded more control of their lives through independence. Meanwhile, in the political sphere, the same idea of individualism sparked rivalries between men like Marius, Sulla, Pompey, Crassus, and Caesar—with Caesar ultimately gaining control over the Republic. Consequently, these men all attributed to the destruction of western democracy, and the creation one of the most powerful empires the world has known.

No clear date in history can be pointed to as the fracturing of the Roman Republic and the beginning of the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, looking back to specific events and people does help to clarify why there was a change in political structure to begin with. In the first century BCE, a struggle for power lasting hundreds of years between people of all classes and political ideologies came to an inevitable point of no return when Caesar announced his own word as law.[1] Leading up to this, the Republic—plagued by war and agricultural instability[2]—fought to survive during a time of imbalanced power within the government. Adding to this internal conflict, a demand for civic rights among the population was growing steadily. A struggle for dominance between the patricians and plebeians were early inklings of the changes to come, the populares' and optimates' constant fight for political control was like nothing seen before, Marius and Sulla's rivalry shattered political

[1] Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars, Volume I: Julius. Augustus. Tiberius. Gaius. Caligula,* trans. J. C. Rolfe. Intro. K. R. Bradley. Loeb Classical Library 31. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 77.

[2] David Shotter, *The Fall of the Roman Republic*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 13.

norms, and Pompey would come out of it all on top… for a short time. All of this eventually led to the end of the prosperous Republic and the start of something new. By examining these political and social changes of the late Republic era, the reasons for its collapse become much more apparent when considering the various men who contributed to it. Indeed, the Republic's collapse can be attributed to the natural reactions caused by not one but several Roman leaders contending for their own complete and authoritative control over Rome.

Although Rome's common people were living in relatively prosperous times during the Republic, there was a collective feeling of imbalance between them and their leaders that served as early warning signs of a significant shift in society. While the Republic lacked a central source of power, it prided itself on the three political pillars of which the power was dispersed: the consuls, the senate, and the people.[3] Although technically an essential part of the trifecta, the latter realized they realistically held little to no power when it came to politics, the economy, military, or religion.[4] As the backbone of Rome, the working class served as a vital component for the economy, yet almost every aspect of their lives was out of their control and in their leaders' hands. As for the bottom of the civil hierarchy—the poor—the rich were taking away their homes. Cheap land available for the poor soon became out of reach when wealthy landlords started to raise their rent, eventually forcing many of the tenants out.[5] A law was later enacted disallowing any one person to hold more than five hundred acres of land at a time. This law meant the rich were obligated to keep people in their homes.[6] However, the wealthy neighbouring landlords soon took control of these lands, leaving the less fortunate to fend for themselves. Once again, the commoners were at the mercy of the higher-ups. It is no surprise then that people "no longer showed themselves eager" [7] when the military inevitably came calling. Refusing to go to war sparked the start of a new age of independence for the common people of Rome—an age that gave them a voice that would shake up the political landscape and draw attention to the ones who had ignored them for hundreds of years: the consuls. Once alienated, the people of Rome were open to a new political structure, and their support would be instrumental in building the Empire to be.

Along with the general population demanding more individual freedom, Rome was also struggling regarding agriculture and territorial expansion. This struggle resulted in opposition within the consul and set the stage for a division in leadership that Rome had not experienced since the abolishment of the monarchy. With Rome

[3] Shotter, 1.
[4] Ibid, 2.
[5] Plutarch, *Lives, Volume X: Agis and Cleomenes. Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus. Philopoemen and Flamininus,* trans. Bernadotte Perrin. Loeb Classical Library 102. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921), 8.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

constantly expanding to outlying provinces and a military growing exponentially, the number of overall magistrates grew out of necessity.[8] The nobility saw this as a problem, but the solution led to a failure in leadership that played out in the Carthaginian wars.[9] Ultimately, Rome required a new system of leadership, a system that neither the "consuls [or] the praetors could provide."[10] Governing authorities of provinces refused to fall back into anonymity after their roles were meant to end. This was a change from the times when they would silently fall back into the shadows after they had completed their duty.[11] Thus, the concept of individualism in government was beginning to overshadow the previous practices of leadership. While internal conflict preoccupied the government, Rome was expanding, and it needed a decentralized government to grow beyond its current state. Meanwhile, the wars with Hannibal led people to question their loyalty toward the Republic, as some felt they were on the wrong side.[12] The relationship between the Romans and the Italians became hostile, creating a new problem concerning Roman citizenship for Italians. What is more, as people abandoned their land, agriculture continued to suffer immensely.[13] Rome was now seeking new leadership, new citizens, and new reforms.

The future of Rome would depend entirely on the ability to stabilize the Republic after this time of internal turmoil and division.[14] At the forefront of this conflict were two men whose feud would catalyze Rome's earliest civil wars: Gaius Marius and Cornelius Sulla. Marius (a popularis) and Sulla (an optimatis) clashed in a rivalry that had their respective sides of government at war with one another. When Sulla, a man with a reputation for his "elimination of political rivals,"[15] marched into Rome for the second time, there was no question who the victor would be. Sulla became dictator—the first person to do so in over one hundred years—and there was now no limit on the extent to which he could hold office.[16] For the first time during the Republic, one man controlled Rome. Now came the realization for other ambitious leaders that a dictatorship was something within the realm of possibility. Much to the surprise of the Romans, Sulla's reign was short-lived, as his rule came to an abrupt end when he unexpectedly retired. His absence left an opportunity for others to contest for the position by solidifying their spot as dictator.

In the absence of Sulla, a new rivalry developed between Pompey and Crassus. However, it was soon put on temporary hold as they set their egos aside to form a

[8] Shotter, 11.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid, 12.
[12] Ibid, 7.
[13] Ibid, 13.
[14] Ibid, 38.
[15] Ibid, 41.
[16] Ibid, 41.

political alliance in order to acquire more power with their combined wealth and military influence.[17] In addition to this, the new duo dismantled Sulla's reforms along the way. Contrasted with Tiberius's later reforms, when people were "by their wrath and contentiousness to hate the law-giver,"[18] a sudden adjustment of political undoing was generally well-received by the public. The joint consulship's ability to destabilize and undermine the Senate left room for Pompey take full advantage. As he rose to greater heights, he promised stability for Rome, gaining a significant amount support along the way.[19] One of his supporters, a man with much influence, would provide the missing link for the alliance. An ambitious yet unassuming Julius Caesar now aligned himself with Crassus and Pompey, and the First Triumvirate was born.

The consolidation of power for Pompey assured him and future rulers' dictatorship over Rome. This achievement would be the beginning of the greatest empire to have ever dominated the known world, all leading to the rise and fall of Caesar—a man bigger than Rome itself. By constituting his own laws and reforms—some of which were welcomed, others not so much[20]—Caesar alienated himself from the people he relied on most: the Senate. Suetonius, in his famous compendium *Lives of the Caesars*, conveyed the significance of Caesar's downfall when he stated that his failure was not only due to the extravagant and unjust honours such as dictator for life and "uninterrupted consulship… but [that] he also allowed honours to be bestowed on him too great for mortal man."[21] There was no longer any room for such self-gratification in the Republic. By 31 BC—13 years after Caesar's assassination—Octavian's success in defeating Mark Antony would diminish any remaining thoughts of the old Republic. By securing victories over his enemies and captivating the Roman world with his charismatic personality, he put an end to the divisiveness between traditional government and individual determination within the political sphere.[22] The Republic was shattered, and in its place, the looming Empire picked up the pieces.

The idea that a single man could be thought of, either by himself or by the people, as larger than the Roman world itself, is ultimately the mindset that led to the formation of the Roman Empire after Caesar's death. Sulla, Marius, Pompey, Crassus, and Caesar were only a handful of rulers with this mindset who changed the political direction of Rome. Nonetheless, they each played a significant role in building a legacy that would span centuries, and would inform and influence the ways in which future leaders would make their mark on the world. These were the

[17] Shotter, 48.
[18] Plutarch, 9.
[19] Shotter, 52.
[20] Suetonius, 41.
[21] Ibid, 76.
[22] Shotter, 94.

men who ensured the end of the Roman Republic and led to the start of something that no one could ever have predicted: the greatest, most expansive empire ever to rule the world. It was, in all of its glory, success, and failure, the beginning of the end for the Roman Republic.

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