



THE FRAGILITY OF REPUBLICAN INSTITUTIONS AS VIEWED THROUGH THE FALL OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC

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Abstract

Early on a mild January day, supporters of a controversial political figure stormed the capital of the world's oldest republic. This politician had become famous for his disregard of democratic institutions and his abuse of power while holding the highest elected office in the government. This politician's name was Gaius Julius Caesar, it was January 10th 49 BC, and through his actions and the actions of those who stood opposed to him, the Roman Republic would come to an end. Ultimately, it was not the actions of Caesar alone that caused the collapse of the Roman Republic, nor was it the fault of the common citizens. The political class failed to consider the long-term ramifications of their actions—instead, choosing to focus on short term gains, political partisanship, and their own political careers. As a result, these politicians presided over the demise of the 600-year-old Republic. Almost 2,070 years later—to the day—a political figure in the United States would spur his supporters to storm the capital in Washington, D.C.. If we are to protect our own democratic institutions, we must look back upon the failures of Cicero and his colleagues as they fought against Julius Caesar to protect the Roman Republic. Their failures as guardians of democracy can offer a unique perspective into how the modern world can safeguard itself from the dangers of authoritarianism.

Introduction

There are certainly unambiguous distinctions between the Roman Republic and the United States; however, the institutions which protect democratic rule have remained unchanged since the era of Julius Caesar. These are called “republican institutions” and they have ensured the continuation of democracy in any republic throughout history. The continuation of elections, absence of political violence, active participation of a political class, and the recognition of the “Rule of Law” are key institutions of any democracy. Together, these ideals are considered foundational pillars around which a republic is built. When these pillars remain strong, democracy is able to grow and flourish. Although, if these pillars are damaged or dismantled, democratic rule becomes weak, vulnerable, and prone to collapse. Over the course of a 15-year period, Roman citizens watched as their republic crumbled into pieces. Leading figures such as Cato, Pompey, Cicero, and Caesar would all become victims to an age of incredible political instability. As we will see, the Roman Republic was not destroyed by external threats, nor was it extinguished when Caesar marched across the Rubicon. The Republic was destroyed when the republican institutions—its foundational pillars—were abandoned to decay and ultimately collapse. According to historian Anthony Everitt, in his book *Cicero*:

*“...For a long time they had defended and administered [the republic]. Then in old age it slipped from their hands. Destroyed by their own mistakes...” – Everitt, Cicero
[pg.321]*

The Roman Republic, just like the United States, had succeeded because of the political stability that democratic rule brought. As we analyze the characteristics and decisions of historical figures of this age, we must attempt to understand how that stability could evolve into chaos. Living in the prime of a republican era, these men willingly dismantled the institutions which safeguarded democracy from falling to autocratic rule. History teaches that greed, power-mongering, and loss of ethics are common consequences of political power being concentrated in individuals. The safety of modern democracies may depend on an understanding of key lessons from the past, lessons rooted in the massive impact a few individuals with unchecked power had on the fall of the Roman Republic. In this paper, I offer four important institutions which safe-guard democracy, exploring the role of key players in ancient Rome and

how they could potentially have been prevented the collapse of democratic rule, as well as thoughts on how these lessons apply to the modern American democratic system.

Background Information

What makes a successful government?

Many aspects of human society contribute to what constitutes a successful government: whether it be environmental stability, social bonds, martial virtue, or common language. For simplification, we can categorize these elements into two distinct arguments as to what promotes a successful government. First would be the continuation of political stability, and the second would be the need for economic stability.

Political Stability

Political stability can occur in different forms for various systems of government. When referring to a democracy, this concept refers to the maintenance of the republican institutions which safeguard democratic rule. Reiterating these institutions, they consist of: the continuation of elections, absence of political violence, active participation of a political class, and the recognition of the “Rule of Law”. When these foundational pillars are all upheld, the result is a politically stable system of governance. Why do we need political stability to have a successful government? For this analysis, it is assumed that the purpose of a government is to successfully protect and care for the inhabitants living under said government. To successfully administer the protection and preservation of a society, political stability is essential. In the simplest terms, political stability serves to prevent infighting within a society, with some examples being civil wars or political purges. Without the promise of political stability, many responsibilities of the state become difficult to fulfill, or even become outright impossible. Maintaining foreign relations becomes a tenuous act, as neighboring peoples have no guarantee that any agreement(s) will be maintained. Raising armies with the intention to defend the people becomes dangerous, as any one army could be driven to rebellion against the sitting government if motivated to do so. While collecting and redistributing taxes betters the people as a whole, it runs the risk of tearing at the very bonds which bind the society together. Essentially, if taxes are raised on one specific class, the reaction can insight

rebellion. All of the above and more are symptoms of political instability, and all serve to prevent the ultimately purpose of governance, to protect and care for the people. Therefore, the political stability of a government must be constantly maintained in order to successfully govern a society.

Economic Stability

While the success of a government may be based in its political stability, the health of any society is based in its economic stability. In any society there will be a set of economic classes which people can be classified within. In the modern day, we can view this simply as the lower, middle, and upper classes. Economic stability refers to a state in which the distribution of wealth¹ amongst the different classes remains in balance. To maintain economic stability, a successful government can engage in welfare for the betterment of the lower classes or raise taxes on the upper classes to prevent inequality. The tendency for the “rich to get richer” and the “poor get poorer” lays at the bedrock of this concept. This is why governments across history have always struggled with corruption. Corruption is a method by which the upper classes can further their own interests, destroy welfare programs, and create runaway wealth-inequality. When this occurs, the middle class is taxed at increasing rates while the upper classes experience a rapid increase in wealth. The result of such a destabilized economy is a rapid increase in the size of the lower class, collapse of the middle class, and the concentration of massive amounts of wealth into the hands of the upper class. With all the above in mind, an economically stable society will be more capable of dealing with political crisis’s; just as a politically stable government will be more capable of dealing with economic recession.

What can lead toward political instability?

The Roman Republic at its Height (120 BCE)

At its height, the Roman Republic was extremely politically and economically stable. The Republic experienced a golden age of economic and political prosperity that allowed it to conquer the entirety of the Mediterranean world. This political stability was created thanks to: annual elections, an

¹ The term “wealth” refers to a summation of the amount of land or goods a class can have at their disposal at any given moment. Not the amount of currency any one individual owns.

active political class, the absence of political violence, and the supremacy of the “Rule of Law”. The political stability of the government fed into creating an economically stable society, which allowed for more people to take part in governance, which fed back into creating more political stability. This feedback loop allowed for the Romans to maintain their own political stability even in times of crisis. This stability has been mirrored by the relative political and economic stability the United States has experienced since the end of World War 2. The lack of internal political instability and the economic growth the United States has experience for some 70 years allowed the nation to remain incredibly influential and powerful for generations. These periods of stability, however, were not to last. In both cases, the economic and political prosperity which each experienced indirectly led to periods of instability. In the modern day, the economic prosperity of the late 20th century allowed for politicians to refrain from addressing looming political issues, instead choosing to push these issues onto future generations. Similarly, the Roman success abroad militarily and the inaction of their political class sowed the seeds by which the economic stability of their society would come undone.

Cycles of Instability

As time passed, the economic stability of Roman society began to break down. With the political class constantly engaging in warfare with far off kingdoms and peoples, the middle and lower classes were forced to give up more and more of their own wealth. This draining of the lower classes’ wealth was compounded as the Roman military continued to bring hundreds of thousands of people back to the Italian peninsula in slavery. This influx of free labor drove many of the rural middle class out of work and into poverty. This economic instability caused the Roman middle class to slowly wither away as the upper class simply gathered more and more wealth. There were, however, solutions to this crisis. Multiple attempts were made by reformers within the political class to address the growing wealth inequality. The political class recognized early on the danger the economy was in, but the economic instability fed into a slow breakdown of political stability. The growing wealth of the upper class meant that the government began to grow more and more corrupt. The wealth of the upper class meant they could co-opt the political class to serve their interests alone, and as corruption became more and more common, little was done to

address the growing economic inequality within Roman society. Similarly, from the end of the 90s to 2020, the United States has experienced a similar breakdown in the economic strength of the middle and lower classes. Due to a variety of factors, the middle and lower classes have had their financial strength drained as the upper class grows more and more wealthy. This wealth inequality presents a clear threat to the economic stability of the nation, but the political class has refrained from enacting any significant reforms to address the crisis. This has resulted in two economic recessions, as the shrinking middle class is pushed further and further into debt. These trends in both societies constitute “cycles of instability” where the economic instability of the nation feeds directly into the political instability of the government. This political instability creates inaction with the political class, which allows the economy to become more and more fragile. As the economy destabilized, politics becomes more and more volatile as different factions fight over who is to blame for the economic downturn, and the stability of the society as a whole begins to break down. The Roman Republic was facing a unique challenge it had never before dealt with, and those in power were woefully unsuccessful in addressing this cycle of crises.

Stage 1: Economic Instability leads to Political violence

Undermining Republican Institutions

Political Violence (90 to 80 BCE)

Political violence is often the first symptom of political instability in any system of government. Once broken, this republican institution is incredibly difficult to rebuild. The Romans failed in almost every effort to prevent the rise of political violence as they repeatedly failed to diagnose the root cause. As a result of decades of economic instability, a divide had grown within the political class. The upper classes had used their wealth to prevent any real solution to the economic crisis, meanwhile the middle and lower classes had grown cynical and hateful of the political class as a whole. Ambitious politicians had co-opted this outrage in order to fuel their own political careers. Without recognizing the danger the economy and the political class were in, politics continued as it always had, but it was unsustainable. As a rift began to form in the political class, it was only a matter of time before violence broke out. Between the years of 90 BC and 80 BC, the Roman Republic's political class fell head long into political violence

on a horrifying scale. When political power fell into the hands of either faction, that power was used to order the deaths of political opposition groups. As multiple purges of the political class took place, one of the pillars designed to protect democratic rule was torn to pieces. These political purges sent shockwaves through Roman society. Figures such as Cicero, Caesar, Cato, and Pompey all were witness to these events. In their youth, they all reacted differently to sudden outbreak of political violence. Anthony Everitt describes how these events impacted their formative years by saying:

*“...the [proscriptions] of Marius and Sulla had taken place during their formative years. Their reactions to what they saw hardened over the years into mature political positions which, as it happened, covered the whole spectrum of the possible. Defense of Republican traditions, withdraw from direct political activity, and commitment to radical reform—these were the ways in which [these historical figures] came to terms with the breakdown of the constitution and the decimation of the ruling class.” –
Everitt, Cicero [pg.41]*

Decimation of the Political Class

A healthy political class is often indicative of successful governance. Without the fear of political violence, the political class can focus on the day-to-day governance of the people. Older politicians and groups can exert influence on newcomers and continue the traditions and rules of republican governance. Contrary to modern democracies, the Roman Republic did not have a written “constitution”. Instead their republic was guided by customs and principles which dictated day to day political activity. The threat of social isolation or political ostracism from the senate was often enough of a threat to maintain republican institutions. By the end of the year 80 BC, the Roman political class had collapsed in influence. Older politicians had been either exiled or killed for their refusal to abide by the Proscriptions. Without the influence of these members of the political class, the rules and traditions of the Republic became less important. In the years to come, these rules and traditions would be broken more and more often. Without the threat of social or political isolation, it became far easier to simply ignore these rules.

The New Guard

With the political class reduced to a shadow of its former self, the Romans found themselves in a unique position. The political stability of the Republic had been briefly shattered, but as time passed, no autocratic king stepped forward to seize power. The economic stability of their society was still in flux, as

the middle class continued to suffer under hard times. it was the next generation of politicians who decided the fate of the Roman Republic. Cicero, Caesar, Cato, and Pompey would all play a pivotal role as the Roman Republic attempted to recover from its internal strife.

Cicero's Childhood

Marcus Tullius Cicero was born to a prominent Italian family. Born in the Italian countryside, Cicero spent his childhood being tutored by the most prominent politicians of his youth. When the proscriptions came, Cicero watched as his tutors and mentors were systematically purged from the political class. As Anthony Everitt describes, Cicero responded to these events by placing a great level of importance upon the "Defense of republican traditions". Cicero felt that the violent nature of Roman military life had fed directly into the political violence that had destabilized the politics. It was his belief that:

"A victorious general ... is in no way inferior to a statesman. Victories in the field count for little if the right decision is not made at home." – Everitt, Cicero [pg.52]

As the Proscriptions came to an end, Cicero remained deeply scared by the deaths of his mentors. In his eyes, the Roman Republic had betrayed the traditions and institutions that had guided it for centuries, which was of course true. This logical analysis of the danger the Republic was in, but Cicero was entirely ineffective at addressing these problems. In the years to come, Cicero would remove himself from the political situation for fear of his own life. As figures such as Pompey, Cato, and eventually Caesar were killed for their convictions, Cicero remained on the sidelines, until it was far too late for his influence to matter.

Caesar's Childhood

Gaius Julius Caesar, unlike Cicero, did not walk away having an abundant love of republican traditions. Caesar had grown up in a far less privileged world than Cicero. When the proscriptions came, Caesar's family was among those targeted. While Caesar was not killed, many of those around him lost their lives as the political class enacted its purges and counter purges. When Caesar was eventually able to reenter political life, he did so with a disdain for the senate and the aristocracy. To Caesar, these leading

figures had failed to protect him and so many of his friends and family. Caesar would change over the course of his life, but he never trusted the senate in the way Cicero or Cato would. He would spend a large portion of his political career working to undermine the authority of the Senate and of the Republic at large. Caesar's mistrust of the political class was not misplaced, but what Caesar failed to recognize was the consequences of his actions. Caesar never stopped to ask if what he did was going to benefit the Roman people in the long term. Rather than addressing the root problems the Republic was facing, Caesar enacted reforms which acted as Band-Aids on bullet wounds. In his hatred for the political class, and his failed attempts at economic reform, Caesar would sow the seeds of future political collapse.

Cato

Marcus Porcius Cato grew up in a similar fashion to Cicero. Raised and tutored by the brightest and richest political figures in Rome, Cato earned a reputation as a young age for his unwillingness to compromise. Cato was never in any danger due to the Proscriptions, as family were prominent conservatives and were members of the upper class. Walking out of this pivotal moment in Roman history, Cato developed a deep mistrust for the "*Populares*" or "reform" faction within Roman politics, similar to Caesar's mistrust of the political class. Cato was an intelligent politician, but his failure would lay in this mistrust. In the leadup to Caesar's rebellion, Cato actively seemed to thwart any attempt to compromise with Caesar. In his mistrust of the reform faction, Cato failed to recognize the danger he was placing the Republic in. Committed to the idea that the reform faction was an existential threat to his political faction, Cato placed his own ego and beliefs above the safety of the Republic. In this way Caesar and Cato were very similar, as they both were uncompromising in their ideals to a fault.

Pompey

Pompey Gnaeus Pompeius was not born to an aristocratic family. Born in rural Italy to a small rural family, Pompey never took well to political life. Having grown up surrounded by veterans of Rome's overseas conflicts, Pompey had a lot of respect for military veterans and military life. Walking away from the proscriptions, Pompey had avoided any real danger of violence by isolating himself from politics. It is possible, as stated by Anthony Everitt, that Pompey saw this horrifying spectacle as even

more motivation to “withdraw from direct political activity”. During Pompey’s future political career, he would continually retreat from public eye any time that roman politics showed signs it might devolve into violence. Pompey’s willingness to place his own self-preservation above any republican institution made him equally as dangerous to the Republic as Caesar was. After the Republic returns to political violence, Pompey will use the chaos to further his own political career, and his ego and power-mongering would directly lead the Republic towards catastrophe.

Modern Relevance

Sowing seeds of Political Instability

The political violence which these characters witnessed in their youth came to an end. As we will see, in the decades that followed this breakdown, the political class would recover, and political violence would abate for some time. Yet, the Republic was not recovering. For ambitious figures such as Caesar there was now a dangerous precedent they took note of, that being: political violence can be a tool for achieving economic reform. Caesar would be the first politician in the decades following the Proscriptions to use political violence in this way. His willingness to use political violence was reciprocated by many of the younger generation, and as time passed more and more politicians would engage in this kind of political violence. Inversely, Cato and a large portion of the older conservative faction would spend their political careers ideologically opposed to any economic reforms. These conservatives failed to realize the need for reform and change within the Roman economy. Instead they chose to attempt to restore the “status quo”, only pushing the can further down the road. When Caesar and his reform faction eventually returns political violence to the Republic, the conservative faction will be caught entirely off-guard. Unable to prevent the violence, the conservatives will simply take up the same methods and only worsen the political instability of the Republic.

A Modern Failure to Recognize the Looming Danger

While the modern American democracy is not yet to this stage of republican collapse, it is important to note how close it has come. Only months ago, the threat of a purge of the political class was dangerously close to reality. January 6th and the events which occurred in the US capital constitute a

warning sign for the dangerous waters the American Republic has drifted into. While the political class remained unharmed, this was not a certainty on January 6th. Had those storming the capital been slightly more organized it is possible that the entirety of the US congress could have been taken hostage. The consequences of this event are still being felt, but no matter what the immediate aftermath of these events is, a pillar of democratic rule has been weakened. To younger generations who are just now beginning to aspire for political careers, the lessons drawn from January 6th will not pertain to the danger it posed to modern democracy, but rather how political violence can be used as a tool for achieving a political goal. Similarly to the conservatives in Rome, the modern political class seems to have entirely failed to recognize the root cause of the sudden outbreak of politically motivated violence. The politicians responsible for the uprising remain in power; instead of punishing these figures, the political class seems confident that punishing the mob that stormed the capital will be enough. This failure to impose the “Rule of Law” on those who worked to foment the mob towards insurrection constitutes another dangerous failure to protect republican institutions. With the appearance of political violence and the failure to impose the “Rule of Law”, the political class is leaning more and more towards inaction.

When the Romans attempt to recover political stability following this catastrophe, the political class will attempt to treat the Proscriptions as “an aberrant moment in time.” Instead of addressing the economic instability which had created a cycle of political instability, those in power will chose to do nothing, and the consequences will be disastrous.

Stage 2: Inaction allows the crisis to worsen

20 years of Inaction (80 to 60 BCE)

For 20 years leading political figures such as Cato, Cicero, Caesar, and Pompey did little to address the root cause of the Roman Republics political instability. Ignoring the economic instability which continued to shrink the middle class, those in power continued as though it was “business as usual”. Without fail, this “return to normal” was a horrible mistake. The coming crisis of political stability could have been entirely avoided; all the political class needed to do was act. Ignoring the warning signs,

the political class moved forward without reflection as to the consequences of their inaction. While political violence had largely come to a halt, and the political class had recovered, the fundamental pillars of democratic rule had been severely weakened.

Caesar's year (59 BCE)

The First Triumvirate

In 59 BC, Caesar became one of the two elected consuls of Rome for a one-year term. His electoral victory came thanks to the support of 'The First Triumvirate'. This title refers to a secret agreement between three of Rome's more prominent politicians: Caesar, Crassus, and Pompey. A mutually beneficial agreement, each was meant to support the others politically in order to achieve political reforms. Caesar needed their support to pass reforms relating to wealth inequality, while Pompey needed their support in order to pass reforms relating to retirement benefits for retiring soldiers. This agreement, on its own, was not dangerous for the Republic. These three men would work over the next year to pass several reforms which went a long way to addressing the economic woes the middle class was suffering. While the attempt to enact economic reform was badly needed, the means by which Caesar achieved these goals was not justified. For 20 years political violence had been absent from Roman politics, that all came to an end only days into Caesar's term.

Caesar's Authoritarian Leanings

In the first meeting of the senate for the year 59 BC, Caesar attempted to pass a massive wealth redistribution bill. Wealth redistribution would mean the confiscation and redistribution of thousands of acres of farm land to the middle class, and was a reform opposed by Cato and his conservative faction. When Caesar presented his legislation the conservatives in the Senate refused to support the bill. Caesar's response to this refusal earned him the name "tyrant". Ordering the arrest of Cato, Caesar grew tired of the stubborn refusal of the Senate to enact reform. Following this authoritarian attempt to silence his political opposition, he decided to simply bypass the senate altogether. Caesar proclaimed that the

legislation would be voted on by the public assembly² in 20 days' time. On Caesar's first day in office, he had ordered the arrest of his political opposition and had undermined the authority of the Senate. After the 20-day period had passed, Caesar held a meeting of the public assembly, yet he was still met with opposition from the senate. Cato, along with a delegation of senators, approached the speaking platform in the Roman forum. Cato was adamant that the senate's authority not be undermined, and was there to declare the gathering illegal. In response, a mob of urban poor driven into a frenzy by Caesar himself, turned on the delegation and swarmed the senators. Caesar made no attempt to stop the mob as senators fled for their lives. The message to the senate was clear: Caesar didn't care that the conservatives had the majority in the senate, he didn't care about protecting his fellow senators, what Caesar wanted was to pass his legislation and he was willing to do away with multiple republican institutions to do so. Political violence had returned to Roman politics thanks to the actions of one man. In the months that followed, several attempts were made to punish Caesar for his actions, but none were successful. Caesar, with the political support of 'The First Triumvirate', was able to bribe and threaten his way to escape the Rule of Law. The threat of political violence silenced Caesar's opposition, and for the rest of his term he was unopposed.

A Failure to Fight Authoritarianism

In a politically stable democracy, the appearance of authoritarian politicians is met by a strong backlash from the political class. When President Nixon engaged in an authoritarian attempt to blackmail his political opposition, the majority of the political class in the United States rallied against him and he was relatively quickly removed from power. In a democracy that is suffering from political instability, this backlash is even more important but is hard to successfully enact. When the Roman political class was met by a proactive and dangerous authoritarian in Julius Caesar, there was no political backlash. Prominent politicians, for fear of their own lives allowed Caesar to continually enact authoritarian style

² The Public Assembly was akin to a gathering of all the citizens of the city of Rome and was often simply used to provide a rubber stamp of approval on any legislation the senate passed. It was undemocratic and incredibly rare for a politician to ignore the senate and proceed directly to the public assembly to pass legislation.

governance for the entirety of his term. Caesar successfully passed legislation regarding the retirement of military Veterans, as he had agreed to with Pompey, and even more legislation concerning wealth and land redistribution. By the time Caesars term was nearing an end, the senate had all but given up any attempt to reign him in. Instead, the senate granted to Caesar the command of roughly a quarter of the entire Roman military. As the year 58 approached and elections began, Caesar left the city, and the political class breathed a sigh of relief. They had successfully appeased Caesar long enough to see him leave.

Inaction and Appeasement

If Politicians won't stand for Democracy, who will?

The authoritarian actions of Caesar in his year as consul were of course detrimental to the Republic, but this was always a possibility since the year 80. If not Caesar, some other reform minded politician would have enacted the same tactics against the political class to bypass Rome's republican institutions. Political violence had returned and was being used as a tool of the reform faction to pressure the conservatives and allow for economic reform. The Rule of Law had been ignored by Caesar and had not been enforced by the political class. Additionally, the political class had chosen to appease Caesar, and simply sideline themselves, allowing for Caesar to enact any legislation saw fit to. If the political class wanted to prevent future violence, they needed to meet the threat Caesar posed the moment it was shown just how authoritarian his character was. To prevent a rise in political violence, the Senate could have committed to a number of solutions. From the start, the unwillingness of Cato and his supporters to consider economic reforms or work with reformers to achieve change made violence even more likely. Addressing the economic struggles of the middle class was what had gotten Caesar elected, and the failure of the conservatives to recognize the political winds pushing towards reform jeopardized the Republic itself for the sake of party politics. Even beyond this point, Cato seemed to have no general plan besides to remain obstinate against Caesars reforms. When faced with authoritarian means being used to circumvent their unwillingness to enact economic reform, Cato and his supports simply rolled over and allowed republican institutions to be trampled on. Cato appears to have reveled in this fact, seeing it not

as a danger to the Republic, but as an opportunity to prosecute his political opposition. The unwillingness of the Roman political class to combat authoritarianism left a deeper impact upon the political stability of the Republic than any damage Caesar did with his policies. If Cato had wanted to truly prevent political instability and avoid more violence, he took all the wrong steps to achieve that goal. What appears more likely, is that Cato and his conservative faction continued to place the needs of the upper class above that of the Republic itself, and this refusal to act or to reign in authoritarian rule was yet another milestone on the path towards disaster.

A Modern Caesar

The appearance of modern authoritarianism in the United States has followed a dangerously similar path to the one walked by Cato and Caesar. For decades before 2016, the US congress failed categorically to address the slow collapse of the middle class. When the political class lost their bid for the presidency in 2016 and bore witness to authoritarian policies being used to silence the congress, the majority of the political class did nothing. To preserve their own political careers, a majority of the congress chose to either appease or support the authoritarian actions taken by this president. This inaction has now allowed for republican institutions to wither away for years. Only months after an electoral loss, threats of political violence were nearly successful at seizing congress in order to overturn the results. Already, the same path is being walked by modern politicians. Instead of working to either politically combat the authoritarian leanings of their president through impeachment or by reigning in the powers of the president, the political class did nothing. In their inaction, they have allowed for years of political instability to sow further divides both within the political class and within society at large. These mistakes have already come and gone, and now the absence of political violence and of the legitimacy of the electoral process have both been brought into question. What remains certain is that the trends which took the United States to this point continue to bend toward further political instability. Without decisive action from the political class to address the root cause of this instability, the political realm will continue to grow more and more dangerous.

Stage 3: Politicians place Party over Politics

Political Violence as a tool in government (58 to 56 BC)

Years of Chaos

Following Caesar's departure from the city, a period of calm returned to Rome. The senate regained its authority, for the moment. Without Caesar's threat of mob violence hanging over their heads, politicians quickly returned to the status quo. The failure to recognize the threat of political violence, Cato and Cicero failed to prevent its return. Following in Caesar's footsteps, Clodius Pulcher began to use the threat of mob violence to boost his political career. After winning an election to become a tribune of the plebes³, he utilized the threat of mob violence to scare the senate into passing several economic reforms. It was at this point that the Roman senate finally recognized the need to prevent political violence. Their response, however, simply made the situation worse. Unable to or perhaps unwilling to give up an opportunity to use this new political tool for themselves, several prominent conservative politicians began hiring gladiators as mercenaries. Using these mercenary forces, the conservatives and reformers clashed repeatedly. Political violence broke out across the city as both sides of the political divide descended into armed political violence. To quote historian Tom Holland:

"Rome became the scene of endless street battles." – Cicero, Letters to Atticus [5]

The loosening grip of the "Rule of Law"

When charges were brought against the reformers the threat of mob violence and effective bribery saw them acquitted. When the reformers turned around and accused the conservatives of the same crime, the senate itself intervened to protect their own. When the senate tried to have Claudius banished from sitting in on senate meetings, Clodius threatened to burn the senate house to the ground⁴. Rome, as a city, was meant to be a weapon free zone. It had been a tradition for centuries that no weapons or soldiers were allowed to enter the city unless given permission from the senate. By 56 BC, two years after Caesar's term as Consul, this rule was being broken on a daily basis by both sides of the political aisle. Needless to

³ This position's role isn't of importance, what is important is that he was able to introduce legislation as though he was a consul.

⁴ See source [5] by Cicero

say, this course of events was unsustainable. In their first attempt to address the growth in political violence, Cato and his conservative faction had simply added fuel to the fire. The reform faction shares its own side of the blame, but once again it was the decisions made by the conservative faction that prevented any real healing from taking place. The steadfast obstinance to any reform was slowly eating away at what remained of the Republic's political stability. Cato's decisions here made it just that much easier for Clodius to gather support from the urban poor, as it was easy to convince them that the prideful men who refused to enact reform were to blame for the outbreak of violence. In reality, the Romans struggling to put up any sort of defense to protect their republican institutions. Political violence, once started, is difficult to stop, and the conservative response of "taking up arms" is simply another symptom of that struggle to end the violence.

[One step in the Right Direction \(56 to 52 BC\)](#)

By the year 56 BC of the 4 fundamental pillars which protected democratic rule, none had remained untouched by the chaos of the past 2 years. Political violence had been turned into a tool for both reformers and conservatives to use. At the same time, the "Rule of Law" had been openly floated as both sides refused to suffer any legal consequences for their actions. Elections had been suspended due to the rise in violence, and the political class was once again dangerously close to using political purges as a means to remove their opposition. Finally, by the end of the year 56, the Roman political class took its first tenuous steps towards addressing the crisis.

[Pompey to the Rescue](#)

When elections for Consul finally did come in the year 56 came the two Triumvirs, Pompey and Crassus, were victorious. During the course of their terms, these two men worked to limit the rise in political violence. While political violence was not ended permanently, the success Pompey and Crassus had at ending the violence earned Pompey a positive reputation within the conservative faction. Despite the general failure of either side to put an end to the violence, both sides could at least still recognize that the rise in violence needed to stop.

In 52 BC, with mob violence going on its sixth consecutive year, the senate turned to Pompey to restore order. On its own, this decision could have resulted in a general recovery of some political stability, but the method by which the senate chose to address the crisis ended up causing more harm than good. Ignoring the electoral process the senate simply appointed Pompey as sole consul. By law there needed to be a 10-year gap between consulships, and Pompey had just served as consul only 4 years ago. Additionally, the senate did not have the power to decide who the next consul would be. What seems to have been the consensus amongst the conservatives was that this was an extreme crisis. The republic was under daily threat of being burned down due to the violent mobs which roamed the streets, and the senate needed to reassert control over the population.

Hypocrisy and Greed

If the conservatives wanted to combat the rise in political violence, they could have simply commanded Pompey to help administer the city in this time of crisis. Instead, the conservatives in the senate chose to suspend one of the few republican institutions which had remained unscathed from the previous 6 years of chaos in Rome. By appointing Pompey as “sole Consul”, they broke from any established republican traditions. If they truly cared about preserving republican institutions while protecting their citizens, they could have negotiated a settlement with the reformers that could have addressed the economic crisis while also putting an end to the political violence. Such compromises were supported by Cicero and several moderate politicians, but they were never taken seriously. Instead, Cato’s ideological inability to compromise meant that the conservatives ultimately engaged in the same behavior which had branded Caesar a “Tyrant”. They had taken up arms to enact their own brand of political violence. When they finally did put an end to the violence, they did so by undermining the electoral process as being the only route politicians could take to gain political power. Cato, rather than being a protector of republican virtue, seems more of an opportunist whose greed and ego won out over any desire to enact real change.

Questioning the Legitimacy of the Electoral Process

Elections are some of the most sacred parts of democratic rule. It is an accepted part of any democracy that political power flows up from the people, through the electoral process. Political stability, while it can fluctuate over time, can almost always rely on this solid bedrock of democracy. When Cato and the conservative faction violated this bedrock of democratic rule, they crossed a line. Up until this point, no matter the level of political violence, elections have been the only way politicians could gain access to political power. With a single action, Cato and the conservatives showed the entire Roman political class that elections didn't necessarily confirm your political power. Instead, the soldiers Pompey commanded as he entered the city were indicative of a shifting source of political power. The precedent was set that political power could flow just as easily from the tip of a sword, as it had once flowed from the ballot box.

In the months prior to the 2020 election, a majority of the political class attempted to undermine this fundamental pillar to democratic rule. Inferring that the electoral process was corrupt, these politicians were attempting to commit the same type of betrayal of republican traditions as Cato and his conservative faction. To create such uncertainty in a society as to where political power should come from, they were in essence attempting to shift that source of power towards themselves. The insurrection on January 6th was only possible thanks to this act of subterfuge. As we will see, the actions of Cato and the conservatives directly lead the Republic toward civil war.

Stage 4: Civil War

Gambling with Democracy (52 to 50 BC)

Conservative VS Reformer

As politics back in Rome had been unravelling, Caesar had been in northern Italy and modern France. His term as governor or general of these northern territories was coming to an end, and with its end Caesar would be forced to return to Rome as a private citizen. As a private citizen, he would have no protection from the Rule of Law. Due to the animosity he had fostered with the political class at large, he was likely to face prosecution for his actions. This all came to a head in the year 50 BC. The reformers

managed to elect a radical senator Marcus Antonius, or as we know him, Mark Antony. Cato's conservative faction in the senate were attempting to pass legislation that would strip Caesar of his command and legal immunity. At the same time, Mark Antony led the reform faction in the senate as they attempted to prevent the prosecution of Caesar. By midway through the year 50, neither side had been successful. Cato and the conservatives, while their desire to impose the Rule of Law on Caesar would have been a positive, they come off as willfully ignorant of reality. Caesar held command of a quarter of the Republic's armed forces and was unlikely to simply give up his command to face repercussions for his actions as Consul 10 years ago. With the senate deadlocked between the two factions, neither side was willing to listen to the other. As years passed, Caesar announced his intention to run for Consul a second time in the year 49. Cato and the conservatives refused to acknowledge such a statement, and the two sides failed to reach any compromise. During this period of gridlock, Cato gave Caesar an ultimatum, if Caesar didn't step down by November of the year 50, he would be declared an enemy of the republic. [7]

Cicero's Moderate Compromise

During this period, Cicero seems to have played the role of moderator between the two sides. He was steadfastly opposed to allowing Caesar to run for the consulship without facing legal prosecution, but also refused to support Cato and his seeming bloodlust to see Caesar convicted. Cicero proposed a middle path that reveals a lot about the two sides in question. Cicero proposed that the senate allow Caesar to run for the consulship, only after he had subjected himself to a formal trial.⁵ Cicero recognized the disaster which this conflict could result in. Caesar was never going to simply give up his command and possibly end his political career in a trial, and Cato was obstinate that Caesar face a conviction for his actions as Consul. To avoid civil war, Cicero pushed for compromise between the two sides, but neither listened. This failure for either side to consider a moderate approach to end the rising tensions is indicative of the uncompromising nature of this political climate. There was never a moment where either side, especially the Pompeians, stepped back to question how their actions were endangering the Republic. Instead of

⁵ See source [7], *Historia Civilis*

self-reflection, and compromise, the two sides moved towards civil war, expecting the other side to backdown. In a letter to a fellow senator, Cicero confessed to the reality of the political climate at the time:

“The current political situation terrifies me ... Almost everybody I know wants to avoid a fight and give in to Caesars demands ... Sure, his demands are shameless, but no more shameless than when he asked for a 5-year extension to his term as governor ... why fight him on this?” – Cicero, Letters to Atticus [5]

Cicero criticizes both Cato and Pompey in these letters, saying that these leaders had failing to recognize that the conflict they were instigating presented an existential threat to the republic. They never seemed to contemplate the possibility of a Caesarian victory, but rather were entirely committed to the idea that they couldn't lose.

The Last Chance at Peace

When January 1st of 49 came, and Caesar had still refused to step down, two new consuls took office. They both sided with Cato, and soon the senate had passed legislation that stated that needed to resign his command within 7 days. Three days later, on January 4th, a final meeting was held between the reform faction and the conservative faction. Pompey, Cato, Cicero, Mark Antony, and server other Caesarian senators attended, in the hopes of orchestrating an agreement which would deescalate the situation. Preempting any discussion, Mark Antony came with an offer from Caesar. Caesars offer stated that he was willing to step down from two of his three provinces, leaving him with only a couple thousand soldiers under his command. His condition to this agreement was that the Pompeian's allow him to serve as consul for the year 48. While Cicero was willing to take this offer, Pompey and Cato were not. After a short discussion, a final offer was made: Caesar would only retain command of a thousand soldiers. This offer was supported by both Pompey and Cicero, as it would disarm Caesar of his army, and thus it would end the threat of civil war, but not Cato. In the end, Cato refused to accept Caesars offer, stating to Mark Antony that he would only accept such an offer if Caesar relinquished command of all his armed forces. Unwilling to compromise, and confident that he was in the stronger bargaining position, Cato left the meeting, and the last chance to avoid civil war slipped through their fingers.

The Survival of Democracy is Gambled away

It goes without saying that civil war must be avoided at all costs when it becomes possible in a democracy. A civil war of the kind that Caesar and Cato were courting would have been gambling the very existence of the Republic on the success of the Republic's generals. Caesar was farsighted enough to recognize that a civil war of this nature was incredibly dangerous, and there was no certainty he could win. So Caesar genuinely wanted to avoid a conflict, and to attempt to earn the trust of Cato and Pompey, he offered to relinquish the majority of his armed forces. For the first time in years the two sides seemed to be reaching an understanding. Up until this point, both sides had operated with conflicting interests, but it shows that even with the political climate so close to disaster, leaders of both sides recognized the necessity to avoid conflict if it was possible. With only a handful of soldiers, Caesar was no threat to the Republic, and at the same time could be allowed enough breathing room to continue his political career. It is understandable for Cato and the conservatives to want to see Caesar's political career come to an end. His actions during his year as Consul in 59 would have remained a constant reminder as to why he was a danger to the Republic, but Cato and the conservatives had backed themselves into a corner. Caesar was now a direct threat to the Republic if they refused to work with him, and the choice was to cooperate with him or to gamble the Republic and many of their lives on the outcome of a bloody civil war. For Cicero's part, was the only politician among them who seems to have recognized the danger Caesar posed far in advance. He constantly insisted that he play the role of moderator, and his success at bringing both sides back to the negotiation table was the only reason they came so close to an agreement in the first place. It is from this reasoning that we must place the majority of the blame for this failure on Cato. While other figures such as Caesar, Pompey, and Cicero all recognized the need to avoid civil war, Cato refused to accept any compromise. His unwillingness to sacrifice the status quo and his willingness to refute Caesar and the reform faction at every turn allowed for Roman politics to come this close to civil war. Despite all the danger the Republic had been in thus far, the two sides had largely reached an agreement. Cato never did recognize Caesar as a fellow senator, but rather always saw him as an enemy to be fought at every turn. This attitude made the conflict more and more likely to end in bloodshed. In the end, Cato was

willing to gamble the very survival of the republic in exchange for crippling a rival politician, that is inexcusable.

To Cross the Rubicon (49 BC)

Political Stability reached Rock Bottom

When Caesar received news that Cato and the conservatives had broken off peace talks, on January 6th, he marched approximately 3,000 Roman soldiers in the dead of night to the Rubicon river. The river here signified the border between where Caesar's governorship ended, and the senate's territory began. To cross the river with an army but without the senate's direct permission would be considered an act of rebellion. Caesar remained on the other side of the river until late into the morning of January 7th of the year 49 BC, waiting for any messengers from Rome to appear in hopes that an agreement could have been reached. Instead, when no messengers arrived, Caesar, before ordering his men to cross the river, he quoted what was at the time a famous play:

"Let the die be cast." – Holland, Rubicon [pg.4]⁶

Democracy Falls into the Hands of One Man

When Caesar crossed the Rubicon, the Roman Republic had already suffered a general collapse in political stability. The 4 pillars of democratic rule had been individually undermined by both sides of the political divide, which meant that when Caesar rebelled he could only do so against a Republican government weakened by a decade of failed attempts to repair political stability. If the Romans had wanted to, by this stage avoid the complete political collapse of the Republic, they needed to put aside their differences and work together to address the economic and political divides which were tearing the Republic apart. Instead, Cato and the conservatives bet that they could defeat Caesar, not recognizing that in doing so they landed yet another blow to the stability of their Republic. It is no coincidence that in only a few years' time, figures other than Caesar will march against the Republic in an attempt to seize power. The precedent which Cato had allowed Caesar to set was that it was possible to march against the

⁶ See source 11, by Tom Holland

Republic now, and even if Cato and Pompey had been successful, nothing would have stopped the next Caesar from doing the exact same thing.

For the modern United States, what comes next may still be a ways off, but that doesn't mean democracy is doing well. As we saw, from the year 59 BC to the year 49 BC, the Roman Republic was plunged into internal struggles for political stability. The fundamental republican institutions which protected the republic were eroded until the political class felt it was necessary to gamble the Republic's survival in open warfare. In the modern day, we won't see such a rebellion, but rather, this type of collapse in political stability would occur when large portions of modern America decide that the sitting government no longer retains any legitimate hold to power. This must be avoided at all costs. In order to safeguard political stability and democracy at large, the divisions which have currently fractured the political class must be overcome. As we saw, Cato and Caesar and the animosity between the two allowed for the divisions which had been so damaging to the republic to grow until there was no political stability left to hold each side together. If the modern American democracy wants to avoid that fate, it can not afford to make those same mistakes.

The Aftermath

A new Political Order (45 to 44 BCE)

Caesar is Magnanimous in Victory

In the aftermath of the civil war, Caesar's veteran army proved too strong for any of the Pompey and the conservatives to defeat. The civil war was long and painful, but by its end Caesar stood atop the Roman republic with no one republican institution left to hold him in check. Surprisingly to the remaining members of the political class, Caesar did not proclaim himself king or dictator. Instead, in an attempt to avoid the horror the Proscriptions had left upon the Republic in his youth, Caesar accepted exiled conservatives back into the senate. Figures such as Cicero were spared any retribution for opposing Caesar. This desire for peace between the two factions was a decision that was unique to Caesar's character. Rather than overthrow the government, Caesar wanted to prevent more bloodshed and had the foresight to recognize that if his victories were going to last he would need the support of those he had

fought against. Caesar was still however, an authoritarian at heart. When his first year as dictator began, Caesar seemed to behave as though he was merely a consul given extra authority to restore the republic's institutions. Elections were held once more, political violence was absent, the political class had been spared any purges, and the Rule of Law appeared to be continuing uninterrupted. But as weeks turned into months, Caesar started to explore his newfound hold on power.

Caesar as King?

He had the senate grant him the right to wear royal regalia on all festival days. This would have been an audacious purple toga and a crown of loral leaves which were all intended to invoke the idea of monarchy. In the center of downtown Rome, there were a series of statues depicting the “7 Kings of Rome” as well as an 8th statue of the man who had driven the kings out of Rome and founded the Republic. Caesar added a 9th statue, of himself, to the lineup. It doesn't take a lot of detective work to guess why Caesar was associating himself with the “7 Kings of Rome”. Caesar began to expand his collection of powers. Beginning when he was declared the “prefect of public morals” which allowed him to remove members of the senate for exhibiting “bad public morals” which could naturally be interpreted as almost anything. Caesar had already devastated the ranks of the senate during the civil war, but with this new position he could freely decide who was allowed membership into the senate. All these authoritarian power grabs began to create an atmosphere of panic within the political class. Led by Cicero, this group was slowly being driven out of power, and those brought in to replace them were entirely loyal to Caesar. Talk began to spread among this relatively small group of older senators as to how they could counteract Caesar's power grabs. We might imagine Caesar starting to put on the breaks, slow it down with all the authoritarian tendencies, and try to calm the nerves of his republican constituents. Instead Caesar, seeing no real opposition to his actions, pressed fully onto the gas pedal. He placed within the senate house a special golden chair that would sit in the center of the senate chamber.. Some might be tempted to call this a “Throne”, but Caesar's supporters didn't see it that way. They would remind us that *thrones* were for *kings*, this was just a special golden chair intended for the guy who already dressed up like a king, that was definitely not a throne.

Bankrupting Republican Institutions

Late into the year 45 BC, Caesar had taken the four pillars of democratic rule and torn them all down. Elections now served only to confer the title of Consul to politicians Caesar saw fit to give it to. Political violence had allowed Caesar to take power, and while it had not returned, there was talk among the political class of assassinating Caesar. The political class, year after year, was becoming less and less active in politics as Caesar and his lieutenants held all the political power. The Rule of Law, while not technically broken, meant little as Caesar continued to exercise extra-ordinary executive powers that went entirely against every republican tradition the Romans had. To the political class, this all appeared to be sudden and unexpected. Cicero writes at length that he was surprised as to how quickly Caesar took to wearing royal clothing, as though it was nothing. When viewed as a whole, however, it's easy to see how the Roman republic had been struggling to change course for a long time. Earnest Hemingway perhaps phrased it best by saying:

"People go Bankrupt Gradually, and then suddenly." – The Sun also Rises⁷

The Roman republic had been in a state of decay for decades, perhaps even centuries, but in only the course of a few months, the republic began to collapse. This political instability within the Republic slowly grew with time. Before the civil war, there was still a semblance of political stability which had kept elections running and had allowed the political class to continue to attempt to address the crisis. Once Cato had placed the Republic's survival in the hands of his general Pompey, even this stability was shattered. When Caesar returned victorious, Cato and Pompey had all but handed the fate of the Republic to an authoritarian. Caesar experimented with the idea of doing away with these 4 fundamental institutions, and when no one stopped him, he simply took whatever he wanted⁸. Republics are designed by nature to work slowly, methodically. They experiment with multiple solutions to a problem, debate their merits, and

⁷ See source [9], The sun also Rises

⁸ See source [7], Historia Civilis

then decide on one that best suits the people. By dismantling the guard rails that kept the republic together, he showed an entire generation of young politicians that it no longer mattered who the Consuls were, or what the senate thought. If you held the support of the armies in the field, and the people in the streets, you held all legitimate political power.

Caesar's Assassination (Ides of March, 44 BC)

“No Plan. No system. No method.” – Cicero

The story of Caesar's assassination had been romanticized over the millennia, but in broad terms we know the following. On the 15th of March, Caesar was called by members of the senate to discuss what was described as mundane issues which required his presence. Caesar entered the senate meeting, and when he took his seat in his golden chair, the conspirators drew daggers they had hidden in their togas and stabbed him to death. When the assassination was done, one of the lead assassins by the name of Brutus turned to Cicero and said:

“Congratulations Cicero, you’ve regained your liberty.” – Everitt, Cicero [pg.6]

When news spread, figures such as Mark Antony and other supporters of Caesar began to flee the city. The conspirators, while successful, don’t come off as very intelligent. Immediately following this, the senate paraded through the streets celebrating Caesar’s death. Someone might have reminded the conspirators that Caesar had been an incredibly popular figure among the commoners of Rome. Additionally, Mark Antony and those who had close ties to Caesar’s regime were not harmed in any way. Instead, the senators simply walked through the streets, proclaiming “the tyrant is dead” and “long live the republic”. There didn’t appear to be any plan as to what would take place following Caesar’s assassination. As put by Historia Civilis:

“...All of [the conspirators] planning had basically ended at Caesar's death ... There had always been vague notions of a political movement to restore and revitalize the republic, but nobody really knew what that meant ...” – Historia Civilis [7]

Without any clearly defined goals, the conspirators simply occupied the forum and waited for “something” to happen. Shocked at this choice of action, Mark Antony took up the leadership of the

reform faction. He struck an agreement with the conspirators by which none of them would be prosecuted for their crimes as long as all of Caesar's legislation was allowed to remain law. The Caesarians had no intentions of allowing Caesar's killers to go free, and the conspirators should have known this. Why didn't the conspirators recognize this threat? It seems from the sources that these young conservative senators were full of idealism but were far out of their depth when it came to actual politics. It may have been a genuine belief amongst the group that the moment Caesar dropped dead, the entire Roman political class would celebrate the death of the dictator.

Political Assassinations

It is a drastic measure to decide that the best option for the survival of your government is to engage in a political assassination. The Roman Republic indeed was in a lot of danger, so it is understandable as to why the conspirators chose to take such a drastic action. Like Cato before them, however, these young conservative politicians failed to recognize what needed to take place if they were going to restore republican institutions. Caesar was popular with both the people of Rome and with the Army. He had spent the time since the end of the civil war actively trying to improve the lives of everyday Roman citizens, and in large part the economic crisis which had been the source of all this instability had slowly been brought under control. The middle class, for the first time in many decades, began to grow again. This reforms had helped to restore some amount of economic stability to Roman society, but their government was not entirely devoid of any political stability. All the political power and stability of the government had become trusted in the hands of one man. When that leading figure was assassinated and those responsible for his assassination made no attempt to guide the senate back into power, the result was a return to the same chaos which had drained the Republic a decade early after Caesars first term as Consul in 59.

For modern democracy, it is hard to imagine such drastic measures ever being used for the protection of democratic rule. What is certain is that if such measures are ever contemplated, it is not a sign of political stability, or that the Republic is being held hostage by one figure. Rather, if the American

democracy is ever in such a poor a dilapidated state that political assassination is considered as a solution, a far worse disaster will have already taken place. The number of poor decisions and short sighted choices which would lead to such a situation would be indicative of a general collapse of republican institutions. As we will see for the Romans, given one last opportunity to attempt to repair their democracy, it will be far too late for any meaningful change to occur as republican institutions become weak and democratic rule becomes fragile.

Caesar's Funeral (Ides of March, 44 BC)

Public Opinion turns against the assassins

Just days after the assassination, Caesar's funeral was held in the Roman forum. This event has gained notoriety in the modern day, as it is where Shakespeare has Mark Antony give his famous "*Friends, Romans, Countrymen*" speech. While Shakespeare's interpretation is fictitious, the truth is far weirder. Caesar's body was placed on a golden shrine on top of the speaking platform in the Roman forum. The cloths he had been wearing at the time of his death, still crusted with his own blood, were placed on a spear in front of the platform. A series of speeches were then given by Caesar's friends, but when Mark Antony took his turn to speak, things began to pick up a bit of steam.

Antony read a list of Caesar's accomplishments to the crowd, and after every item he would gesture to Caesar's body as though to indicate "and this is what happened to him". He then relented to the skies, seeming to invoke the Roman god Jupiter. He proclaimed that the only reason he could not carry out revenge against Caesar's killers was the deal the two sides had struck up just a day earlier. Several senators and members of the conspiracy raised a note of protest at this, but Antony continued. Antony remarked that "it's all water under the bridge," making a point to warn that the people should remain vigilant of yet another civil war. He then stepped off the speaking platform and walked to the spear, which was holding up Caesar's bloody toga, and began to wave the spear back and forth in front of the crowd. This has been interpreted by historians to have been a direct attempt to shift public opinion in favor of Mark Antony and the Caesarians, and it was successful. The crowd surged forward and took possession of Caesar's body. They gathered wood from nearby buildings and temples and created a

massive funeral pyre in the center of the Roman forum where they placed Caesar's body. Lighting the makeshift pyre, the entire Roman forum is reported to have been consumed by the flames. Large mobs led on by soldiers from Caesar's army then attempted to storm the homes of the conspirators. Armed gangs began to roam about seeking any senators that they considered at fault for Caesar's death. With this very sudden shift in public opinion, the conspirators went into hiding. If there were any questions as to the hostility Mark Antony held for them, the group received a message from Mark Antony only days later, reading:

"As consul, I can no longer guarantee your safety within Rome... regrettably, too many of Caesar's soldiers and supporters want revenge for Caesar's death ..."

—Holland, Rubicon [pg.70]

The conspirators, in their inaction had simply given Mark Antony and the Caesarians more power as public opinion shifted. Antony controlled both the nearest armies and public support. With the majority of the senate terrified of the political violence that sprung up overnight, the majority of the conspirators retreated into the Italian countryside. The conspirators had successfully assassinated Caesar, and within days of this achievement, the city of Rome had imploded into chaos. Mark Antony, with control of Caesar's army and public opinion, now simply took Caesar's place atop the Roman state.

The Importance of Public Opinion

The actions of the conspirators do speak to a genuine misunderstanding of the political environment they were working within. To kill what the people viewed as "their man" and make no attempt to rectify those actions shows that they simply did not understand the reality of Roman politics. It only took a couple of days for the leaders of the conspiratorial faction to abandon the republic they were trying to restore and flee into self-imposed exile. For some, this meant taking up arms in distant provinces, for others, they never again took part in Roman politics. In that time, Mark Antony had solidified himself as the new leader of the Caesarian

faction, and in one short evening, had turned public opinion from general distaste toward the conspirators to outright bloodlust. Without elderly statesmen such as Cicero, Cato, or Pompey, these young and inexperienced politicians were without the necessary skills to effectively maneuver in Roman politics. Their abrupt retreat caused a lot of distress amongst the senatorial class. They had put their support behind the conspirators following Caesar's assassination, and now with leading figures abandoning the city, many felt the situation was hopeless. Cicero, now 63 years old, relented in a letter to a fellow senator:

"Can it be true? Is this all that our noble Brutus has accomplished? That he should have to live at Lanuvium, and Decimus should have to slink to his province by side-roads? That all the acts, memoranda, words, promised, and projects of Caesar should have more validity than if he were still alive?" – Cicero, Letters to Atticus [5]

One of Cicero's colleagues put the atmosphere of hopelessness and despair even more poetically.

With rising tensions in the political climate, and the possibility of yet another civil war on the horizon, he responded:

"If a man of Caesars genius was unable to find a way out, what hope do we have now?" – Atticus, Letters to Atticus [5]

Cicero and the retreat of the Conspirators

After days of rioting, the murder of several senators, and violent mobs roaming the streets, the political class began to flee Rome for the second time in less than a decade. Among those who chose to remain in Rome to combat the growing tensions was Cicero. Following Caesar's death and the chaos surrounding his funeral, a large amount of Cicero's senatorial colleagues fled the city and tried to convince Cicero to do the same. Ultimately Cicero decided to stay in Rome, putting his own life at risk in order to fight in the senate to prevent another civil war. Tom Holland describes this action by saying:

"Cicero showed genuine principle fused seamlessly with inordinate self-regard." – Holland, Cicero [pg.231]

What he means by this is that Cicero had remained a constitutionalist. Never during the past 15 years of chaos, had Cicero waived in his love of republican traditions. Cicero, however, was taking up a

dangerous position in Roman politics. With the retreat of the conspirators, only he would remain to take up the defense of republican traditions. Years earlier, Pompey and Cato had bet the republic's political stability, and in ways its very survival on their armies' superiority to Caesar. When they lost that bet, they had in essence given the republic's fate over to Caesar. Ironically, it was thanks to Caesar that the republic continued to survive at all. Caesar, with unchecked power, made the decision to allow his former enemies to return to their political careers, wanting to avoid any further bloodshed. This decision allowed figures such as Cicero, Brutus, and the rest of the conspirators to survive Caesar's reign as dictator. But that was all thanks to Caesar's unwillingness to exercise extreme political violence. Now, the situation was far worse and far more dangerous. Mark Antony and the remaining Caesarians had watched as their leader had allowed the conservatives to return to their political careers, and in return Caesar had been assassinated. This sent a message to the remaining Caesarians which put what remained of the republic at risk; if the Caesarians were going to hold onto power, they could not make what was now seen as Caesar's mistake. They would need to purge the state of all opposition; only then would they be able to hold power uncontested. So, through first the failures of Cato and Pompey, onto the indecisiveness of Brutus and the conspirators, the Republic now lay directly at stake.

[Cicero's Finest Hours \(44 to 43 BC\)](#)

Dividing the Caesarian Faction

Gaius Octavius was the grandnephew of Julius Caesar, and when Mark Antony had opened Caesar's will, Octavian had been the largest benefactor of the death of the dictator. In Caesar's will, he had stipulated the Octavian would be posthumously adopted as his son and heir. In adopting Octavian, he became the heir of Caesar's familiar fortune, but more importantly he gave Octavian a genuine claim to the leadership of the Caesarian faction. Upon Octavian's arrival in Rome a few weeks after Caesar's funeral, the Caesarian faction began to fracture. A struggle between Mark Antony and Octavian for leadership of Caesar's political legacy. While the details are not important, was the influence Cicero had within the Senate as the two Caesarians struggled to decide who would take a leading role. In this time, Cicero was able to resurrect the old Conservative faction which Cato had held control over years earlier.

Using this newfound hold over the senate, Cicero began to associate himself with Octavian in an attempt to divide the Caesarian faction even further. Around the same time, a member of the conspiracy to kill Caesar by the name Decimus led an army down from northern Italy in response to Mark Antony's animosity towards the conspirators. This all culminated when Octavian gathered up a couple of thousands of Caesar's retired veteran soldiers and marched on Rome.

A Second Civil War

In only a few short months, the lieutenants of Caesar, specifically Mark Antony, had been driven from Rome and fled south. What is notable here is the speed at which the Senate and thus the Republic managed to reassert some level of republican rule. While Cicero's understanding of the problems that faced the republic were flawed, he was an expert when it came to manipulating public opinion as well as the opinions of the senators around him. By December of the year 43, Cicero had reinstated elections in Rome and two new consuls were elected. This was the first time this had happened in almost 7 years, and it was entirely thanks to Cicero that the Republic was able to reassert itself. The Republic, with a moderate constitutionalist at its head, now had to contend with enemies who wanted to attain the same level of power Caesar had held. What this meant for Cicero and the newly elected consuls was that those who had posed a direct threat to the republic had all gathered together and could now, if defeated, be forced to submit to democratic rule once again. But despite his best efforts to restore the Republic's institutions, Cicero could not overcome the tide of history.

Even though the republic was still capable of being saved and its institutions restored, the fact that the situation had deteriorated to this extent had already stacked the odds against Cicero. There was nothing protecting the republic anymore, no institutions remained which could check the power of the Caesarians should they be victorious. This civil war, as opposed to the first, was a battle over where political power came from. For Cicero and his Consuls, power came from the people, from the republican institutions which had protected the Roman Republic for centuries. For Mark Antony and the remaining Caesarians, political power came not through elections, but through the army and general public opinion. If Cicero's Consuls were defeated on the battlefield, the Republic would come to an end. In fact it was an

even weaker position than that. Cicero had to rely on the loyalty of these newly elected consuls and had to trust that they would not simply betray republican traditions and customs as so many before them had. Cicero was fighting the tide of history and in order to succeed, so many aspects of the war and beyond would have to go right. Cicero needed to defeat the Caesarians in battle, which was not a certainty. If successful, Cicero would then need to begin the long process by which the republican institutions of democracy would slowly begin to heal. It would take decades of maintaining elections, repressing political violence, creating a new active political class, and ensuring that the Rule of Law remained paramount. All this and more needed to go right for Cicero to successfully pull the Republic back from the precipice of destruction.

The End of Democratic Rule

What ultimately undid this revival of democratic rule was outside of Cicero's control. In only a week's period during the conflict, both of the newly elected Consuls died in the field of battle. Taking advantage of the situation, Octavian marched on Rome and installed himself as Consul. Cicero and the Senate were left without any political influence, as the son of Caesar quickly moved to heal the divide that had grown in the Caesarian faction.

Cicero, writing to fellow members of the political class, shows how distraught he was over the senate's abrupt loss of influence:

*"The senate was my weapon, and it has fallen to pieces in my hands." – Cicero,
Letters to Atticus [5]*

This sudden collapse of the new republican faction was in effect, the end of the Republic. Cicero had been able to return the Republic to something close to the political stability of decades earlier, but in the end the tide of history was too strong to overcome. The republican institutions which held the Republic together no longer held sway over the state. Elections would never again be seen as the source from which political power flowed. Political violence would continue to plague Roman society, from the year 44 BC until the sack of Constantinople in 1453 AD, almost a millennium and a half later. The importance

of the Rule of Law and of the political class would deteriorate as Octavian and Antony engaged in the same political purges which had scared Cicero, Caesar, Cato, and Pompey in their childhoods.

The Second Triumvirate

Octavian and Antony, in only a few weeks' time, formed a new alliance. This alliance became known to history as 'The Second Triumvirate'. Unlike the first, this alliance was written into Roman law. Three men were given absolute power over different portions of the Roman republic. As *Historia Civilis* puts it:

"This had been Cicero's worst fear since the beginning, a Roman monarchy with three heads." – Historia Civilis

The three victorious triumvirs then did what Caesar had refused to do upon his victory against Pompey and Cato. They ordered a purge of Rome's political class in order to prevent any further attempts to seize power from them. Caesar had placed a lot of care not to be associated with the Proscriptions which had scared him in his adolescence. It was this unwillingness to engage in a political purge that set Caesar apart from this new cast of autocratic figures. Octavian and Antony, however, had no memory of the original Proscriptions, and thus they didn't care who they brought to harm, their enemies had to be eliminated.

The Death of Cicero

In defeat, Cicero left Rome. The elder statesman had watched from his youth as the Roman republic tore itself apart over political opinion. Who then helped to restore a period of republican rule, only to watch as the pride and vanity of his colleagues lead them down the same path he feared they would walk. When Caesar had proven unwilling to destroy the republic, but had been assassinated all the same, Cicero had stepped forward and tried to succeed where so many before him had failed, but in the end he could not overcome the tides of history. When Octavian and Antony enacted their purge, Cicero was among the first names on the tablets put in the Roman forum. His killers found him on the road from his country estate south of Rome, headed toward the Mediterranean coast. Reportedly, they found him reading, and upon realizing his time was up, he said the following:

“I am stopping here. [pointing to the lead centurion] Come here, soldier. There’s nothing proper about what you’re doing, but at least make sure you cut off my head properly.” – Everitt, Cicero [pg.315]

Cicero’s head and hands were cut off by his killers. These were eventually delivered to Mark Antony and Octavian back in Rome. As revenge for Cicero’s attempt to drive Antony from power, he had them nailed to the speaking platform in downtown Rome for all to see. At this sight, the citizens of Rome, seeing a prominent political figure whom they had once viewed as the savior of the republic, did not protest, they did not riot, they simply went about their business as though it was just another day in the life of a citizen of oldest republic in the known world.

Conclusion

Closing Thoughts

What Could have Been done to address the Crisis

After 15 years of political instability and economic struggles, the Roman people accepted the return of autocratic rule. The failures of politicians such as Cato, Pompey, Cicero, and Caesar had allowed for the Republic to be destroyed. The underlying economic instability within Roman society remained unaddressed, and as time passed it would take over half a century for the middle class to return to prosperity. This collapse of the economic stability of Roman society had been the root cause of the Republic’s struggles, but it was not the fault of either the conservatives or the reformers that the Republic experienced a collapse in the middle class. The success of the Republic as a whole had brought an end to the pre-conquest society. The Romans own military success had been the catalyst for the collapse of their economy. The influx of free labor for landed magnates to exploit at the expense of the rural, middle class, Italian farmer had spelled an end to that period of rural agriculture. As Mike Duncan puts it:

“...just as had happened with the Gracchan⁹ program, within a generation [the small Italian farmers] had all sold their land to rich magnates, and the end result was the Italian peninsula being dominated by large estates...” – Duncan, The Storm before the Storm [pg.259]

⁹ The Gracchan program refers to the first attempted solution to the influx of urban poor. The Gracchi brothers attempted to implement a similar solution as the one Caesar ended up implementing, but it failed, just as Caesar’s would in time.

In time, both reformers and conservatives failed to address the crisis. Each sides failure to correctly diagnose the problems the Republic was facing led them both to conflict. When Caesar and his constituents passed wealth redistribution bills, their reforms failed to bring the economic crisis to an end. At the cost of the republican institutions and indeed the political stability of the Republic, Caesar and his followers had simply been applying Band-Aids to bullet wounds. The Republic was facing a shift that was not reversible. The rural middle class was being rung dry of all its wealth, and as a result had flooded into the cities. To attempt to redistribute land back to the urban poor was an attempt to reverse the tide of history. In the end, both sides of the political divide wrong while also being partly correct.

The reformers were correct to be concerned with the new influx of urban poor, and thusly wanted to find a way to restore what had once been the status quo. That status quo had been an older era where small Italian farmers loyal to the Republic had been the backbone of the Roman economy. Now, a new status quo had arisen, foreign slaves worked for the benefit of the rich, while the middle class collapsed into poverty. Conservatives like Cato knew that the rural farmers would never again hold their farms in rural Italy. But instead of helping to address the crisis, Cato and his followers simply allowed for more and more people to fall into poverty. Cato may have truly believed that the new status quo was sustainable, but it is equally as likely that he was enjoying the corruption which had prevented the Roman senate from passing any meaningful legislation for decades. What could have solved the problem was to embrace this new age of urban growth. Had reformers and conservatives worked together and created long term welfare for the growing urban population, the Republics economic struggles might have come to an end. This solution, however, would not be utilized for decades. By the time the Roman middle class had recovered within its new urban environment, the Republic was already becoming a distant memory.

The Modern struggle against Authoritarianism

The economic woes of modern America are more apparent in 2021 than ever before. The middle class, laden with debt and struggling to stay afloat, suffered the most during the COVID-19 pandemic. The upper class continues to amass larger and larger sums of wealth, while more and more people fall into poverty. This struggle, while unique to the US, mirrors closely with that faced by the Roman

Republic. What followed this collapse in the economic stability of Rome was the outbreak of increasing levels of politically motivated violence. This growing acceptance of violence between American citizens had already begun to spread into the political sphere, in much the same manner. The modern American democracy is struggling to combat the same political instability which brought the Roman Republic to an end. Despite what the political class might hope, the events of recent years do not constitute an “aberrant moment in time.” The US is facing the same trends and yet is responding in the same way. All occurring within the last months of 2020, elections were undermined, political violence began to take hold, and the Rule of Law was avoided by those responsible for the insurrection on January 6th. Already, three of the four republican institutions which protect the Republic are being degraded by a political class willing to gamble the political stability of the Republic in order to remove a political rival from power. This all of course sounds very scary, and it indeed is, but modern America can still change course.

The Roman political class utterly failed at every opportunity to halt the cycle of political instability which was wearing at the republican institutions which protected their democracy. Modern democracies can avoid these mistakes, but only if they recognize the danger. It took figures such as Cicero far too long to recognize the danger. By the time they realized that the Republic was close to collapse, the odds had already become stacked against its survival. Short sighted, greedy, and foolish decisions had allowed the Republic to fall to autocracy. To prevent this collapse, these senators and leading members of the political class needed to come together, recognize the danger, and push aside their party affiliations to serve the Republic as a whole. In modern times, it is not an option to simply wait for the crisis to pass. Politicians and leading members of the nation must recognize the danger and work daily to address the root of the instability within American society. Addressing the economic collapse of the middle class would only be the start, as the nation as a whole must address multiple growing crisis which all threaten the economic stability of society at large. Doing so will take political will and a recognition that the alternative, inaction, would be following in the same footsteps which lead the Romans to disaster. The political instability which the Romans were unable to recover from is only beginning to manifest within modern America, and we must take every possible action to avoid the same outcome. If we fail in

this responsibility, future historians may write about us in the same way the Roman historian Appian wrote about the breakdown in political and economic stability, over a century following Cicero's death:

“Thus the seditions proceeded from strife and contention to murder, and from murder to open war ... Henceforth there was no restraint upon violence either from the sense of shame, or regard for law, institutions, or country.” – Appian¹⁰

¹⁰ See source 10, by Appian

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