

CROSSING THE RUBICON: CAESAR'S DECISION AND THE FATE OF ROME

(LUCCA FEZZI)

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In our failing American Republic, Julius Caesar is, for many, a condensed symbol. He stands in for everything that might bring a final, formal end to institutions already dead, and he hints at what and who may open the door to something new. This broad symbolism derived from Caesar's meteoric career, however, means that all the many details about what he actually did tend to get ignored, as do the other players in the complex political whirl of the 40s B.C. What results is, too often, comic book history, which usually is offered to buttress some facile claim about what is happening today. Lucca Fezzi's book helps us look deeper; he offers us a detailed, balanced, and narrowly-focused political history of the end of the Republic.

This is a book about how decisions are made by men of power, not about war. Battles get mentioned mostly in passing. Moreover, despite the title, we spend little time on Caesar's decision to cross the Rubicon. Rather, we primarily learn about the innumerable decisions made before and after by the various major players, with the aim of understanding how Rome got the immediate result it did—the short-lived dictatorship of Caesar, which is itself not covered, much less the later wars that led to the accession of Octavian. A good deal of Fezzi's focus is analyzing which of conflicting ancient sources is most likely accurate; rather than choosing one and running with it, he involves the reader in his analysis. It's all very interesting, and the upside of this book is that the reader learns a lot. But the downside is that all the detail, and all the contrast-and-compare, often bogs the reader down.

When Caesar crossed the Rubicon, it had been less than forty years since the end of the earlier civil wars between Marius and Sulla. Those had ended in 82 B.C., with the Battle of the Colline Gate, and a dictatorship of several years by Sulla, until he retired. The intervening years had been peaceful, but in the manner typical of terminally-ill republican systems, characterized by sclerosis and extreme division. The Catilinarian conspiracy was merely the most spectacular of various feuds and attempts to settle scores run up in the decades prior, and as

covered in Mike Duncan's *The Storm Before the Storm*, not only was the *mos maiorium* essentially a dead letter, but all the structural and customary obstacles that acted as a brake on destructive political infighting had either been weakened greatly or disappeared entirely. Religious sacrilege of various kinds became common, and was used as a political weapon, another indication of a society rotting from within. The actions of the mob, and feeding the mob to keep it quiescent, became a crucial focus of elite politics, yet further sign of decay. And, finally, gross electoral corruption, what the Romans called *ambitus*, became entirely normalized, despite efforts by men such as Marcus Tullius Cicero, when he was consul, to push back. As with every dying society, all efforts to bandage over ruptures in the societal framework by legal means were a waste of energy, because, like us, Rome was merely marking time until the rupture and reconstruction of the polity.

By 60 B.C., the three most powerful men in Rome were Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (known as Pompey the Great); Marcus Licinius Crassus (the richest man in Rome), and, the least important of the three, Caesar. Pompey was the most prominent and successful, and at the time, much more beloved than Caesar. He had fought for Sulla in the civil wars; was involved in putting down the revolt of Spartacus (the Third Servile War); and in 67 B.C., given a three-year command of the Mediterranean to destroy the scourge of piracy, he wiped the pirates from the sea in three months. He capped all this by defeating Mithridates, king of Pontus and regarded as a very dangerous enemy of Rome, and celebrated his third triumph, in Rome, in 61. He had served as consul, as well, but did not enjoy retail politics, and was not keen to spend time in Rome doing the hard work of patronage. Crassus was mostly just notable for being rich, a self-made man, but also fought in the civil wars and was instrumental in winning the Third Servile War, and had earlier been consul (jointly with Pompey). He, conversely, enjoyed the hard work of patronage, but he could bring little or no military power to the table. Caesar, meanwhile, had been ascending the *cursus honorum*, had been governor of Spain, and had also been elected *pontifex maximus*, a crucial office, but he had not been elected consul and he was dependent on Crassus and others for money.

Hoping to turn political matters and political chaos to their joint benefit, in 60 B.C. Pompey, Crassus, and Caesar entered into an informal,

shadowy partnership to advance their joint goals. This arrangement is commonly referred to as the First Triumvirate, although a quote from Appian which Fezzi uses as an epigraph, that the three men “exchanged mutual favors,” is more accurate, since there was no legal form to the arrangement. As a result, Caesar was elected consul, and used his power to advance the interests of Pompey (and, to a lesser extent, Crassus), such as passing an agrarian law rewarding veterans loyal to Pompey. All of this was more or less par for the course in the late Republic, but reading about it highlights to the reader a crucial reason why the American Right has never won a single battle (even with gun control, the Right has only managed a holding action, though a very important one). The Right, or rather its putative leaders, has never grasped that alliance building, favor granting, and most of all defense of political allies and punishment of political enemies is crucial for keeping and maintaining power. Instead, the Right does none of that, and debilitates itself by aggressively policing its rightward boundary, rejecting sound alliances; chooses to neuter itself and let the Left win for reasons that are mostly just treasonous and which demand harsh future punishment; or, like Donald Trump, totally lacks the discipline needed to create and manage a competent patronage network.

Caesar, however, wasn't very keen on playing third wheel. In 58, he was given command of the legions in Gaul, and left Rome to lead the famous Gallic Wars (in part made famous by Caesar's skillful propaganda), while Pompey and Crassus did nothing new or spectacular. The Triumvirate was not an all-powerful team or a dictatorship, and there was much open political opposition to all three men, which kept brewing through the 50s B.C. Meanwhile, the Triumvirate frayed, as such arrangements always do. Pompey was married to Caesar's daughter Julia, but she died in 54 B.C., eroding the bond between the two men. Political violence among competing factions, some allied to Pompey, others to Caesar, increased (the most famous players in which were Titus Annius Milo and Publius Clodius Pulcher, with the former killing the latter in 52). Then Crassus got himself killed in Parthia in 53, with the Parthians supposedly mocking him by pouring molten gold down his throat, which also killed the Triumvirate. Meanwhile, well away from Rome, Caesar was steadily enhancing his reputation and glory in

Gaul, while Pompey and his allies wondered how to reconcile Caesar's obvious ambition with their own ambitions.

By 50 B.C., it was apparent to all that conflict was very near. The immediate flash point was Caesar's desire to be elected consul before returning to Rome, in order to protect himself and continue to enhance his power and glory. Those who opposed him, including by this time Pompey, wanted him to give up his military command and return to Rome, and then run for consul. Unsurprisingly, the risks inherent in that course, and the implied threats contained within demands he take that course, did not appeal to Caesar.

From there, it was internecine struggle descending to civil war. Fezzi uses the letters of Cicero, which include correspondence with most of the major players, including both Caesar and Pompey, as his main source. Cicero was a hugely influential man, so both Pompey and Caesar carried favor with him. He was an ally of Pompey but he also tried to maintain a friendly relationship with Caesar (including borrowing money from him), and did maintain many friendships with supporters of Caesar. Fezzi supplements Cicero, however, with many other sources, including Appian, Suetonius, Plutarch, and others, and he offers extensive notes, to both primary and secondary sources.

Caesar's proffered, and rejected, solution was that both he and Pompey give up their military commands. Pompey by this time had fewer soldiers loyal to him, and they were not under arms and fighting, but scattered around Italy, or in distant provinces. If he had given up his forces, Caesar would at least enter Rome on equal terms. The Senate and the upper classes in general heavily favored Pompey—conversely, the other classes, and all men hoping to gain by a circulation of elites, favored Caesar. Fezzi narrates many detailed political machinations, though at least unlike in our own terminally-ill America, which is just a clownshow of stupid people doing clueless things, in Rome serious men were openly discussing serious matters and making serious, considered decisions.

Matters reached a head in January 49, when after much debate and near-violence in the Senate, and controversy surrounding the ignoring of the tribunician veto (one of the two tribunes was Mark Antony, a supporter of Caesar), the Senate passed the rare *senatus consultum ultimum*, an order to the consuls to "ensure that the *res publica* suffers no

harm”—in essence a declaration of war against Caesar. Immediately Caesar responded by leaving Gaul with a small number of his soldiers and entering Italy, and capturing by surprise the first city on the road south to Rome (Ariminum, two hundred miles north of Rome)—which was on the other side of the Rubicon, a smallish river. His march heralded rebellion, without any declaration, because a magistrate given *imperium* over soldiers could not take those soldiers outside his stated province of command. What exactly he was thinking is hard to say; he later wrote an account for self-justification, and many other writers have offered conflicting versions of both facts and motivations. The facts are clear enough; his motivation was only partly, and maybe only a small part, fear of being put on trial. More likely this was swamped by pride, the refusal to countenance any humiliation, combined with overweening ambition. Cicero viewed Caesar as a man “of supreme daring, hardened to every risk,” and such a man is more likely to aim high than merely act to protect himself.

Having achieved initial success, Caesar called for the rest of his armies to join him, and kept marching south. The central theme of Fezzi’s book is asking why Pompey lost to Caesar, and the key on which Fezzi focuses is Pompey’s seemingly inexplicable decision to abandon Rome very soon after Caesar crossed the Rubicon. In short, according to Fezzi, Pompey lost his nerve; he was “an uncertain leader and strategist,” and within a few days of Caesar’s crossing, he ordered his supporters and soldiers to flee Rome. This is certainly how Cicero, who regularly met with Pompey, describes Pompey’s decision, that Pompey was “gripped by fear” and “all he did was add mistake upon mistake.” Fezzi endorses Napoleon Bonaparte’s considered view of Pompey’s flight, written on St. Helena, that Pompey could have won had he kept his nerve. Fleeing was interpreted by all as fatal weakness.

From there Caesar’s conquest of Rome, and Italy, was essentially a foregone conclusion, or at least it seems that way now. Cicero retreated to the countryside and dithered endlessly. Pompey backed further away from Rome, trying to raise soldiers, while various attempts at negotiation failed. Caesar defeated half-hearted and not-very-competent military attempts by Pompey’s allies to stop him—it turned out, too, that Pompey’s past popularity among the Italian towns and cities had long since faded, and Caesar’s popularity grown. Moreover, Caesar’s

reputation for clemency (something which ultimately did him in) made his task easier. He cast himself as being for the people, while charging Pompey with wanting to be a dictator in the Sullan mold. (Whether that was what Pompey wanted, we will never know.) Pompey ended up in the Adriatic port city of Brundisium, and in March Caesar's forces besieged him there, whereupon Pompey set sail for Greece.

The rest of the war, including battles in Spain and the final battle in Pharsalus, in 48 B.C., Fezzi only mentions in passing. He does detail how Cicero returned to Italy, hoping to mend fences with Caesar, which Caesar was only too happy to do. And there Fezzi leaves the story, with Caesar a few years from his death, and Cicero restored to prominence, a prominence he would maintain until killed on Antony's orders in 43 B.C., as the Second Triumvirate cleaned out their enemies.

While it's practically the national sport, at least in some quarters, I think that comparisons of Rome to end-stage America are of limited usefulness. Broadly speaking, of course, the end of the Republic demonstrates that no polity lasts forever. But that's not news. Somewhat more narrowly, the problems afflicting dying polities tend to resemble each other, and can therefore be compared with some profit, although each is filtered through a unique culture and its own circumstances. Still, comparisons are difficult because we do not share the Roman worldview, and thus it is easy to make comparisons that seem accurate but are misplaced. For example, today we are used to decisions being justified by appeals to morality, Christian morality, the baseline of all Western action, whether admitted or not. The Romans appealed to morality, too, but it was far from a Christian morality, so far that it is largely alien to us. Sulla's self-written epitaph, supposedly essentially "No friend ever served me, and no enemy ever wronged me, whom I have not repaid in full" (although we don't know exactly how it read in Latin), encapsulates their view of political morality, and if you read Sarah Ruden's *Paul Among the People*, you will learn how different Roman morality was from ours in other ways. Without understanding this difference, and other differences, in perspective, it is hard to understand Roman decisions, and hard to predict anything specific using Rome as an exemplar.

That said, I think that perhaps the skeleton key for any Rome-driven analysis of our present moment is that the men who made history in the

late Republic were driven, most of all, by an obsessive quest for personal glory. This drive, in the form it commonly existed among the Romans, is absent in every man of political prominence in America today (in part, perhaps, because glory cannot be achieved through politics today), and that seems relevant to what changes may come, and when. What prominent American man today is “of supreme daring, hardened to every risk”? I mean really, who? Nobody, that’s who. (But, I will note, such men exist abroad. Take, for example, Nayib Bukele, the President of El Salvador, who has been receiving attention lately for having, in a short time, wholly crushed the armies of criminals who had made his country one of the most violent in the world, simply by having the will to apply adequate force, at great risk to himself.)

This, the total enervation of the elites, the loss of the drives which made the success of the nation possible, only happened in Rome in the late Empire. It is hardly an original thought, but in this and very much else, modern America resembles the Empire more than the Republic. Whatever the fights that occupied the Romans of the late Republic, and the loss of the high virtue that made the Republic successful at its apogee, men in public life were serious men, educated men, dangerous men, who, while self-interested, were still Romans, and who desired the best for Rome. Their political structures had passed their use-by date, to be sure, but their society had not. It just needed an authoritarian reconstructor of its institutions.

Thus, it seems to me that we in modern America are likely to be the lucky recipients of a two-for-one special, what they call in my old business a BOGO (buy one, get one). We’ll get the package deal of simultaneous collapse of both republic and empire—for, after all, America claims to be a republic, and is in reality a nasty empire, run for the benefit of a group of nasty oligarchs, so both will get flushed simultaneously. We have lost everything that makes a polity and a culture successful (even if I maintain that among the common people many of those virtues remain, if mostly in dormancy, and can be revitalized under a wholly new elite), so it is time for operations to shut down, and reopen in a new form.

I admit that a reasonable response to this claim is that we see little sign of such a looming shutdown. Oh, we see lots of decay and fracturing, from fentanyl deaths to infrastructure collapse, and infinite elite

stupidity and incompetence combined with stunning malice. But we're staggering along, aren't we? We're eating, a lot, even if sometimes the shelves don't have what we want, and we have Netflix and ChatGPT, so where's the evidence things are going to shut down? I've explained this apparent paradox elsewhere, but it is worth adding thoughts on why we see almost none of the political violence that characterized the last century of the Roman Republic and always characterizes the end stages of decayed polities.

True, we do see violent state terror directed at Regime opponents, such as in the Floyd Riots and in the aftermath of the (excellent and awesome) Electoral Justice Protest, and we see day-to-day hatred and violence directed at white people being encouraged ever-more aggressively by the Regime, but I mean here two-way violence aimed at concrete political gain, as was common in the late Roman Republic. In part this absence is cultural—such violence has not (yet) been normalized, because that's not how Americans see themselves, and in particular the Right has been, so far, very effectively neutered to reject any violence, even defensive violence, such that it only receives, not deals out, violence. More importantly, it is because non-state actors on the Right who might engage in such violence have no elite protection. In Rome, whatever your politics, if you beat up or killed your political opponents, you might be brought to trial, but if you had friends you had a good chance of escaping any punishment, and anyway the worst that was likely to happen to you was exile and loss of property—an exile from which you figured return in the near future was quite likely (this happened to Milo, for example, although he never made it back, being killed during the fighting between Caesar's and Pompey's forces). And in addition, the current reach of the Regime, enhanced by technology, makes it able, right now, to bring overwhelming force to bear against any isolated instances of overt opposition. This obviously makes political violence now against Regime tentacles unprofitable.

Only when the Regime has to play whack-a-mole, using limited resources against many simultaneous wildcat incidents, and also has to contend against opponents who are protected (such as by, say, a powerful state governor), is bilateral political violence likely to come back into fashion. This will probably happen when the daily situation of the average person becomes very much worse as the result of some

(inevitable) crisis. But I bet that at that point, when the balance between costs and benefits inverts, two-way political violence becomes very fashionable very quickly, as it did, for example, in 1930s Spain. And whether we like this or not has nothing to do with whether it will happen.

Even then, however, how matters might proceed, in the lands then formerly known as the United States, is unclear. For great changes require great men, and as I say, there seem to be none on deck. I'm certain, however, that they will emerge—unlike in Rome, here no place exists currently for such men in the Regime, so they are outside of our view. Chaos, however, has a magnetic attraction for men of destiny, those “of supreme daring, hardened to every risk.” Pay attention, as we spiral downward, to your peripheral vision, and I predict that soon you will see movement there, edging into the frame.