

From Republic to Empire

The assassins of Julius Caesar hoped to restore the Roman Republic, but they instead set in motion events that encouraged the rise and triumph of despots worse than Caesar.

by *Steve Bonta*

This is the eighth installment in a series of articles on the rise and fall of the Roman Republic.

It is said that Marcus Brutus, one of Julius Caesar's assassins and, along with Cassius, the leader of Rome's last republican army, had an extraordinary vision one night while encamped with his army in Asia Minor. He and Cassius had raised a vast military force to challenge the Second Triumvirate of Mark Antony, Octavian, and Lepidus, a sort of military junta assembled after the death of Julius Caesar. Brutus, sometimes called "the last Roman," knew that the time was fast approaching for a climactic battle with the forces of the Second Triumvirate, and was making preparations to cross back into Greece for the final confrontation.

Brutus was alone in his tent reading by

lamplight, long after the rest of his men had gone to sleep. Suddenly he became aware that he was not alone and, looking toward the entrance of the tent, saw a personage of, in Plutarch's words, "a terrible and strange appearance" standing beside his bed. Brutus, undismayed, asked the apparition what it was and why it had come. "I am your evil genius, Brutus," the figure replied. "You shall see me at Philippi." Brutus stared at the dark figure with all the courage he could muster and replied evenly, "Then I shall see you."

The next day he told his friend and associate Cassius of the vision. Cassius reassured him, saying that the mind had limitless capacities for inventing such things and that there were no such things as supernatural beings. He added with more than a little irony, "I confess I wish that there were such beings, that we might not rely upon our arms only, and our horses and our navy, all of which are so numerous

and powerful, but might be confident of the assistance of the gods also, in this our most sacred and honorable attempt."

Brutus' reply is not recorded. But with the Roman government now in the grip of tyrants, the old republic in tatters, and Rome embroiled in yet another titanic civil war, Brutus and many other trembling citizens must have wondered whether, indeed, the powers of heaven had abandoned them.

From Bad to Worse

The assassination of Julius Caesar, instead of solving Rome's problems, made them worse. Brutus, Cassius, and the other assassins ran through the streets of Rome with blood on their hands and togas, proclaiming liberty and the death of the tyrant. They were greeted for the most part by sullen stares, while the remainder of the Roman government fled the Forum in confusion, expecting perhaps that this latest blow to Rome could only lead to more



Funeral of a dictator: Mark Antony exploited Caesar's funeral to stir up the Roman masses against Caesar's assassins. The mob burned the houses of Cassius and Brutus, but the two men escaped to make a final attempt to rescue the republic.

pogroms. Before long, Brutus and Cassius realized that, rather than ridding Rome of a detested tyrant, they had made a martyr out of a popular despot.

Two men who watched events unfold with opportunistic glee were Mark Antony, Caesar's junior consular partner, and Octavian, Caesar's adopted son (and the son of Caesar's niece), who was barely 20 years of age. Mark Antony feigned solidarity with the assassins until the day of Caesar's funeral. When he eulogized Caesar, he took advantage of the solemn occasion to heap imprecations on Caesar's assassins and displayed Caesar's bloody, slashed toga to the onlookers. The crowd, enraged at the sight, surged into the streets to hunt down and kill Caesar's murderers. They tore to pieces an innocent bystander who happened to have the same name as one of the assassins, prompting Brutus, Cassius, and the rest to flee Rome.

While Cassius and Brutus escaped to Greece to try to raise armies of their own, Antony set about consolidating power for himself. He soon found his popularity on the wane, thanks in large measure to Cicero. The tireless statesman delivered to the Senate and the Assemblies a total of 14 passionate speeches denouncing Antony and his tyrannical ambitions, calling them — only half in jest — his Philippics, after the Greek orator Demosthenes' celebrated denunciations of Philip of Macedon. At the same time, Octavian, having returned to Rome, became Antony's great rival. He adopted for himself the title of Caesar and soon garnered enough factional support to force Antony temporarily to withdraw from the city.

But Octavian in his turn quickly learned what his adopted father had understood: the road to absolute power would be more secure if reinforced by willing allies. With a political precocity that belied his extreme youth, Octavian sent emissaries both to Antony and to a third man, Lepidus, a former consul and staunch ally of both Julius Caesar and Antony, proposing reconciliation. Antony and Lepidus both seized the olive branch and with Octavian formed, in 43 B.C., the unholy alliance known as the Second Triumvirate.

The Proscriptions

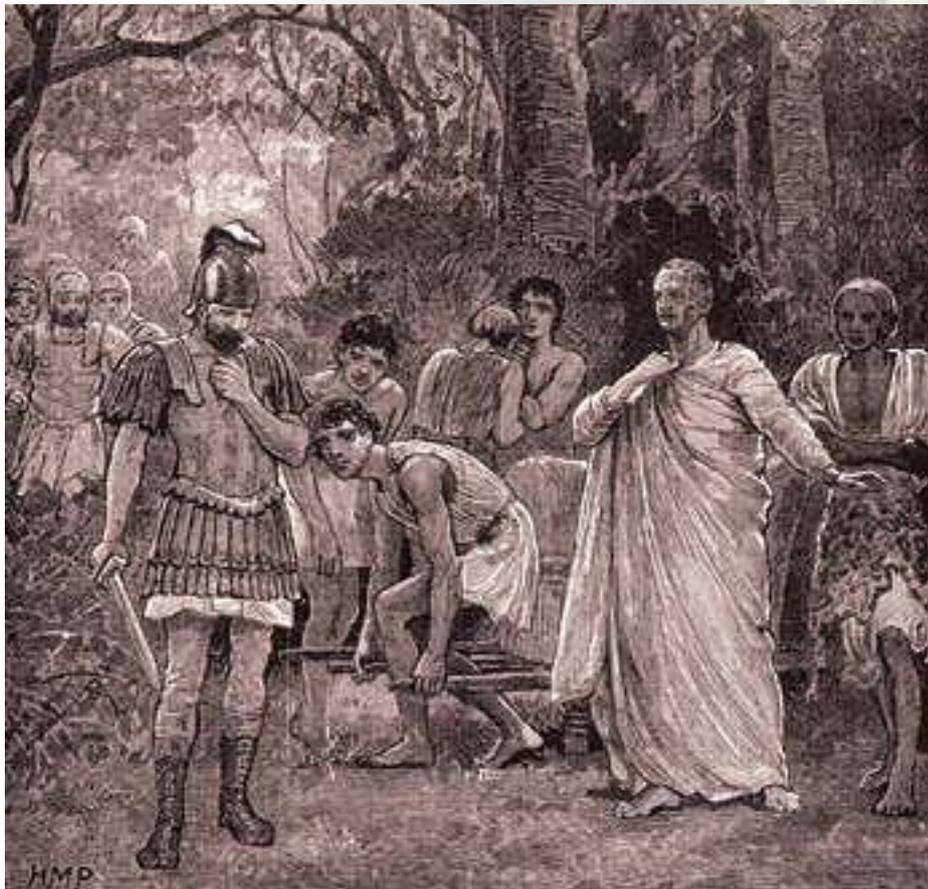
The first act of the Triumvirs was to draw up a list of political enemies to be eliminat-

ed. This process required a certain amount of cynical give and take; Cicero, for example, had been a supporter of Octavian against Antony, but the latter now insisted on Cicero's death. According to Plutarch's version of events, "They [the Triumvirs] met secretly and by themselves, for three days near the town of Bononia.... Caesar [i.e., Octavian] contended earnestly for Cicero the first two days; but on the third day he yielded, and gave him up. The terms of their mutual concessions were these: that Caesar should desert Cicero, Lepidus his brother Paulus, and Antony, Lucius Caesar, his uncle by his mother's side. Thus they let their anger and fury take from them the sense of humanity, and demonstrated that no beast is more savage than man when possessed with power answerable to his rage."

The assassins of the new

Triumvirate now fanned out across Roman territory to eliminate the hundreds of Romans on the proscription lists. They tracked Cicero down at a remote villa by the sea, where, weary of flight, the aged statesman offered his neck willingly. His head and hands were taken back to Rome and delivered to a jubilant Antony, who ordered them fastened up over the rostra in the Senate, "a sight," Plutarch tells us, "which the Roman people shuddered to

Octavian was victorious after a decade-long struggle for dominion, yet he wavered as to whether he would forge ahead as Rome's sole ruler or attempt to restore republican government. In the end, he chose to become emperor and took the title Caesar Augustus.



Death of Cicero: Betrayed by Octavian and proscribed by the bloodthirsty Mark Antony, Cicero was tracked down by government assassins at a remote villa, where he resignedly offered his neck to the sword.

behold, and they believed they saw there, not the face of Cicero, but the image of Antony's own soul."

Last Stand at Philippi

Brutus and Cassius, hearing of the prescriptions and the death of Cicero, were hardened in their determination to hazard all for Old Rome. They had enjoyed considerable success in winning over or conquering portions of Greece, and their combined army was one of the largest that Rome had ever fielded. Having won Macedonia to their cause, they assembled

their forces outside the city of Philippi, the provincial capital.

Before long, the combined armies of Octavian and Antony made their appearance. On the morning of battle, October 27, 42 B.C., Brutus and Cassius conferred, for what would be the last time. Cassius asked Brutus what he resolved to do if things went ill for them. "If Providence," Brutus replied, "shall not dispose what we now undertake according to our wishes, I resolve to put no further hopes or warlike preparations to the proof, but will die contented with my fortune. For I have already given up my life for my country on the Ides of March; and have lived since then a second life for her sake, with liberty and honor."

In the battle that followed, many thousands were hewn down on both sides. Octavian retired prudently from the field, which saved the young Caesar's life, since Brutus' republican forces fought their way to the enemy camp

and pillaged it, setting to flight or killing large numbers of Octavian's troops. But on the other wing of the battle, Antony's men prevailed and sacked the camp of the republican forces. Thinking all was lost, Cassius, ever the pessimist, committed suicide. Brutus withdrew his forces from the battlefield to defend his camp, and the battle ended inconclusively. Eight thousand of the republican army lay dead on the battlefield and roughly twice that number from the forces of the Triumvirate.

The two armies regrouped and prepared for a second engagement. Brutus' navy, in the meantime, engaged that of Octavian and wiped it out, prompting Octavian to renew hostilities before Brutus could learn of his good fortune. On the evening of November 16, the dark apparition reputedly appeared to Brutus again, but vanished without saying a word. And on the following day, his forces met with disaster.

The battle was comparatively brief. The forces of the Triumvirate smashed through republican lines. Marcus, the son of Cato the Younger, died a hero. Refusing to flee, he shouted his father's name over and over

The Roman people and the Senate, exhausted by decades of turmoil, wearily resigned themselves to the loss of their republic. The Senate was preserved by Caesar Augustus, but shorn of meaningful power. The senators, the emperor made clear, were now his subordinates.



as enemy troops closed in about him, leaving many of them dead on the field before finally succumbing. Another of Brutus' men, Lucilius, pretended to be Brutus and allowed himself to be captured by Antony's forces, buying time for Brutus himself to escape. But Brutus, seeing the ruin of everything that he had lived and fought for, fell upon his sword.

Contest for Empire

With the final defeat of the republican forces, all that remained for the rival members of the Triumvirate was a battle for the prize of absolute power. Lepidus managed to avoid all-out war with Octavian and Antony, content with gradual diminution of his role until finally being removed from power in 36 B.C. Antony and Octavian, however, rekindled their earlier dispute. It soon became apparent that the Roman Empire was not large enough for both of them.

The first rift occurred in 41 B.C., with a revolt against Octavian led by Fulvia, Antony's wife. Octavian quashed the revolt the following year, and Fulvia died in exile. Octavian and Antony patched things up temporarily with Antony's marriage to Octavia, Octavian's half-sister.

Antony's affair with Queen Cleopatra of Egypt led to a permanent and irreconcilable break between the two triumvirs, Octavian accusing Antony of repudiating his Roman birthright to pursue an adulterous liaison with the Egyptian queen, and Antony accusing Octavian of usurping power that rightfully belonged to Ptolemy Caesar, also known as Caesarion, the illegitimate son of Caesar and Cleopatra. Tensions simmered for a number of years before open civil war again ignited in 31 B.C. The climactic engagement took place in the gulf of Actium on September 2, in which the navies of Antony and Cleopatra squared off against Octavian's navy in the greatest sea battle until Lepanto, 1,600 years later. In the midst of the battle, Cleopatra fled in her ship, and Antony forsook the battle to pursue her. The forces of Octavian finally wiped out Antony's navy by setting the fleet on fire, incinerating thousands of men.

With the final defeat of Antony and



Battle of Actium: Regarded as one of the most important naval battles in history, Actium — which ended with the fiery destruction of Antony's fleet — decided nothing except which of two tyrants would inherit the imperial spoils.

Cleopatra, who fled to Egypt and soon committed suicide, the decade-long struggle for uncontested dominion was at an end. Yet still the young Caesar wavered, according to historian Cassius Dio, as to whether to forge ahead as Rome's sole ruler or to attempt to restore republican government. We can only speculate as to Octavian's sincerity, but one of his advisers, Agrippa, counseled him to eschew monarchy. "I do not see what reason could possibly persuade you to desire to become sole ruler," he told the young autocrat. "Such a regime is difficult to impose upon democracies in general, and would be far more difficult still for you yourself to operate. Surely you can see how the city of Rome and its affairs are even now in a state of turmoil. It is difficult in the first place to make yourself master of the mass of our citizens who have lived for so many years in freedom, and secondly it is difficult, when we are surrounded by so many enemies, to reduce once more to slavery the allies and the subject nations, bearing in mind that some have been democratically governed for generations, and others we ourselves have set free." Agrippa pointed out the many advantages of free states over tyrannies and recommended that Octavian set the affairs of the state in order and then lay aside the scepter:

Act wisely, while you have the opportunity, and entrust to the people the control of the army, the provinces, the offices of state and the public funds. If you do this now and of your own accord, you will be at once the most famous of men and the most secure.... It would be an immensely hard task to bring this city, which has known democratic government for so many years, and which rules an empire of such a size, to a state of slavery.... The state of monarchy is such that even virtuous men cannot possibly redeem it.

Agrippa reminded the sovereign that certain men, like Sulla, had been able to lay aside supreme authority and retire, and recommended that Octavian do the same.

Octavian's other adviser, Maecenas, was of the opposite opinion. He urged Octavian to accept the reality of empire and to indulge no further vain hopes that the republic could ever be reconstituted. "So long as our numbers were not large and we did not differ in any important respects from our neighbors," he pointed out, "our system of government worked well, and we brought almost the whole of Italy under our rule. But ever since we ventured beyond our native soil, crossed the water,

Imperial Rome was now at peace, for the time being. But it was a peace dearly bought, as succeeding generations would discover. Beginning with the emperor Tiberius, a hundred-year parade of brutal monsters was soon to teach Rome of the true price of empire.

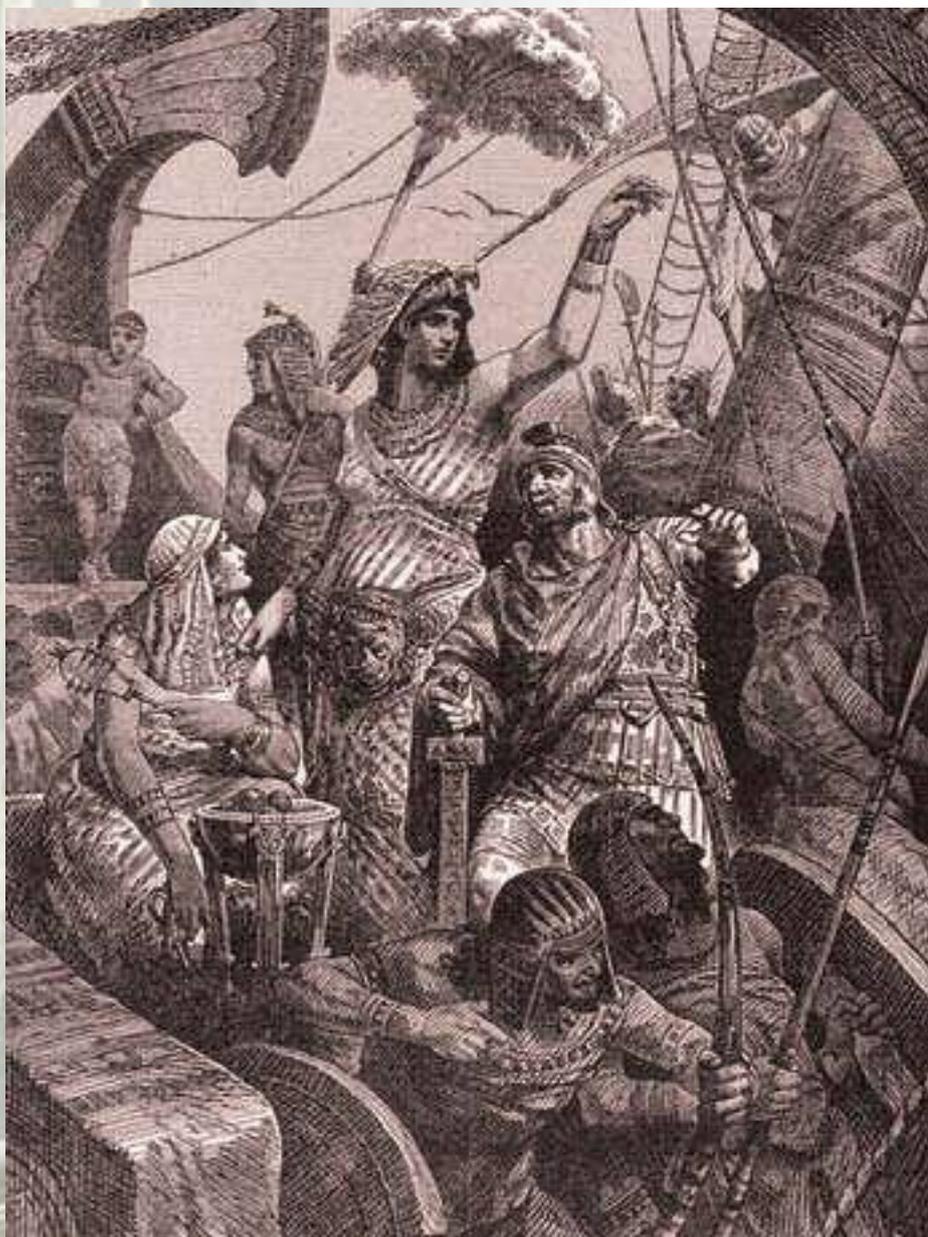
set foot on many islands and many continents, and filled the whole sea and the whole earth with our name and power, we have experienced nothing but ill fortune. At first it was only at home and within our own walls that we split into factions and quarreled with one another, but later we introduced this sickness even into the army. For this reason our

city, like a great merchant vessel, manned with a crew of every race but lacking a pilot, has now for many generations continued to roll and plunge as it drifted here and there in a heavy sea.... Do not, then, allow her to be waterlogged. And do not let her be smashed to pieces on a reef, for her timbers are rotten and she will not be able to hold out much longer.” Republican government was clearly inadequate to the demands of a far-flung, multi-ethnic empire and the vast military that held it together, but rather than renounce imperial dominion, Maecenas preferred to renounce liberty.

After his councilors finished, Octavian, who had now adopted the title Caesar Augustus, thanked them both for their sincerity and openness. Unsurprisingly it was, according to Dio, “the advice of Maecenas that he was inclined to accept.”

The Roman people and the Senate, exhausted by decades of warfare and domestic turmoil, and bereft of the leadership of a Cicero or a Brutus, wearily resigned themselves to the loss of their republic. The Senate and various magistracies — the forms of republicanism — were preserved by Augustus, but shorn of meaningful power. The senators, the emperor made clear, were now his subordinates. He purged the Senate of refractory elements by compelling hundreds of senators to resign without open reprisals. He also forbade the remaining senators from ever traveling outside of Italy, a law that remained in force in Rome ever after.

Augustus made much fanfare out of closing, in 29 B.C., the doors of the temple of Janus. Roman custom for centuries had decreed that the doors remain open in time of war and be closed only during peace. For many generations, the doors had been kept open, in acknowledgement of the endless warfare that had afflicted Rome since her earliest forays into imperialism. Imperial Rome was now at peace, for the time being. But it was a peace dearly bought, as succeeding generations would discover. Augustus himself was the most benign emperor Rome was to see for a century and a half, but his immediate successors, beginning with Tiberius and continuing with a hundred-year parade of brutal monsters, were soon to teach Rome — and the entire Western world — of the true price of empire. ■



Cleopatra on her ship: The Egyptian queen, who had borne Julius Caesar's illegitimate son, later had a famous affair with Mark Antony. In the heat of battle at Actium, however, she turned tail and sailed away, contributing to Antony's catastrophic defeat.