

The Rise of Caesarism

The weakened Roman Republic was crushed by Julius Caesar, a charismatic military leader who exploited his popularity with a Roman people who desired security above all else.

by Steve Bonta

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

The Cilician pirates in the early first century B.C. were the scourge of the eastern Mediterranean. They commanded huge fleets and immense amounts of wealth from their strongholds along the southeast coast of Asia Minor

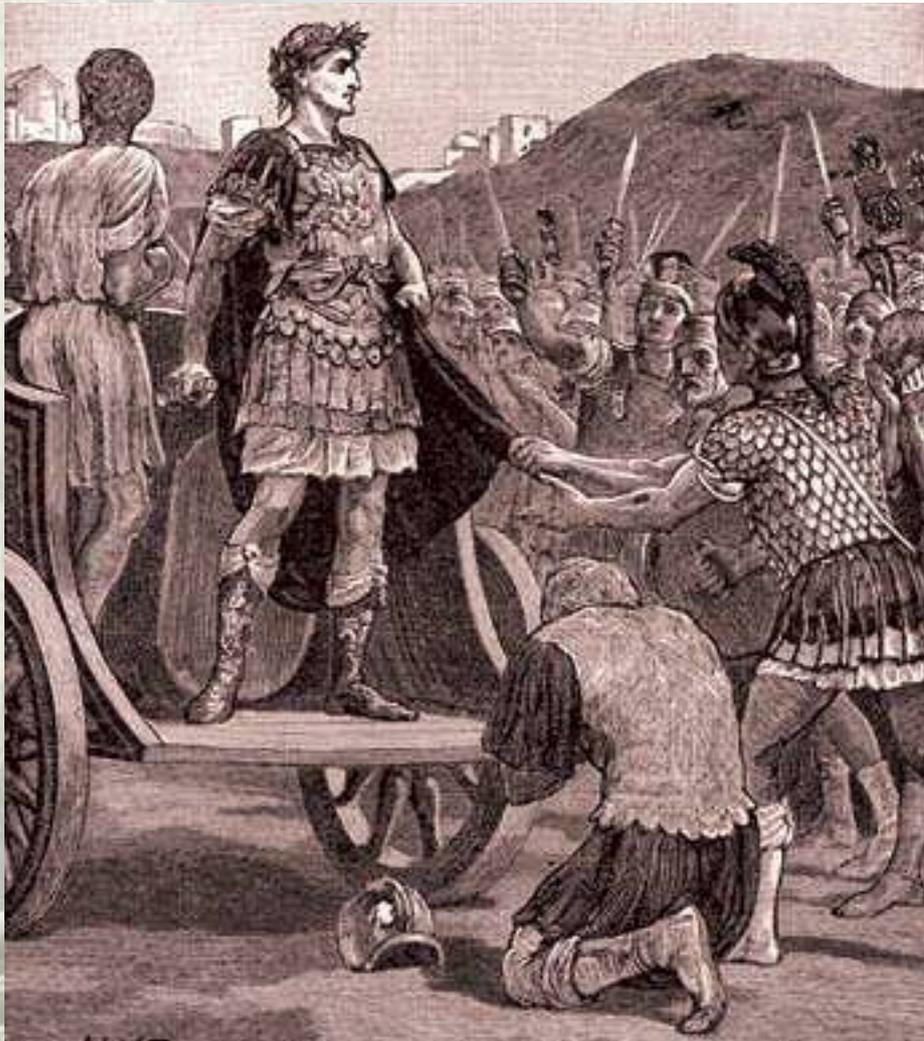
and had spread their depredations over the entire Aegean Sea. By 75 B.C. they apparently enjoyed the sponsorship of Rome's sworn enemy Mithridates, king of Pontus, who, having already lost one debilitating war with Rome, still sought to undermine Roman power any way he could. Sometime in that year, a group of Cilicians captured a vessel carrying a young Roman aristocrat named Julius Caesar.

According to the story, the young Caesar laughed at his captors' demand for a ran-

som of 20 talents. He told them they had no idea whom they had captured and instructed them to ask for 50 talents instead. The pirates readily agreed to his bold demand, and Caesar dispatched most of his entourage back to Italy to round up the ransom money. In the meantime, Caesar more or less took command of the pirates' camp, insisting on preferential treatment, writing letters and essays, and deriding the illiterate pirates as ignorant savages. He also laughingly promised the pirates that he would crucify every last one of them. The Cilicians, unsure what to make of this cheerful, powerfully built young man with the emotionless eyes, played along with what they assumed were foolish jests by a spoiled socialite who hadn't grasped the full peril of his situation.

After a lapse of little more than a month, Caesar's friends returned with the ransom money, and the Cilician pirates set him free. It was the last mistake they were to make. Julius Caesar went directly to the nearest port, Miletus in Asia Minor, and assembled a small fleet of mercenaries. He then sailed back to the island where his erstwhile captors were still encamped. His forces quickly defeated and captured the pirates, and Caesar ordered them all crucified. However, in a fit of magnanimity to the condemned, he ordered their throats to be cut, to spare them the full agony of death by crucifixion. After all, he reminded them, they had treated him well in captivity.

This was the personality of the man who dominated his age like no other before or since, saving only One who came into the world a few decades later to preach the coming of a very different kind of kingdom from that espoused by Caesar and his confederates, and who had nothing in common with Julius Caesar except his initials. Gaius Julius Caesar — military genius, charismatic leader of men, author, demagogue, consummate politician — was one of the most contradictory characters ever to occupy the stage of history. He shared



Adoring fans: Julius Caesar basking in the admiration of his soldiers. Caesar's rise to power owed much to the fierce loyalty of the fighting men who served under him.

Sulla's lust for dominion, but lacked his bloodthirsty vindictiveness. Capable of ruthlessness beyond measure, Caesar also frequently displayed calculated clemency. He understood, where Marius, Sulla, and Cinna had not, that the path to supremacy lay in patronage and flattery, not in pogroms. His personal assets — a keen wit, powerful intellect, decisiveness, and an athletic physique hardened by years of discipline — won him instant allegiance among the men he commanded and allowed him to ingratiate himself with the masses. In an age that produced a constellation of luminaries — Cicero, Brutus, Cato, Pompey, Crassus, and many others — Caesar outshone all the rest. Yet in spite of his extraordinary assets, Julius Caesar was a tragic man who, more than any other Roman leader, was responsible for the downfall of the republic.

Early Life

Caesar was born in 100 B.C. and as a young man married Cornelia Cinnilla, the daughter of Cinna, the leader of the Marian faction. He found himself on the wrong side of Rome's first civil war when the victorious Sulla began his purge of all of Marius' supporters. Caesar fled from Rome and enlisted in the military to campaign

in Asia Minor. While there, he is said to have developed an indecent relationship with the king of Bithynia, a powerful kingdom in northern Asia Minor. Homosexuality at the time was still taboo in Rome (in stark contrast to ancient Greece), and Caesar's political enemies were quick to amplify the rumors of Caesar's moral misconduct.

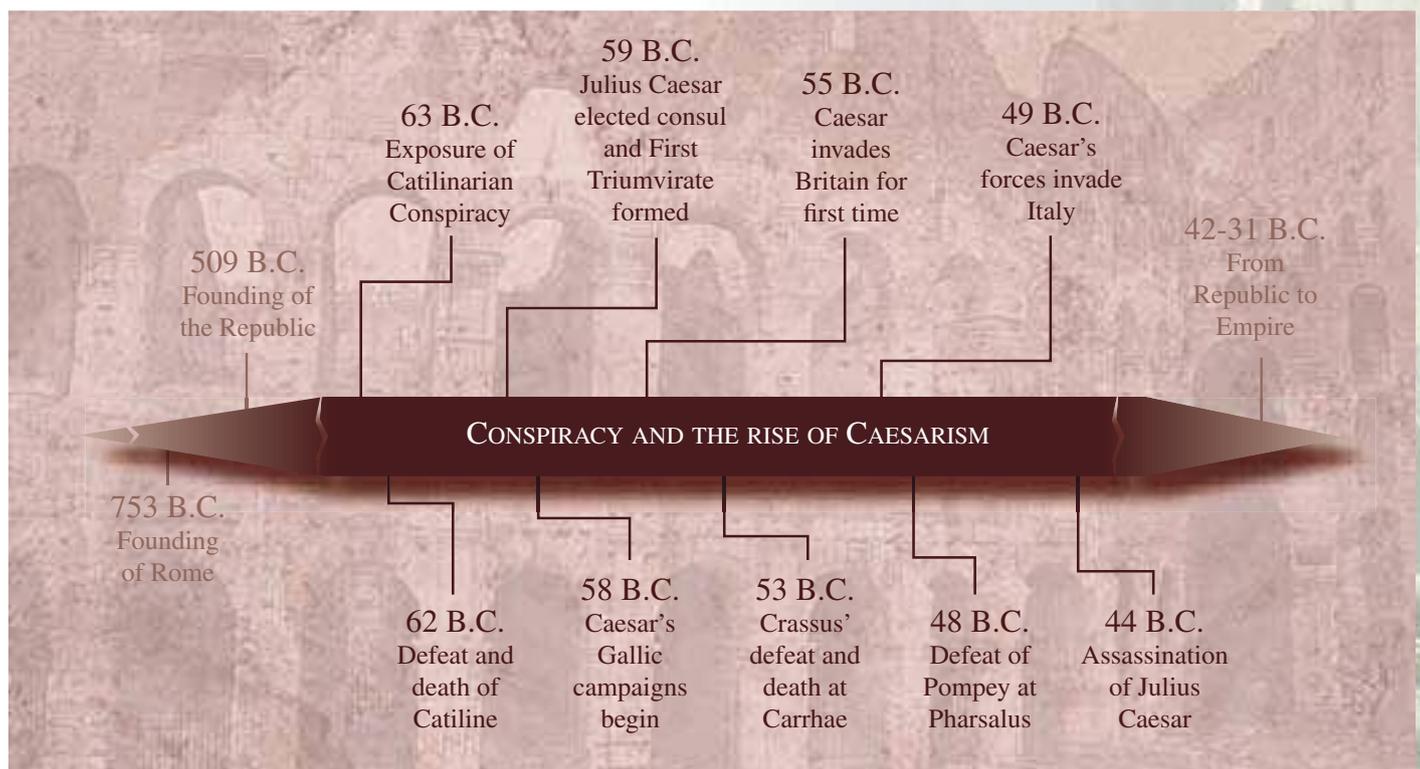
In spite of the scandal, Caesar, returning to Rome after Sulla's death, was able to build a creditable career as an advocate and gained a reputation as an unusually powerful and persuasive orator.

Caesar had two great rivals in Rome for power and prestige: one, Pompey, eclipsed him in military exploits and the other, Cicero, in rhetorical skill. Although friends from youth, Pompey and Cicero were completely different in background and temperament. Pompey came from a wealthy, well-connected family, whereas Cicero came from what would now be styled the middle class, lacking the pedigree for automatic promotion and patronage. Pompey, who sided with the Sullan faction in the great civil war that arose

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between the rival despots Marius and Sulla, was rewarded by the latter with his daughter's hand in marriage. Pompey was only too happy to divorce his first wife to become the Roman dictator's son-in-law. After his marriage, he was dispatched to Sicily to quell the remnants of the Marian resistance there. In Sicily, Pompey earned a reputation as a capable but ruthless military leader noted for his severity in dealing with opposition. Sicily was a major source of Roman grain, and its strategic position in the mid-Mediterranean made it an asset that could not be squandered. "Stop quoting laws," Pompey reputedly told the refractory Sicilians, "we carry weapons."

Following his success in bringing Sicily to heel, Pompey was dispatched to North



The Senate ordered Caesar to disband his army. He chose instead, to the everlasting regret of history, to risk all for the sake of his ambition and cast aside forever the brittle husk of the old republic. On January 10, 49 B.C., Caesar led his army across the Rubicon River and marched on Rome.



Victors and vanquished: The once-proud Gauls submit to Caesar and the Roman yoke.

Africa and eventually to Spain, where the last remnants of the Marians, led by a capable general named Sertorius, held out until 71 B.C. Immediately after his victory in Spain, Pompey returned to Italy in time to assist Crassus in suppressing the uprising of Spartacus — and lay claim to a piece of the credit for the Roman victory.

He was then elected consul for the first time, in 70 B.C.

Pompey's profile grew still further during the next decade. In 67 B.C., in spite of bitter debate in the Senate, Pompey was given unprecedented power — absolute authority over the Mediterranean Sea and all coastal territory extending 50 miles inland — in order to conduct a campaign against the Cilician pirates. The campaign was brief and exterminated the pirates as a military threat. Instead of returning to Rome, however, Pompey departed for Asia Minor, where he helped another general, Lucullus, defeat Mithridates for the second and final time. He then led Roman forces into Armenia, Syria, and Palestine, including Jerusalem itself, all of which he annexed for Rome. He returned to Rome in late 61 B.C. to wild acclaim and a sumptuous two-day triumph in honor of his exploits. His popularity at an all-time high, Pompey's stock rose still higher after several large personal donations to the Roman treasury.

The Road to Power

In the meantime, Caesar's other rival, Cicero, had gotten the better of the Catiline affair, in which a monstrous conspiracy to overthrow the Roman Republic was exposed and dismantled, largely through Cicero's diligence. Caesar, who had defended Catiline's confederates in the Senate, was oratorically worsted by both Cicero and Cato; suspicions of his involvement in the Catilinarian conspiracy tainted him in the eyes of many. By all appearances, in the late 60s, Caesar's star was declining, and those of his rivals were ascending.

Julius Caesar, however, had the good fortune of being consistently underes-

timated by his enemies. He recognized Pompey and Crassus, two of Rome's wealthiest men and most celebrated military leaders, as indispensable allies. In 59 B.C., Caesar, having managed to get himself elected consul for the first time, forged an informal, semi-secret political alliance with these two men. This, the so-called First Triumvirate, was very much a marriage of convenience. Pompey needed Caesar's political support for his project of conferring state lands on veterans who had served under his command, and Crassus coveted the authority to launch a military expedition against Parthia, a powerful Persian state in Mesopotamia. Pompey and Caesar agreed to set aside their quarrels, and the former even married Caesar's daughter Julia to cement the alliance.

The following year, 58 B.C., Caesar was made proconsul over Roman Gaul, where he promptly launched his famous war of conquest in Gaul and Britain. The Gallic campaigns, generally considered the greatest military feat since the conquests of Alexander the Great, were a turning point in the history of Rome and of the Western world. They not only brought most of what is now France and the Low Countries, as well as a part of Britain, under the Roman yoke, they transformed Caesar into a military hero whose popularity, at least with the masses, eclipsed even that of Pompey.

Caesar, a tireless chronicler of his own exploits, disseminated accounts of his victories over the various Gallic and British tribes. His history, designed to appeal to the general public rather than to the literati, was written in the terse, straightforward language familiar to every second-year Latin student.

In addition to his undeniable qualities as both a military leader and rhetorician, Julius Caesar was blessed with extraordinary charisma. Endowed with a hardy physique and uncommon stamina, he earned the slavish devotion of his soldiers through his willingness to share their hardships and risks on the battlefield, often plunging into the thick of combat heedless of mortal danger.

After three years of Caesar's spectacular success in Gaul, Pompey and Crassus, elected consuls in 55 B.C., honored their agreement with him and extended his proconsular authority. They, like many others, appear to have underestimated Caesar and

put too much faith in the strength of their alliance with him. But in the years immediately following, fate took a hand in two crucial events that none had foreseen.

The first blow to the Triumvirate was the death of Julia in 54 B.C. Both Caesar and Pompey were heartbroken, and Pompey soon began to have second thoughts about his alliance with Caesar. He spurned Caesar's offer to marry one of his nieces, choosing instead one Cornelia Metella, the daughter of one of Caesar's political enemies.

The following year, catastrophe struck the Roman expeditionary forces in Parthia. Crassus and his son, leading a huge Roman army, allowed themselves to be lured deep into the burning desert by the wily Parthian general Surena, where they were cut off and slaughtered to a man. This, the battle of Carrhae, was one of Rome's worst military defeats ever. It set the stage for centuries of warfare between Rome and her greatest imperial rival, Parthia/Persia, whom Rome never completely defeated. Crassus himself was taken prisoner by the Parthians, where he met a gruesome end peculiarly apt for Rome's wealthiest citizen: the Parthians poured molten gold down his throat.

Crassus' defeat and death provoked outrage in Rome and calls for military reprisals, but Rome was in no position militarily or politically to avenge the setback. The rivalry between Caesar and Pompey had hardened and, with the dissolution of the First Triumvirate, Rome trembled at the prospect of another civil war.

The Fall of the Republic

In 52 B.C. Caesar cemented his military reputation with a decisive victory over a coalition of Gauls led by Vercingetorix. In 50 B.C., his five-year extended consulship expired, and the Senate ordered Caesar to disband his army and return to Rome. Caesar recognized that the time had come for decisive action. Compliance with the Senate mandate would mean the end of his political career, given the hostility of most of his senatorial colleagues, Pompey in particular. He chose instead, to the everlasting regret of history, to risk all for the sake of his ambition and cast aside forever the brittle husk of the old republic. On January 10, 49 B.C., Caesar crossed the Rubicon River, which marked the Italian frontier,

with his Tenth Legion, reputedly uttering the phrase that has become synonymous with irreversible, all-or-nothing decisions: "Alea jacta est" ("The die is cast").

With his battle-hardened veterans, Caesar stormed southwards, prompting Pompey, Cato, and others of the so-called "Optimates" (the party opposed to Caesar) to flee Rome. Perhaps Pompey wanted to spare the Eternal City the bloodbaths it

had seen during the wars between Marius and Sulla, or perhaps Caesar's swiftness and resolution dismayed him, but Pompey the invincible found himself needing to regroup to prepare to meet Caesar's challenge. Caesar may have sought reconciliation with his rival, but the mask was now off, and Pompey wasn't having any. Their forces collided first at Dyrrachium in Greece, where Pompey's experience and



No escape: Pompey, shown here fleeing Rome before Caesar's arrival, wanted to avoid bloodshed in the capital city. After nearly defeating Caesar at Dyrrachium, his army was overwhelmed at Pharsalus.



A monarch uncrowned: Caesar, understanding the distasteful symbolism of a coronation, publicly refused a crown that Mark Antony tried to give him. It was probably a cynical publicity stunt, since Caesar had made himself a monarch in everything but name.

able generalship carried the day in July, 48 B.C.

At this point, Pompey was seized with reluctance to prosecute the war further, distressed at the prospect of shedding more Roman blood. Cato the Younger, according to Plutarch, wept bitter tears at the sight of thousands of dead Romans on the battlefield after Dyrrachium. But most of Pompey's other associates urged him to pursue Caesar, to finish him off while his forces were reeling. Tormented by premonitions of disaster, Pompey bowed to the demands of his men and led them to the place where all would be hazarded, Pharsalus in northern Greece.

Only about a month had elapsed since Dyrrachium, and Pompey's forces greatly outnumbered those of his determined adversary. Yet Julius Caesar's army carried the day, routing Pompey's 45,000-man force and capturing all of his tents and

equipment. Caesar, as was his trademark, was magnanimous with captured enemy leaders. He pardoned them all, judging that he would do better to win allies by showing mercy.

Pompey, Cato, and a number of others eluded capture, however. Pompey set sail, along with his wife and a substantial entourage, hoping to reach Africa and regroup. Reaching the coast of Egypt, Pompey was lured onto the beach by emissaries of the Egyptian monarch Ptolemy, who had decided to have Pompey murdered to ingratiate himself with Caesar. As his horrified wife and friends watched from the boat, the treacherous Egyptians cut down Pompey on the beach.

Caesar, pursuing Pompey to Egypt, appeared to be genuinely upset at the latter's assassination, since it denied him yet another opportunity to put his self-serving victor's magnanimity on display.

As Plutarch noted, without a trace of irony, "in his letter to his friends at Rome, [Caesar] told them that the greatest and most signal pleasure his victory had given him was to be able continually to save the lives of fellow-citizens who had fought against him." In Egypt, Caesar supported Cleopatra in a civil war that had lately broken out and installed her as ruler. He also had an affair with Cleopatra that produced his only known son.

After a brief interlude in Asia Minor, where he defeated the latest upstart king of Pontus, Pharnaces II, the son of Mithridates, Caesar returned to Africa to deal with the remnants of the forces representing Pompey and the Senate. Another characteristically decisive victory followed, which saw most of the remaining opposition leadership killed. Cato the Younger, who was also in Africa, was informed of the defeat and of Caesar's great anxious-

ness to capture him as prelude to one of his famous reconciliations. But Cato, idealist, courageous patriot, and unshakeable partisan of the old republic, wanted no part of the new order that Caesar was ushering in. Seeing that the republic was lost beyond recovery, he denied Caesar any personal triumph in the only way he knew how: by committing suicide.

Pompey's sons escaped to Spain, where they decided to make a last stand against Julius Caesar. Now in his fourth term as consul, Caesar hurried to Spain, the last of Rome's dominions to defy his rule, and destroyed the last opposing army at the Battle of Munda in 45 B.C., in which more than 30,000 Romans perished. Caesar himself, now in his fifties, is said to have led his reluctant men in an all-out charge. This time, however, he may have pushed his luck too far, for in the total victory at Munda he wiped out all the remaining family and confederates of Pompey, save only one son who escaped the carnage. This, Plutarch tells us, displeased large numbers of Romans who still held Pompey in very high esteem. Not only that, Caesar arrogantly celebrated this victory with a colossal triumph in Rome, which stirred up even more antagonism.

Nevertheless, he managed to get himself appointed dictator for life and elected to a 10-year term as consul. He shrewdly curried favor with the masses by publicly repudiating calls for him to be crowned king. In one incident — probably staged — his political ally and fellow consul Marcus Antonius (Mark Anthony) attempted to place a diadem on Caesar's head during a major religious festival. Caesar ostentatiously declined the honor, to the delight of onlookers. However, as Appian noted somberly, "the people hoped that [Caesar] would also give them back democracy, just as Sulla had done, who had achieved a position of equal power. However, they were disappointed in this."

According to Appian, Caesar's person was made inviolate, and he began conducting business from a throne of ivory and gold. Temples were dedicated to him, and the priests and priestesses were instructed to offer public prayers on his behalf. Magistrates were placed under oath not to oppose any of Caesar's decisions. Even a month of the Roman calendar, Quintus, was renamed Julius in his honor.

Caesar used his dictatorial powers to redistribute wealth and land. He began planning grandiose public works and even reformed the Roman calendar. His most ambitious dream was a grand military campaign into Parthia and Scythia, and thence north and west into Germania, to bring under Roman dominion all of the nations to the north and east that still defied Roman arms.

Death of a Dictator

But the recently expired republic still had its champions. Cicero maintained a low profile, opting to play the survivor rather than the martyr. Other senators, however, led by Marcus Junius Brutus and Gaius Cassius Longinus, were dismayed at the Caesarian dictatorship. Brutus and Cassius had both been pardoned by Caesar after the defeat of Pompey, and young Brutus was even alleged by some to have been Caesar's illegitimate son. Brutus, Cassius, and their senatorial confederates now decided that only drastic action could restore the republic. They formed a conspiracy to assassinate Julius Caesar.

The date chosen for the assassination was March 15 in 44 B.C. According to tradition, Caesar had ample warning of the plot against him. His associates warned him that trouble was brewing, and a soothsayer advised him to beware of the Ides of March, as the Romans referred to that fateful day. On the eve before his assassination, his wife Calpurnia dreamt that he had been murdered and begged him to stay at home the next day.

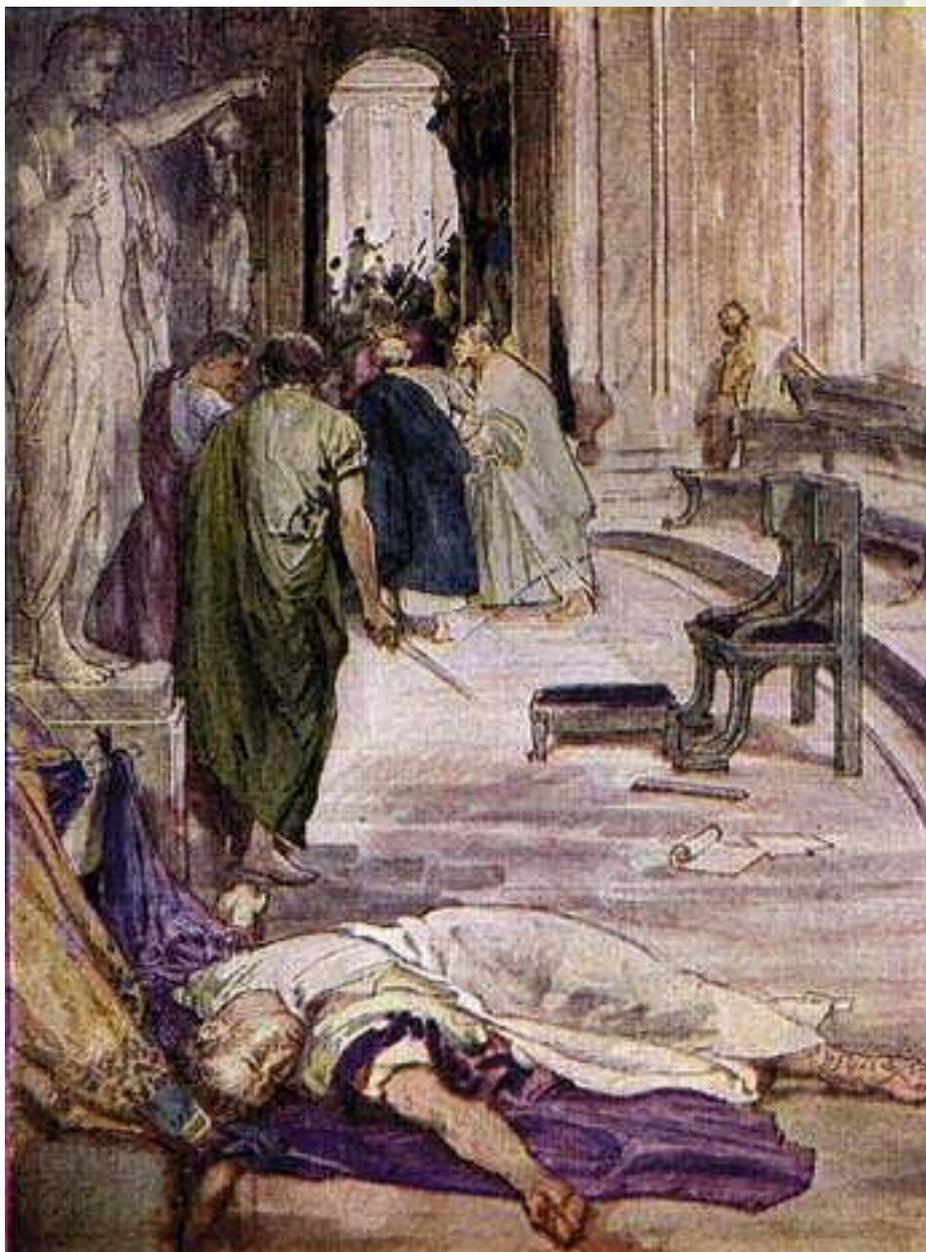
Yet in spite of all these portents, Caesar made his way to the Forum the next day. Plutarch records that he met the soothsayer along the way and told him jestingly, "The Ides of March are come;" to which the soothsayer, unruffled, replied, "Yes, they are come, but they are not past."

On that day, the Senate had chosen to meet in a building where a great statue of Pompey stood. It was at the very foot of this statue, as Caesar was surrounded by a knot of senators, that the assassins, bearing daggers concealed under their togas, made their move. As soon as he realized what was happening, Caesar fought ferociously against his assailants, but soon sank to his knees. Seeing Brutus among the assassins, he is supposed to have said, "Even you, my child?" before succumbing

to more than twenty knife wounds.

After the assassination, the senators fled in confusion, and Rome descended into turmoil. The man who had dealt the republic its death blow was dead in his turn, but contrary to the expectations of his assassins, few Romans rallied now to the cause of the republic. Instead, the masses mourned the passing of a charismatic leader who had kept them entertained and who had never hesitated to raid the public treasury on their behalf. Instead of liberty,

Rome now craved peace, luxury, and security. But with the permanent rise of Caesarism, Rome lost not only her liberty but also her peace and security. Her opulence and fearsome military machine guaranteed yet a few generations of imperial dominance, but for Rome's unhappy citizens, the years to come would bring a nightmarish pageant of bloodshed and oppression that in the end would undo the civilizing work of centuries and bring to a close the first flowering of Western civilization. ■



Thus ever to tyrants: Caesar's assassins wanted to restore the republic by killing a usurper, but only made matters worse. Many Romans loved Caesar for his generosity with public monies and for his military prowess, and had lost interest in self-government.