

Bernice L. Fox Writing Contest

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Foreword

It is said that history repeats itself. This is not exactly true: history rarely ever repeats, instead, patterns reemerge. Americans are living in extraordinary political times. In the context of recent American political history, it may seem unprecedented, but there is one case in history that can give us some insight in what we are seeing now: the fall of the Roman Republic. Though two millennia has passed between then and now, many parallels can be seen, particularly in regards to the consistency of human beings and the intentional likeness of the political system. If the "great trends and forces" theory of history is believed to be true, then Julius Caesar could just as easily fill the opportunistic, populist and authoritarian opening seized by Donald Trump in contemporary America, as he had in 49 BC Rome. Beginning the narrative a decade prior to the crossing of the Rubicon, the descent into darkness was evident, due to the partisanship, bully tactics, breach of norms, corruption and populism that permeates throughout both then and now. It may even be inevitable. It is, of course, a rough parallel: how does one, a highschool student no less, put words in the mouth of the greatest orator that ever lived, describe the actions of the most remarkable historical figures, translate ancient circumstances into modernity, or inject emotion into a contentious period. The solution sought was to use as many of the original characters' words and actions as possible. Though the parallels are at times messy, it will soon be clear the lessons to be applied from the fall of Rome's republic to the degradation of our own.

Last light of the Republic

The flame of the candle flickered as a draft came in, briefly engulfing the dim-lit library in total darkness. Mark Tullius Cicero reluctantly rose from the oak desk in his study, which he is practically tethered to, to close the window. In the short walk, he was mulling over a phrase of the leatherbound book he was just devouring: *Brutum Fulmen*, an empty threat. He thought it

exceedingly appropriate for the times he lived in. When he sat back down, his excitement to reexamine the passage was frustratingly interrupted by the buzzing of his phone. It was a message from his Chief of Staff, Tim Atticus. The president had been making a lot of what they both thought were *Brutum Fulmen*, they had to be on the look out they did not come to fruition. Cicero was needed on the Hill, immediately.

On the drive from his quiet residence through the bustling streets of the nation's capital to the even still busier Capital, Cicero was briefed on the situation. The newly-inaugurated president, a self-proclaimed champion of the people, had asked Congress to convene in a joint session to discuss a pivotal part of his agenda. Ideas were floated around as to what it would be, but nothing substantiated. Everyone had to wait and see.

When Cicero arrived at the Capital, he noticed more people gathering outside the marble building than was usual.

"It seems the President's proclamation has piqued the interests of the public as well," Cicero said.

"Well you know those *Populares*, always wanting to bask in the public's ire," Atticus responded, motioning Cicero up the steps.

He was ushered through the fledgling crowd and into the convening Senate chamber.

"Just in time, I'm getting the feeling the president doesn't want a full attendance, or the prolonged debate that comes with it," Atticus said. Wished or not, a number of Democrats were boycotting the address.

When it seemed as though all of the government officials who were going to show up had assembled, the president walked down the aisle to the platform to an anthem of applause.

Cicero shook hands with President Julian Caesar as he made his way down the aisle, and up the platform. Basking in the applause, Caesar fixed his thin strands of hair with his characteristic arrogance.

“When I see his hair so carefully arranged and observe him adjusting it with one finger, I cannot imagine it should enter such a man’s thoughts to subvert the American Republic” Cicero sarcastically murmured to Atticus.¹

In Cicero’s eye, Caesar and his morally bankrupt Triumvirate, made up of the Congressional darling Gerald Pompey and their backroom donor, the billionaire real estate and media mogul Lester Crassus, were undermining the constitutional republic Cicero so loved. Caesar, who once considered Cicero a friend, had even asked the moderate to join this axis of evil, but knowing his vocal base would decry him for doing so, and even more importantly, it going against his principles, he refused. He now hoped he could muster the political and personal strength to be a stalwart against the Triumvirate’s more brutish attempts.

“Friends, Americans, countrymen, lend me your ears,” Caesar said, drawing the chamber to a dead silence. “It is evident that we Americans have reached a point in our history that is no longer sustainable. Despite, what I know to be, the best efforts of you fine gentleman in the Senate, the people are suffering. They have been for years. They have voted me as president in an overwhelming electoral landslide, the biggest since Ronald Reagan, in a show that they are tired of the political establishment and are ready for change.”

“He likes to think he has the people on his side,” Atticus said to his companion, under the applause.

“As long as the people think it to be true, does it matter?” Cicero responded, matching his friends hushed tone.

¹ As attributed by Edith Hamilton in *The Roman Way*

"We've spent trillions and trillions of dollars overseas, while our infrastructure at home has so badly crumbled," Caesar continued. America has spent approximately \$6 trillion in the Middle East -- all the while our infrastructure at home is crumbling. With this \$6 trillion, we could have rebuilt our country twice, and maybe even three times if we had people who had the ability to negotiate."

"Another Republican President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, initiated the last truly great national infrastructure program -- the building of the Interstate Highway System. The time has come for a new program of national rebuilding," Caesar said to a flurry of applause.

"Crumbling infrastructure will be replaced with new roads, bridges, tunnels, airports and railways gleaming across our very, very beautiful land."

"To launch our national rebuilding, I will be asking Congress, in concurrence with Congressman Gerald Pompey, to approve legislation that produces a \$1 trillion investment in infrastructure of the United States -- financed through both public and private capital -- creating millions of new jobs."

"This effort will be guided by two core principles: buy American and hire American,"² Caesar said, reflecting the populist wave that got him elected, and spurned those Republicans in attendance who did not share this sympathy to applaud anyway.

"Together, we will make this nation great again!"

With Caesar's incendiary line spoken, the chamber erupted into a mix of applause and boos from the assembled Congresspeople.

To Cicero, this all seemed very familiar. It was just four years ago he had spoken out against and defeated such an infrastructure bill proposed by a no-name representative and heavily pushed by then-senator Caesar.

² Excerpts regarding infrastructure taken from president Donald Trump's February 28 Presidential address

Cicero's objection came not from the fact that the bill was unnecessary, for he had known the US was in a dire need of systematic repair, but from principle. If he had handed Caesar and his Triumvirate this monumental legislative ribbon-cutting ceremony, he would be handing him the keys to the kingdom of public opinion. If Caesar signed that bill, he would be potentially ending the Republic in the same stroke.

Yet, Cicero was torn, a fact of life that is all-too often true. The American people demanded, and, more importantly, needed their roads fixed and their water supply to be safe. The hypocrisy of crying out during the Flint Water Crisis and crying out at this belated attempt to avoid future incidents was not lost on him.

He was hardly unaware of the political consequences of opposing such a popular reform, one that finds support from Cicero's side of the aisle as well, that has been clamored for since Barack Obama's failed attempt at doing so. Of course, supporting it would yield political consequences as well.

He was flanked from both sides, and could not sure up one without further exposing the other. He has earned the Rights hate for opposing their beloved president and faced rancor from his own party for not opposing him vigorously enough. Though not a military tactician, he was a superb political one. He had no intention of allowing his party to be hijacked by their version of the Tea Party, but he walked a very fine line.

One who had no such qualms was Jeremy Cato, the unyielding Liberal moralist. Cato, though a congressional veteran, now electrified the newly energetic base and was as much a thorn in Cicero's politicking backside as he was in Caesar's. He was the face, voice and heart of the uncooperative, to the point of obstructionist, Caesarian resistance. At his earliest opportunity, Cato took to the senate floor to deride the legislation, which had quickly materialized, with the tradition shattering bonus of having Caesar in personal attendance.

"Citizens and fellow senators, we cannot pass this bill. We shall not. Signing this bill would be signing the death warrant of our Republic," Cato said in his classical melodrama to the murmuring assent from the liberal senators.

"We've already seen that the three-headed monster had wielded it's sword around like a bloodthirsty gladiator," Cato continued. "But this is not the games. This is the fate of our democracy. Noble conscript fathers, you shan't hand over the freedom that our noble forefathers fought and bled for. Since our founding fathers, since George Brutus put on his military cloak to overthrow the tyrannous yoke of King Tarquin in the revolution, this has been our right, our staple."

The rallying liberals were now openly and loudly voicing their disdain for the bill which they had barely just learned of.

"Voting for this bill, we will be selling ourselves and our Republic as dirty slaves to our masters: Caesar, Pompey and Crassus," Cato said, voicing the concerns of Cicero.

At this point of Cato's speech had been drowned out by Cicero's internal conflicted contemplation on his opinions of the matter and his plans for the future. Half an hour passed before Cicero had escaped his loss in thought, yet Cato was still speaking, much longer than was usual, and showed no signs of stopping. In fact, he had no intention to.

"Quite like Cato," Cicero said to himself. "The man gives his opinion as if he were in Plato's Republic, not in Washington's cesspool."³

He noticed Caesar, listening to the admired senator's speech, was trying to mask the grimace that came over him as he realized what Cato was up to: a filibuster. Cato had previously used this tactic to stall Caesar's attempt to hold a public conference and run for office at the same time just months earlier. The senator had an uncanny capacity to speak for hours on end.

³ Quote attributed to Cicero

Caesar had no intention of being duped again. He visibly conferred with his party loyal senate majority leader and the parliamentarian, the non-partisan officer in charge of Senate procedure.

“Caesar is kowtowing to his chum Pompey. How much of this trillion dollars will find itself in the bank accounts of Pompey’s partisans or Crassus’s network of the ultrarich.”

“Order, order. Senator Cato, you are violating Section two and three of Rule XIX of Senate procedure by impugning the motives of a fellow congressman,” the Majority Leader shouted.

This shocked the senators who had sat through Cato’s prolonged oration, most of all Cicero.

“A similar bill had been defeated several years ago. There is no reason why we can’t do the same now...” Cato continued, ignoring the Parliamentarian’s protests.

“All those who vote to dismiss Senator Cato on grounds violation of Senate procedure, say ‘Aye,’” the Senate President Pro Tempore, a party loyalist, said directly to his party followers.

To Cicero’s dismay, a bare majority of Senators, in a mixture of enthusiasm and reluctance, voiced their consent, silencing Cato in a party-line vote.

“Is this what our democracy has come to. Citizens, Caesar resorts to denying free speech because he is afraid of it!”

“Order, order! Senator Cato you are ordered to stop speaking.”

“I will not, sir. I will not surrender the Republic without protest.”

“Senator Cato was instructed to stop speaking, nevertheless, he stood his ground. Sergeant-at-arms, please remove Senator Cato from the chamber.”

The two Sergeant-at-arms looked at each other with bewilderment, neither had ever had to forcibly remove a senator from the chamber. They reluctantly moved towards the now-shouting Senator, grabbed him by the arms, and began to drag him toward the door.

"I will not be silenced! I will not kowtow to Caesar!" Cato shouted as he was being dragged. He locked eyes with Cicero right before being dragged around the corner. "I will not kowtow to tyranny!"

Caesar, slowly calming himself from his state of perplexity, motioned that he would speak. Yet to his chagrin, a Senator got out of his seat, and began walking toward the exit Cato had just disappeared behind. Then another, and another. Watching the spectacle in amazement, Cicero stood up, but didn't move an inch.

"Where do you think you're going," Caesar growled in uncharacteristic frustration to the first senator.

"I prefer to be with Cato in prison rather than here with you," he shouted back.⁴ More than half of the senate, including those who had voted with Caesar, filed out of the chamber.

Within minutes, the spectacle had spread like a wildfire on social media. #Hestoodhisground and #injailwithcato were the trending hashtags on Twitter. Floods of pundits and celebrities voiced their support for Cato during the ensuing media circus. Caesar had made a tactical blunder, one he would not soon forget.

Cato was released, and he, Cicero, and other Democratic senators were standing in the Capital lobby when a flurry of phone alerts and rushing aides threw the room into chaos.

It seems the president wasted no time in taking his appeal directly to the people in the best way he knew how, in 140 characters or less.

⁴ As attributed by Cassius Dio in his *Roman History*, book 38

“Washington gridlock & greed by failing political establishment refuse to consider my Infrastructure bill that would do great things! Pity!” Caesar’s tweet read.

The next message he sent out was even more shocking than what many had come to expect. “You, the people, have been subverted. That is why I bring this directly to you, to decide your own fate. You will be heard!”

Caesar’s tweet, though not entirely clear, had clearly-enough shown his utter disregard for the normal republican traditions and his belief in direct “democracy,” or as historians who habitually compare the current president to Andrew Jackson would say, “mobocracy.”

It had almost immediately spawned a counter-outburst by social media users, cable news commentators, and quick-typing columnists.

“What is this treason!” Cato tweeted out to a slew of contradictory and supportive comments. “You can’t get your way in the democratic process, so you supersede our checks and balances!”

A staunch Cato ally, Senator Michael Bibulus, had taken to CNN to voice his opposition to Caesar. Unfortunately, his impulse superseded his foresight.

“Do you believe that Caesar has a case, seeing that polls show that a majority of Americans support some kind of infrastructure reform,” CNN anchor Anderson Cooper asked the pundit.

“Nonsense!” cried Senator Calvin Bibulus, without much forethought. “Even if the people want this bill, they won’t get it.”⁵

Later in the interview, Bibulus walked back on the unabashedly obstructionist claim, but the damage had already been done. His words caught like wildfire on social media and sound

⁵ As attributed by Cassius Dio in his *Roman History*, book 38

bites of it were played over and over again. Posts brandishing #wewantit and #wellgetit filled timelines everywhere.

Caesar's fellow Triumvirs, Congressman Pompey and Billionaire Crassus, joined the fray. In a joint press conference with the president, Pompey, always seeking to steal the show, had boldly stated he would counter any attempts to derail the legislation.

"Not only with a sword, but with a shield too!" Pompey exclaimed, garnering much-coveted punditry attention for it.⁶ Cicero was not familiar with swords or shields, but with words, he was well versed. He saw through Pompey's attention grab.

"The thought that his services to the country might in the dim future be reckoned higher than mine pricks me to the heart," Cicero told Atticus.⁷ Nevertheless, the wildly popular congressman's word played well with the masses, a fact not to be ignored.

Crassus had supported Caesar's proposal in a public, but much less chauvinistic way, in addition to the backbone Crassus's coffers had already given Caesar.

The media circus, however, suddenly grounded to a standstill, due to one event: Cicero had decided to conduct a televised town hall.

All eyes were on the greatest Orator of all time, certainly of their generation. Cicero was in the spotlight, in a way he had not been for several years.

By every account, Cicero was a *novus homo*, self-made and to some extent, at least in the beginning, a political outsider. Born to a middle-class family in Springfield, he rose to national political prominence due to his outstanding oratory skill. As Attorney General of Illinois, he prosecuted and indicted a corrupt former governor, as well as a slew of other notable cases. Ever since, he had been a rising star in the Democratic Party. He was elevated to a brief but eventful stint as Attorney General of the entire nation. Now he was the senior Senator from Illinois and

⁶ As attributed by Plutarch in *Parallel Lives*

⁷ As attributed by Edith Hamilton in *The Roman Way*

pillar of the Democratic party, a compromiser, moderate, but above all else, a preserver of the republic.

"Friends," Cicero reluctantly began. "We are at a crossroads in our history. We have seen our republican institutions be diluted, degraded and discarded for the past several decades, there is no doubt. Now, we choose. A choice between the republican democracy of our fathers, or authoritarianism."

"Do not speak to us about constitutionalism!" A familiar voice shouted from the crowd. "Was it not you who violated the constitution in prosecuting the Catalinians just a few years ago!"

At this, Cicero's heart almost stopped. He recognized the voice, it was Peter "Clodius" Pulcher, the infamous alt-right provocateur. His feminine and delicate exterior did not match at all with his deliberately caustic and hateful spewings. The two had a widely-known spat a few years ago when Cicero, egged on by his wife, publicly denounced Clodius for his derogatory statement against women, creating a life-long rivalry for the vindictive Clodius. Though Clodius publicly feuded with Caesar as well, he secretly had his tacit support.

He had no business being at the town hall, but he was. And Clodius was dragging Cicero's most webbed and worm-infested skeletons out of the closet, in front of the whole world.

"What I did was save the Republic," Cicero rebuked. "As I am doing now."

"What you are doing now is pandering to your base," Clodius said. "Tell me, where was the outcry from Liberals when you advocated for the disregard of the constitutional rights of American citizens."

The incident Clodius was bringing to the light of day happened when Cicero was the United States Attorney General. During his tenure, he presided over a peculiar and harsh meeting out of justice. It all started when a former National Security Agency official, a man of the name John Catiline, had leaked sensitive, highly-classified documents. There is nothing particularly

egregious about this, as it happens with an uncomfortable frequency, but he and a cabal of co-conspirators had given the documents to America's enemies with the intent of using the revelations of the documents and his new-found foreign allies to sway the election in his direction.

This, of course, did not work, but it threw the country into Red Scare-level fear, just for a moment. But a moment was long enough for Cicero to make his rash and consequential move, seeking the highest punishment for those involved, including the life imprisonment of four, on the grounds of treason.

After his botched attempt, Cataline escaped to the Venezuelan embassy with the intent of getting asylum and rallying his supporters to drum up support for a violent insurrection. With a threat present, the public, and Cicero, was in no mood to sit on their hands. The indictments were made with dubious constitutionality and the sentences carried out with frightful speed. The Venezuelans, rightfully fearing American retribution, prudently gave Cataline up and he joined his colleagues in a two by two cell.

When the dust had settled, Cicero's actions were seen as a gross overreaction. Nevertheless, he maintained they were necessary. He thought the moment the highlight of his career, when he, Mark Cicero, saved the republic. Others, did not hold that view.

The crowd clearly sided with Clodius, even among left-leaners. Seeing the crowd turn on him, Cicero briskly escaped out the back with the help of Atticus.

His original intent was to take the temperature of what opposing the infrastructure bill would look like, a metric important for the decisively indecisive man, and to educate the public on what he viewed as the fallacies of the bill. But he instead succeeded in tarnishing his own image, rather than that of Caesar or his legislative agenda.

After months of intense debate, the bill was passed through both houses, not without protest, but due to a Republican Majority and even some precariously placed Democrats not

willing to jeopardize their seats or deny the country a much needed remedy. To Caesar's delight, he was even able to finagle a resolution stating that the senate would not overturn the bill at any time.

The new fight, at least for Cicero, was his reelection. With the election coming up, the last thing Cicero needed was this "Gotcha" moment. His gaff to Clodius followed him throughout the campaign, jeopardizing what was supposed to be an in-the-bag victory. It was very rare that a seasoned and nationally prominent incumbent faced so much trouble in reelection, but Cicero was being dragged through the mud by supporters of Caesar and Cato alike.

The incident, in a way, broke Cicero. He had devoted his life to his country, to his Republic, and this was the repayment he got? With all of its kinks and cancers, Cicero loved DC, and was depressed at the thought of having to give it up. What little campaigning he did, if it could even be called that, was complacent and sullen. He preferred wallowing in his home library than taking to the stump and whistlestop tours around the state. He resided in his study, the lighting of which seemed to reflect the mood of the occupant: dark and gloomy. The fight was taken out of Cicero.

"Mark, the polling numbers aren't looking good, we're down by almost double digits. The election is in less than a week. We need to do something, anything!" Atticus spoke frankly and angrily to his boss, not fearing the repercussions. "Instead you stay here in your library, like a monk in his monastery, taking strolls through your garden like a bored retiree!"

"If you have a garden and a library, you have everything you need," Cicero said.⁸

"I know you need more. You need politics. You're no fool. Hell, you're the most talented politician I've ever met, probably as able a man as this country has ever seen. You can rally support if only you tried." Atticus pleaded. As Chief of Staff, and now Campaign Manager, it was

⁸ To Marcus Terentius Varro, in *Ad Familiares* IX

Atticus's job to advise Cicero in political matters, but more importantly, he was concerned for his long-time friend, and was fulfilling his duty as confidant.

"I am unwilling to take arms and fight for my own safety, though it is quite it is in my power to do so," Cicero sullenly responded.⁹

"Well, why the hell not!" Atticus responded.

"Whether I conquer or am defeated, it would be a grievous thing for the republic." Cicero's words hung heavy in the air, creating a dead silence.¹⁰

"You have to do this for the republic, if for nothing else. It needs you now more than ever! And you can't save it from this library."

Cicero mulled over his options, in his classic mix of Enlightenment rationalism and Romantic emotionalism. He finally relented, he would make one last ditch effort to convince his constituents to allow him in the the city he so much enjoyed and fight for the republic he so much loved.

"Call a press conference," Cicero ordered Atticus, who immediately picked up the phone and made a few calls. Minutes later, a press conference was set up for the next morning. Viewership was not an issue, the whole country waited in eager anticipation to hear the words of the best orator of all time, certainly of their generation. Now it rested on Cicero's words to swing a victory.

Standing on the speakers platform, camera's rolling, broadcasting to the entire nation, flashing and clicking from the the camera's of busy photographers, his own mind racing, Cicero took a deep breath.

"At the time when I devoted myself and my fortunes in defense of your safety, and tranquillity, and concord, if I had at any time preferred my own interests to yours, I might find

⁹ Adapted from Cicero's oration *To the Citizens after his Return*

¹⁰ Adapted from Cicero's oration *To the Citizens after his Return*

punishment, of my own accord, everlasting. Instead, I have made all of my decisions out of an honest desire to preserve the state and the Republic! For you!”

“I have undertaken a miserable journey for the sake of ensuring your safety and democracy, in order that the hatred which wicked and audacious men had long since conceived and entertained against the republic and against all good men, might break upon me alone, rather than on every virtuous man, and on the entire republic! I always did what I believed to be good and right, for you, for our nation, and for our Republic. You may call me despicable, weak-willed or traitor for doing so.”

“There is no republic at all in a country in which the Congress has little to no influence,—in which there was impunity for crimes committed by the highest officers and blatant conflicts of interests are ignored—where one branch of government singlehanded calls into question the other, the courts of justice, where violent hate speech bear sway in the public discourse,—where private men are forced to rely on the protection of their wallets, and not on that of the laws, where national heroes are undressed and humiliated by our president,—where conspiracy theorists and “alternative fact”-ers attack journalists and judges for doing their jobs, while the most basic norms and traditions of our nation are thrown aside and the White House is occupied by such an incendiary and reckless authoritarian as Julian Caesar. The republic is on the verge of banishment, if you banish me from politics, I will not be able to fight it from being so.”

“It was the republic herself that has brought me to Washington,” Cicero said, visibly exhausted by the passion and emotion he mustered in the speech. “I promise that I will on no occasion fail the Republic!”¹¹

¹¹ Monologue heavily paraphrased and adapted from Cicero’s oration *To the Citizens after his Return*

The next week, the people made their choice. It was not the one Cicero had hoped for. They rejected him. It did not matter, at least not for Cicero, if he was out-primaried by a Catoian or defeated by a Caesarian, the effect was the same.

With Cicero's exiting of the drama, the last great moderate had been pushed out. It was once said that the "moderates follow Cicero like Sheep,"¹² but they all found new Shepherds, most of them at the edges of the political spectrum. Partisanship hit an all-time high, governance an all-time low. Debate took a backseat to mudslinging. The most basic institutions dipped into despair. Power had amassed itself in the hands of a few, and those hands were clutching as hard as possible.

Cicero was destined to reemerge in the story, his return met with overwhelming popular support, but the damage to the republic had already been done. The last glimmer of hope of a healthy republican democracy, the last flame in the rapidly advancing darkness, was extinguished with Cicero's downfall.

¹² Said by Gnaeus Pompey in HBO's *Rome*