

Sic Semper Tyrannis:
Justification of Caesar's Assassination

Jeffrey Allen Thompson

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-I-

Sic Semper Tyrannis, Latin for ‘Thus unto tyrants,’ was famously spoken by John Wilkes Booth following the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln at Ford’s Theater in Washington D.C. on April 13, 1865. Booth’s words harkened back to the assassination of another supposed tyrant two thousand years before, Gaius Julius Caesar. On the Ides of March, March 15, 44 B.C., Gaius Julius Caesar walked into the temple of Venus, atop Pompey’s Theater, where he was promptly stabbed by a conspiracy of over sixty prominent Romans. The leaders of the conspiracy took Caesar’s bloody robes onto the steps of the temple where they proclaimed that the tyrant was dead and rule had been restored to the Senate. Most prominent among them were the conspirators Marcus Junius Brutus (85-42 B.C.) and Gaius Cassius Longinus (C. 85-42 B.C.¹). Caesar’s assassination marked the end of a nearly twenty-year period of Caesar’s ascent to power, which culminated in Caesar’s control of the Roman state.

The assassination, although motivated by the patrician’s desire for power, was entirely within acceptable Roman beliefs about assassination and defense of the state. Caesar violated the Roman ideals of the first century B.C. about politics, namely, *regnum* and *dominatio*.² This paper examines the justification of Caesar’s assassination from the perspective of Roman culture, history, and political ideals, as well as how Caesar’s assassination fits into the greater Roman ideals of murder, assassination, and justified murder. This paper will not examine the value of Caesar’s rule, but whether or not he violated the Roman ideals of the first century B.C.

-II-

Historical examination of this subject has, for the most part, taken one of two paths. Most of the enlightenment and modernist studies of Caesar have been done in regards to the historians’ own political frame of reference, or from a postmodernist perspective of power and class.

Historians have either viewed Caesar's assassination as justified because he was a dictator, unjustified because the conspirators were attempting to gain or retain power or secondly because the actions of Caesar were beneficial to the Roman people. Both traditional historical views of the topic examine it from a modern perspective with preconceived notions of the value of Caesar's rule. Neither one of these views examine the assassination of Caesar and the reasons behind it from a Roman perspective.

Since the enlightenment, analyses of Caesar and his assassination have been viewed primarily from a predominately pro-representational government perspective, such as the classic pro-conspirators historian M. L. Clarke who argues that Brutus' actions were justified and that he has been perceived unjustly by his critics.³

More recently, historians have begun to question the accepted conclusion that Caesar was a tyrannical dictator who deserved to die. One of the most famous modern historians to examine the subject is Michael Parenti. Parenti argues that Caesar's assassination was unjustified because the conspirators were only attempting to preserve Patrician power.⁴ Parenti examines Caesar's assassination in terms of a social, or people's history. He argues that the Senate was made up of power hungry aristocrats who would do whatever it took to stop the lower classes from gaining power.

Another modern historian who has been rethinking Caesar's assassination is Greg Woolf. Woolf, rather than view Caesar's assassination on its own, examines the assassination as part of a one hundred and fifty year period of struggle. Woolf argues that Caesar's assassination, rather than the culmination of events between 49 and 44 B.C., was the culmination of events all the way back to Gaius Marius (157-86 B.C.) and Lucius Cornelius Sulla (C. 138-78 B.C.). According to Woolf, Caesar's assassination marks the end of the Republic and a nearly one

hundred-year period of attempted domination by individuals. Woolf argues, since Marius had created the profession of soldier and attached them to a General; it was only a matter of time before the Republic would fall. Woolf details the struggle between these individual Generals and political leaders and the rest of the Senate, of which Caesar's assassination is an important turning point.⁵ Woolf argues:

Yet, in grim counterpoint to her conquest of the world, Rome was tearing herself apart. The proceeds of the empire were shared unevenly. This led to the fierce rivalry among the aristocracy and simmering resentment among the Roman poor who doubled as her soldiery. By the time of Julius Caesar's birth in 100 B.C., some Roman politicians had already begun to seek power by championing the discontented masses.⁶

Much of this rethinking is due to a reexamining of Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 B.C.). Cicero is an admirer of the conspirators and of Brutus. Historians have begun to critique Cicero, not as an impassive impartial observer, but as a manipulating political figure. Michael Parenti attacks Cicero as an affluent man who opposed all who were beneath him in social standing. Parenti also berates him for his role in the Catiline Conspiracy.⁷ Parenti writes:

Cicero hoped that his renown as Rome's deliverer would prevail throughout the ages, and so it has among many classicists. But among the sensible commoners of Rome, his self-anointed glory endured for hardly a day.⁸

This attack of Cicero's credibility by Parenti is based on Cicero's past actions in regard to traditional Roman ideals. He does not, however, attack the claims that Cicero made and that are echoed by various other contemporary sources.

Any examination of Caesar's assassination must begin with, and center on, what the authors, historians, and leading figures of the time, and the time immediately following the assassination say about what took place. By analyzing the ancient sources it is possible to determine the perspective of the ancient people themselves. This analysis relies heavily on

Cicero. Although Cicero is important, there are other sources whose histories give important insight into the assassination. Most notable among those historians are Dio Cassius and Appian.

Along with accounts of the assassination given by historians, it is important to examine later sources, such as Suetonius (C. 69-140 A.D.) and Plutarch (C. 46-120 A.D.). Both Plutarch and Suetonius are biographers who approach the assassination and the reasons for it differently than Cicero, Appian and Dio Cassius. These biographies are insightful because they provide a much different perspective than the other sources. Both biographers owe their positions to the actions of different Emperors. This means that both Suetonius and Plutarch do not necessarily have a problem with tyrants. Because of this, their accounts of Caesar are not from an anti-tyrant perspective like Cicero's, but rather from an anti-excesses perspective.

Regardless of the perspective that historians have taken, the issue of Caesar's assassination has been clouded partly due to the prominence the assassination has had in Western culture and history. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* portrays Julius Caesar and his adopted heir, Octavius, as noble leaders in a struggle against the insidious Brutus and Cassius. This is contrasted with the pro-democracy viewpoint of many modern Western historians who view Caesar's assassination as the justified killing of a tyrant. Due to his prominence in history, literature, and culture, Caesar has been cast as the archetype tyrant.

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Caesar's extra constitutional rise to power and prominence began in 60 B.C. when Caesar formed an electoral and political alliance with both Marcus Licinius Crassus (115-53 B.C.) and Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (106-48 B.C.). This political agreement is known as the First Triumvirate. The Triumvirate would last until 49 B.C., ending with the outbreak of the Civil War. Although it lasted until 49 B.C., it began to experience distress in 56 B.C. Gnaeus

Pompeius, known as Pompey, became increasingly fearful of both Crassus and Caesar. This is made worse in 54 B.C. with the death of Pompey's wife, Julia, the daughter of Caesar. Pompey's marriage to Julia served as a major bridge in their relationship. This distress was increased in 53 B.C. at the battle of Carrhae. In order to gain fame for his military success, Crassus launched an invasion of the Parthian Empire which is in present day Iran and Iraq. The whole campaign was a failure and culminated with the defeat of the Roman army at the battle of Carrhae, during which Crassus was killed.

The precarious position of the Roman state and political environment was made worse with the murder of Clodius by Titus Annius Milo. Clodius was a popular politician and his death sent the masses of Rome into a riot, during which they burned down the Senate house. The rioting was so bad that elections were unable to be held. This resulted in Pompey being sole consul with the job of restoring law and order to the republic from 53-51 B.C. As part of his reforms, Pompey put forth the *de uire magistratuum*. This would create a ten-year gap between consulships and governorships. In the past, politicians would go straight from office to office in order to regain the wealth they had spent on elections, by means of extortion. Remaining in office would also protect the politician from persecution for corruption, extortion, or incompetence. Pompey's bill sought to end this. Fearing prosecution, Caesar refused to step down as governor of Cisalpine Gaul. M. Claudius Marcellus put forth a bill that would give the command to the Senate's armies to remove Caesar from office. Before this could happen a compromise was reached. Both Pompey and Caesar agreed to step down as governors on the same day.

On January 1, 49 B.C., the Senate issued a bill that Caesar must disband his armies in Gaul since the agreement meant that he was no longer to be governor. However, Caesar refused

to step down as governor of Gaul. Two tribunes who were Caesar's clients, Gaius Cassius Longinus and Marcus Antonius (83-30 B.C.), vetoed the proposed bill. Following their veto of the Senate bill, both tribunes fled Rome for Gaul to join Caesar. On July 7, 49 B.C. the Senate declared Caesar an enemy of the Republic.

The Civil War that ensued ended with Caesar defeating Pompey and his supporters and capturing Rome. At this time, Caesar began attempting to consolidate his political power, as well as his constitutional position. On July 28, 46 B.C., Caesar had himself declared dictator for the next ten years. The following year, he changed it to dictator for life. Clarke explains the importance of this appointment:

Then in February of the next year came what must have been for some at least the decisive event, Caesar's appointment as dictator for life. This says Plutarch, was clear tyranny. The dictatorship was traditionally a temporary expedient, an appointment for a limited period in time of crisis. Even Sulla, a despot as powerful as Caesar and less beneficent, had given up the dictatorship and retired to private life. Caesar now made it clear that he intended to keep hold of power.⁹

Caesar was given the right to hold one of the consulships every year. He created the office of Prefect of Morals, which gave him the office of Censor for life. He received the right to select half of the annual magistracies. In 48 B.C., he gained the right to make war without consulting the Senate. In 46 B.C., the title *pinceps senatus* was bestowed upon him, which gave him the right to speak first in the Senate. This allowed him to steer debate and set its direction. In 45 B.C., he was given the sole right to command an army in the empire. In the same year, he took control over the treasury. The Senate agreed to ratify all of his decisions in advance. This gave him complete control over the Roman state by the time of the end of the Civil War.

In addition, Caesar sought to insinuate himself into the history, religion, and just about every other aspect of Roman life. In the temple of the deified Romulus, the mythical founder of Rome, Caesar put up statues of himself. He erected a temple to his own clemency. Caesar

changed the month of Quintilis to July in honor of himself. Clarke goes into detail about the many extravagances and pompousness of Caesar's rule:

There was not only the reality of power; there were also the outward marks, those honours which Suetonius lists: a statue among those of the kings, a special seat in the form of a raised couch at the theater a golden throne on the Senate House and on the tribunal, a chariot and litter for his statue to be carried with those of the gods at the procession in the Circus, temples, altars, statues, a cushioned seat like those on which effigies of the gods were displayed, new religious cults associated with him, a month given the new name of July in his honour. Then there was the insolence of his underlings and his own indifference to the susceptibility of the senators; finally there was the impression he gave that in spite of all denials he wished, and even intended, to take the title of king. All of this was intolerable to men who had some pride and self-respect and feeling for the traditions of Roman public life.¹⁰

The arguments put forth by Caesar's assassins and their supporters, for the most part, revolved around the actions of Caesar during his rise to power following the defeat of Pompey in the Civil War. In order to acquire and maintain power, Caesar violated traditional Roman ideals of how a ruler should rule and behave. That is to say that Caesar violated the Roman ideal of the unwilling ruler. The Roman ideal for a ruler was one who ruled reluctantly and not in order to gain power, but consented to rule out of love for the Republic. Cicero, in his speeches and writings, when addressing the Senate directly as a whole, refers to them as the *Patres Conscripti*, or conscripted fathers.¹¹

Furthermore, Cicero held the traditional Roman ideal against rule by one man. He believed that domination by one man was betrayal of Roman ideals. He asserts that any government that is despotic should not be considered a true government at all. He believed that the state by definition was, as he says, *res publica*, or things of the people. He goes on to argue that any state ruled by one man, was not really a state because it lacked a bond of community and law between citizens and that the citizens "are united by no true partnership whatsoever."¹²

There are several different historical sources, which historians examine when looking at Caesar's assassination. Most important among these sources is that of Cicero. Cicero was a prominent Senator at the time of Caesar's assassination. Although he was an admirer and proponent of the assassination, even referring to it as the "glorious deed,"¹³ he was not directly involved. Cicero is an important source due to the number of speeches and letters historians have from him during this time period. He is also important because of his background and history. He was not a member of an old patrician or aristocratic family. He was a supporter of Pompey and fled Rome with him before Caesar could take the city. He later returned to Rome where he was pardoned by Caesar and continued to work within Rome under Caesar.

Cicero's strongest denouncement of Caesar's actions and support of Caesar's assassination comes from Cicero's *Philippics*.¹⁴ *The Philippics* are a series of fourteen speeches. In the *Philippics* Cicero argues that the conspirators assassinated Caesar due to how highly they valued liberty. He asked, when he addresses the Senate, how he could have possibly convinced the conspirators like Gaius Trebonius and Lucius Tillius Cimber to assassinate Caesar. He insists that the entire Roman state owes the conspirators a debt of gratitude for assassinating Caesar and as Cicero says, "Resist a sovereignty", even though themselves were benefiting from Caesar's rule. Cicero goes as far as to say that he is astonished that the conspirators loved the state enough to assassinate their benefactor. He continues to list members of the conspiracy and how they had affection for the state. He said that the sheer number of the conspirators is an honor to the state and "for themselves a title to glory."¹⁵

In the *Philippics*, Cicero comments on why the assassination was justified. He asserts that peace is a good thing, but peace is not a reason not to act in defense of liberty. He argues that servitude is the greatest of all evils and should be resisted with war and even by death.¹⁶

Cicero outlined his views of Caesar and the conspirators in other letters and speeches many of which are less formal than his addresses to the Senate. In Cicero's *De Divinatione*, a two part philosophical dialog between him and his brother Quintus, he discusses Caesar's assassination and what he thinks of Caesar. Cicero comments on the irony of Caesar being assassinated in front of the statue of the man who fought on the side of traditional Romans, Pompey. Cicero again expresses praise for Caesar's assassins, calling them "noble," and saying they assassinated him even though they owed their position entirely to him.¹⁷

Cicero mentions the assassination and his view of the conspirators in his numerous correspondences with friends. Most prominent among Cicero's friends is Atticus. He wrote countless letters to other prominent Romans. In one of his letters to Gaius Trebonius, one of the conspirators, he praises the conspirators but wishes that they would have invited him and finished off Marcus Antonius while they were assassinating Caesar. He calls the assassinating a "glorious banquet" and says that the conspirators provided a "magnificent service." He refers to the conspirators as "the best of men," but does express anger that they did not finish off the person whom Cicero views as the threat; Antony.¹⁸

Cicero's perspective and interpretation of the events of Caesar's assassination are interesting and historically important for a number of reasons. Most important is the perspective and approach that Cicero takes. Due to Cicero's own unimpressive lineage and history, he had to rely heavily upon other more prominent members of the Senate for his position. Throughout his career, he attached himself to various prominent Senators. Cicero chose to side with the Optimates and Pompey. This is the main argument against the reliability of Cicero launched by some historians. They argue that Cicero's praise of the conspirators was just an attempt to align himself with Brutus and Cassius.

This argument overlooks the nature of Cicero's Senatorial position. Cicero owes his position in large part to the idealistic Republican view of the Senate; he owed his prominence not to a Patrician birth, but to his own actions within the Senate. This gave Cicero a genuine appreciation for traditional Senatorial rule, as well as a distrust of kingship and domination.

-V-

The other sources for accounts and opinions of Caesar's assassination come from post-assassination sources. Most of these sources are historians living just after the assassination in the time of the Roman Empire. One of these sources is the Greek historian Dio Cassius (C. 164-235 A.D.). Dio was a Greek who served in the Senate under Emperor Commodus. He wrote an extensive history of Rome beginning with the arrival of Aeneas through 229 A.D. In his history, he does cover Caesar's assassination and the events leading up to it. Dio outlined how during the Civil War and after, Caesar consolidated power as well as had voted to himself different honors.¹⁹ Dio also gives a detailed account of the assassination itself.²⁰ According to Dio, the reason for Caesar's assassination was that the conspirators were trying to liberate the city from someone whose actions were those of someone who wanted to be king, and that personal history and tradition particularly that of Brutus, led to the formation of the conspiracy in the first place. According to Dio, regardless of what the truth was, the Roman populous believed there to be a correlation between the Brutus' family history and Brutus. They thought it was up to Brutus to assassinate Caesar. There were shouts of "we need a Brutus," and they went as far as to write on the statue of the early Brutus and upon the statue of the later Brutus remarks such as: "would that thou wert living!" and "Brutus thou sleepest." According to Dio, this pressure from the populace, along with the taunts that he was not living up to his family name, was a significant reason for Brutus' decision to assassinate Caesar. Dio, like Cicero, thought that even though he directly

benefited from Caesar's rule, he proceeded to gather other people who wanted to be part of the conspiracy, many of which, according to Dio, also benefited directly from Caesar. He gives mention of several of these other conspirators by name, including: Gaius Trebonius and Decimus Brutus.²¹

Other historians echo Dio's views of Brutus' history and ancestry and the role it played in Caesar's death. Cicero argues that the decision by Brutus and others was influenced heavily by their own personal family histories. He says that the previous Brutus fought and drove out the king of Rome, Tarquin. He mentions others who were killed because they aspired to kingly power, such as Spurius Cassius, and Spurius Marcus Manlius. He argues that the conspirators assassinated someone who did not just have kingly aspirations, but someone who was king.²²

Dio provides a different perspective than other historians and writers of the time in that his perspective is that of an outsider. Being from Greece and considering Greece as his home, Dio has a more detached view of the assassination. In addition, Dio had the advantage of having a perspective from over a hundred years after the assassination took place. This allowed him to put the assassination into context with the events that followed, namely the rise of Augustus followed by the more disastrous rule of Emperors like Tiberius and Caligula.

Another important post-Republic historian is Appian (C. 95-165 A.D.). Like Dio, Appian was a Greek. Although he wrote the traditional complete history of Rome beginning with the founding of the city, his five books covering the period of the Civil War and the fall of the Republic are considered the most valuable. Appian is important because he is one of the first historians and biographers who detailed the actual assassination. Appian goes into detail about the stabbing and the immediate aftermath. He writes that conspirators were covered in blood and left the scene of the assassination still carrying the bloody knives. He writes that the conspirators

had even stabbed each other in their haste to kill Caesar. According to Appian, the reason for the conspiracy and Caesar's death was that he aspired to and had the trappings of kingship. Appian writes how there was much talk about Caesar and kingship at the time of the assassination. He gives account of a supposed conversation between Cassius and Brutus in which Brutus replies that he would "defend his country to the death" when questioned by Cassius about what he would do if Caesar purposed a bill that would make him king.²³

Like Dio and Cicero, Appian echo's the importance that Brutus' family history had on his choice to assassinate Caesar. He writes that he is not sure of the motive of Brutus' decision to assassinate Caesar: if it is because he loved liberty, or because his family history compelled him to rid Rome of another king. Appian, like Dio, gives examples of the pressure put on Brutus by the populace of Rome who wanted Caesar gone. According to Dio, statements like: "Brutus are you bribed," "Brutus are you dead?" or "you are not *his* descendant" were written on the statues of the ancient Brutus and Marcus Brutus.²⁴

Appian argues that Caesar was killed because powerful members of the Senate feared that the more powerful Caesar became the more the power of the Senate would decrease. Appian believes that conspirators chose the accusation of kingship because it would have most support, not because there was a deep passion against kings. He argues that the conspirators had little problem with dictators and that the only difference between a dictator and a king was the title.

This argument was, for the most part, sound. There was a definite fear of the growing power of Caesar and what it meant for the traditional power structure of the Roman state. This does not excuse the fact that Caesar could have the accusation of *regnum* and *dominatio* leveled against him. This Appian does not argue. It is telling that the accusation itself is such that it is

supported and latched onto by supporters and members of the conspiracy that are not members of the traditional Senatorial power structure. Although Appian may be right in his assertion that Caesar was killed in order to maintain traditional Senatorial power, he is also clear in his portrayal of Caesar as Dictator and one who aspires to kingship.

-VI-

Apart from historians like Appian and Dio Cassius, there are important biographers from the same time period, namely Gaius Suetonius Tranquilius (C. 69-140 A.D.) and Lucius Mestrius Plutarchus (C. 46-120 A.D.). Suetonius' most famous work is a set of biographies commonly referred to as the Twelve Caesars, although the given name is *De Vita Caesarum*.²⁵ Suetonius is a valuable source due to the records to which he had access. During his life, Suetonius was a private secretary to the Emperor Hadrian. This meant the he had access to the imperial archives and to other members of the imperial court. He is unique in that he goes into detail about the private lives of his subjects. Suetonius gives account of the private life and relationships of Caesar and how these relationships with other prominent Senators and their families, apart from public office, contributed to his death.

In the Twelve Caesars, Suetonius examines the lives of the Caesars from Julius Caesar though the Emperor Domitian. In Suetonius' biography of Caesar he outlines Caesar's actions during the Civil War, as well as his domestic actions during the same time period. According to Suetonius, Caesar was killed because he angered the Senate by not showing the traditional Republican establishment and procedures enough respect. Suetonius outlines how Caesar refused to stand in the Senate building.²⁶ Suetonius examines how Caesar often acted suspiciously in regards to being offered a crown. He states that the Senate was insulted by Caesar's arrogance. This insult came in the form of Caesar's statue being adorned with a crown as he returned to

Rome during a Latin festival. Two tribunes, Epidius Marullus and Caesetius Flavius ordered the crown to be removed at once and those who put the crown on the head of Caesar's statue arrested. Caesar reprimanded and deposed both the tribunes. This severe action taken by Caesar was, according to Suetonius, either because he wanted to remove the crown himself, or because the idea of him becoming king was so negatively received. This action, regardless of his motives, damaged Caesar's assertion that he did not want a crown. This affiliation of kingship with Caesar's name continued on from that point forward. When he walked through the streets, people shouted, "Long live the king." Even though he always denied that he was a king in such instances, the affiliation alone was enough to do damage. This affiliation was not helped by Mark Antony's attempts to crown him while he sat on the Rostra during the Luper Calian Festival.²⁷

According to Suetonius, Caesar was killed for two main reasons: trying to become a king and for his excesses while dictator. This perspective is shaped in large part by experiences of Suetonius' own life, as well as the benefit of seeing the rulers that the downfall of the Republic would bring. Suetonius lived in a time in which the Republic was gone. He did not have a problem with dictators, or with one-man rule. He did, however, have firsthand knowledge and experience of what a ruler who succumbed to the excesses of the office was like. His displeasure with Caesar was over his excesses. Suetonius also is clear that Caesar is suspicious when it comes to matters of wanting a crown.

The other great biographer is Plutarch. Much of Plutarch's work is in the classic comparison method. Meaning that Plutarch would compare more contemporary Roman figures with ancient Roman or Greek figures, usually of great prominence. In his *Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans*, Plutarch gives an account of the events leading up to Caesar's

assassination. Plutarch, much like Suetonius, blames Caesar's appearance of wanting a crown for his death.²⁸ Plutarch outlined the events that he believed led to Caesar's death. He describes the events of the Luper Calian Festival that were so damaging to Caesar. According to Plutarch, Caesar was dressed in a triumphal robe and seated in the Rostra on a golden chair. Part of the festival was Antony running the set course that ended with him approaching the Rostra. When he approached Caesar he gave him a Diadem and Caesar refused it. Plutarch goes on to describe the same story of the two Tribunes, Flavius and Marullus that Suetonius details. Plutarch, however, goes into detail about how both these tribunes were called Brutus by the people after the older Brutus who had helped to drive out Tarquin. This association with Caesar and Brutus and kingship, according to Plutarch, was a significant reason for Caesar's assassination.²⁹

Along with giving account of the events just previous to the assassination Plutarch also gives an account of the events that transpired during Caesar's rise to power that led to his death. He argues that the Roman people gave power to Caesar because they despised the Civil War and the instability that came along with it more than they despised monarchy. Plutarch argues that the people were in such a hurry to end the Civil War that they gave Caesar power. In Plutarch's own words, "This was confessedly a tyranny."³⁰

The sources of the first and second century A.D. along with those of the first century B.C. give a multitude of reasons for Caesar's death. They may differ as to motivations for his assassination, but most agree that Caesar's perceived desire for kingship and his arrogance with regard to the Republican pretense that was a necessary part of Roman politics were a primary reason for the justification of his assassination. Caesar's desire for power and rule meant that he endangered the state, and because of this, the conspirators were, from a Roman perspective, absolved from any moral opposition to the killing of Caesar. Romans believed that war itself was

wrong except for reasons of defending the state. Though this belief was held even during the periods of rapid Roman expansion, Rome built an empire using the practice of defensive Imperialism. Rome was a litigious society, but most of the laws and beliefs were treated as mere technicality when compared with furthering and protecting the state. Caesar's assassination as defense of the state meant that Caesar's murder morally acceptable.

-VII-

The Roman ideals regarding tyrannicide are a significant reason for conspirators deciding to assassinate Caesar. Those who had assassinated and drove out tyrants in Roman history were celebrated and given almost cult-like status. This praise for assassinating tyrants goes back even further than Brutus and Tarquin to Greek history. The Greek heroes Harmodius and Aristogeiton were famed for their assassination of Hipparchus, which eventually led to the establishment of Athenian Democracy. The earliest account of the assassination is from Thucydides. Although Thucydides writes that the assassination had a personal motive, being that it was the result of a love affair, their motives were viewed later as being political.³¹

Harmodius and Aristogeiton were known as the tyrannicides and were the personifications of good Athenian government. Just like there were statues of Harmodius and Aristogeiton in Athens, there were statues of Brutus and other people who committed tyrannicide in Rome. This praise for people who killed tyrants significantly influenced the thinking and attitudes of the Romans toward tyrannicide. This idealized, almost romanticized attitude, toward the killing of a tyrant had a profound impact on the conspirators.

-VIII-

Caesar was assassinated for a number of reasons. His assassination remains a topic of considerable debate. The task left to historians, to divine the motives of those involved in the

conspiracy, numbering at least 60, is a difficult one. An examination of the contemporary and post-contemporary sources reveals that Caesar's assassination was the result of a number of actions on Caesar's part, as well as the political maneuverings of those who were most involved.

Appian's argument that the assassination was an attempt by Patrician elements of the Senate to keep power is a sound one. However the political motivations of a few of the most notable conspirators are not the complete story. There is still the issue of why the Patricians feared Caesar's growing power. An examination of sources like Cicero and Suetonius show the actions of Caesar to be those of someone who wanted a crown and the trappings that go along with it. Caesar's actions during the Luper Calia Festival and his disrespect of standard Senatorial procedure showed him to be someone who wanted power and did not hold traditional Republican ideals in much esteem.

Caesar violated the cardinal rules of Roman politics: not being seen as wanting to rule and not wanting to rule alone. This violation of Roman ideals meant that regardless of the motives of conspirators like Brutus and Cassius, Caesar's assassination was justified. The arguments put forth by modern historians such as Michael Parenti about the nature of the power struggle between Caesar and the Patricians does not answer the larger question of Caesar's own actions. For better or worse, the Roman Republic was what it was; a pseudo oligarchy dominated by the rich and well connected. Caesar did threaten this traditional power base with his hopes to dominate it. He violated Roman ideals about the Republic, even if those ideals are not what modern historians believe that they should be.

An analysis of Caesar's assassination using the primary sources of the time reveals that the contemporary Roman view of the assassination was that Caesar's assassination was justified. This differs from much of the modern analysis of the topic which relies on primary sources for

their facts rather than for their perspective. This invariably means that the analysis is done from a modern perspective rather than from an ancient one.

Caesar's failings are contrasted heavily with the success of his nephew and adopted heir Augustus. Augustus emerged out of the chaos that followed Caesar's assassination as the sole undisputed ruler of Rome. He was able to rule for nearly fifty years. He was able to do this, in large part, to his creation of a pseudo Republican façade, something his great uncle was never able to do. Ultimately Caesar was killed because he was unable or unwilling to create the Republican façade that was a necessary part of Roman politics and culture.

Notes:

¹ Little is known about Cassius until he enters politics.

² *Regnum* and *dominatio* translated into English are kingship and domination. *Regnum* specifically refers to kinglike or absolute authority.

³ See Clarke, *The Noblest roman*.

⁴ See Michael Parenti, *The Assassination of Julius Caesar* (London: New Press, 2003).

⁵ See Greg Woolf, *Et Tu Brute? The Murder of Caesar and Political Assassination* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁶ *Ibid.*, XV

⁷ Michael Parenti, *The Assassination of Julius Caesar*, 88-107.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁹ M. L. Clarke, *The Noblest roman: marcus brutus and his reputation* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 34-5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹¹ *Patres Conscripti* is the vocative or direct address declension. This phrase is Cicero's standard way of addressing the senate and is found throughout his speeches and writing.

¹² Michael Grant, *Cicero government* (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 187.

¹³ See Walker C.A. Ker, *Cicero Phillipics* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1926), 89.

¹⁴ The term *Philippic* refers the style of oration named after those given by Demosthenes of Athens against King Philip of Macedonia. These series of orations were only referred to as the *Philippics* jokingly by Cicero himself. The given proper name for the speeches at the time was the "Antonian Orations". This is due to the theme of the *Philippics* being Cicero's case against and attack of Marcus Antonius

See *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 91-2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 177.

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- ¹⁷ William Armistead Falconer, *Cicero De Senectute, De Amicitia, De Divinatione*, (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1923), 395.
- ¹⁸ W. Glynn Williams, *Cicero Letters to his Friends II* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1929), 388.
- ¹⁹ Earnest Cary, *Dio's Roman History IV* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1916), 233-5.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 331-339.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 327-8.
- ²² Ker, *Cicero Phillippics*, 177-9.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 435.
- ²⁴ Horace White, *Appian's Roman History III* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1913), 433.
- ²⁵ Latin for the lives of the Caesars.
- ²⁶ Michael Grant, *Gaius Suetonius Tranquilius The Twelve Caesars* (London: Penguin Books, 1957), 37.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 37-8.
- ²⁸ Bernadotte Perrin, *Plutarch's Lives VII* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1919).
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 585.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 575.
- ³¹ Anthony J. Podlecki "The Political Significance of the Athenian 'Tyrannicide'-Cult" *Historia; Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Apr., 1966): 129.

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