

The New Criterion

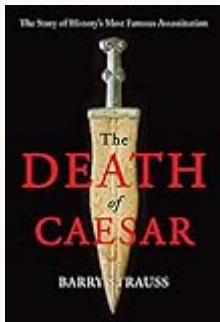
Features May 2015

The moral of Caesar

by Roger Kimball

Caesar's death was more than the end of an extraordinary life; it was the end of an era.

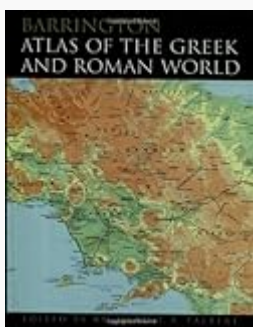
BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Barry Strauss

The Death of Caesar: The Story of History's Most Famous Assassination

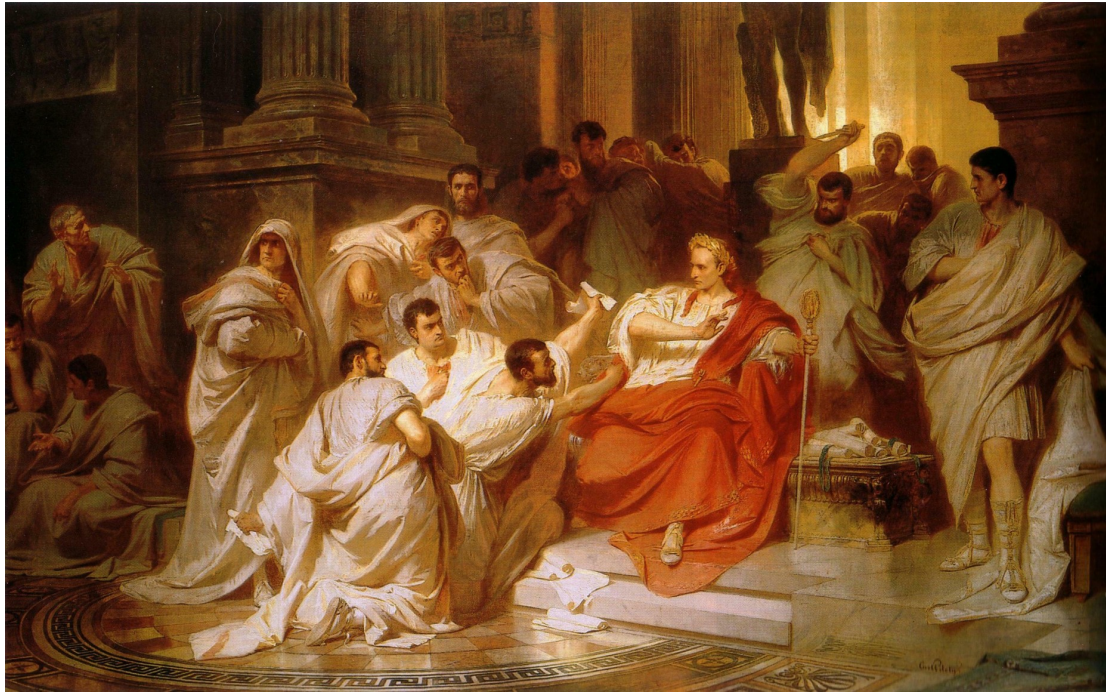
Simon & Schuster, 352 pages, \$27.00



Richard J.a. Talbert

Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World

Princeton University Press, 272 pages, \$395.00



Karl Theodor von Piloty, *The Murder of Caesar* (1865), oil on canvas

“No country was ever saved by good men,” Horace Walpole once observed, “because good men will not go to the length that may be necessary.”

I thought often of Walpole’s remark while reading Barry Strauss’s thrilling account of the assassination of Julius Caesar, which is full of robust men going to incarnadine lengths.¹

“Thrilling” might seem hyperbolic for a serious work of history, which *The Death of Caesar* certainly is. But Barry Strauss is one of those rare academic historians—Victor Davis Hanson is another—who can make stories about the classical world seem as vivid as a fast-paced mystery novel. He did it a decade ago in his book about the naval battle of Salamis (480 BC), which, as his subtitle put it, saved not only Greece but also Western civilization. How different the world would have been if the Persians had won that engagement! He did it in his account of the Trojan War. And he did it most recently in *Masters of Command*, which compares the leadership qualities of Alexander the Great, Hannibal, and Julius Caesar.

Strauss continues the winning streak in his new book. Was the murder of Julius Caesar really “history’s most famous assassination”? Probably. You, Dear Reader, know all about the Ides of March. You know about “*et tu, Brute*,” the bad dreams of Caesar’s wife Calpurnia the night of March 14, and the soothsayer warning Caesar to beware. Amazing, isn’t it? You know quite a lot about what happened that fateful day around noon in 44 BC, more than two millennia past.

Doubtless a lot of what you know comes from Shakespeare’s play *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. Like Barry Strauss, Shakespeare knew how to tell a good story. Unlike Strauss, however, Shakespeare was not writing history, and his deployment of poetic license abounds. Caesar did not say “*et tu, Brute*.” Mark Antony, when he addressed the Roman people a day or two after Caesar’s death, did

not begin: "Friends, Romans, countrymen." And the other Brutus, Caesar's close friend and protégé Decimus (whom Shakespeare calls Decius), played a much greater role in the conspiracy than in Shakespeare's play.

Shakespeare got most of his details about the assassination from Plutarch (an English translation, based on a sixteenth-century French version of Plutarch's Greek original, was published in 1579). Plutarch himself (45–120 AD) wrote more than a century after the event. Following Plutarch, Shakespeare makes Marcus Brutus his hero. "This was the noblest Roman of them all," the Bard has Mark Antony say on hearing of Brutus's suicide after the Battle of Philippi in 42 BC.

Maybe. Most of the American Founders thought so, too. Brutus was no doubt a man of parts. He read philosophy. He hailed from an ancient family (he liked to boast that he descended from the Brutus who, in 509 BC, sent packing Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, Rome's hated last king, after his son raped Lucretia). And yet, as Barry Strauss shows, Brutus, like many Romans in the late Republic, was prepared to go to whatever length necessary not only to save his country but also to preserve his self-interest. Because of Shakespeare, Strauss observes, Brutus is "one of history's most misunderstood characters." Shakespeare presents him as a model of Republican virtue. Ancient sources paint a darker, more complicated picture. Brutus was courageous, yes, public-spirited, no doubt, but also "calculating, ungrateful, and ruthless." Tidbit: About a decade before Philippi, when he was lieutenant governor in Cyprus, Brutus lent money to some people in one city at 48 percent per annum, four times the legal limit. When they refused to pay, he had the town councilmen locked in their council house until five of them starved. You see what Horace Walpole meant about going to the length necessary.

One of the great ironies surrounding the assassination of Julius Caesar is that, for all of the upheaval it occasioned, it failed utterly in its stated purpose. The conspirators sought to overthrow a dictator and restore the Republic. "The Republic," "the Republic," "the Republic": that was the phrase they uttered *ad nauseam*. But the Roman Republic, devised to govern a city state, was overwhelmed by the cosmopolitan responsibilities of empire. By Caesar's day, the Republic was a tottering and deeply corrupt edifice. As Caesar himself put it, cynically but not inaccurately, "The Republic is nothing, merely a name without body or shape." By killing Caesar, the conspirators merely hastened the Republic's collapse. Strauss quotes Emerson (who wasn't wrong about everything): "When you strike at a king, you must kill him." The assassins thought that by killing Caesar they had killed tyranny. They hadn't. Removing Caesar did nothing to remove Caesarism, i.e., absolute rule by one man, which, as Strauss points out, emerged from the bloodbath of the Ides of March unscathed. "The world without Caesar," he notes, "was still a world about Caesar."

The *Death of Caesar* opens in August of 45 BC with Caesar returning to Italy victorious after the Battle of Munda, near modern-day Seville. (Philippi, Munda, Pharsalus, Brundisium, etc., etc. Unless you're an expert, it's hard to visualize where all these ancient places are. An indispensable aid is the *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*.² Exhaustively researched, meticulously rendered, these large-format maps of the ancient world are without peer.) As the Duke of

Wellington said of Waterloo, Munda was a near-run thing. Caesar had to fight for his life right in the scrum of battle. But in the end he won in a rout. And with that victory, Caesar brought to an end the bloody civil war he had ignited in January 49 BC (November 50 by our calendar) when he crossed the Rubicon, the border between Cisalpine Gaul and Italy, with just one legion, the XIII, probably about 4,000 men. In the preceding decade, Caesar had subdued all Gaul (which, as everyone knows, is divided into three parts . . .) and in so doing made himself one of the richest and most powerful men in Rome. Data point: one of Caesar's many mistresses was Servilia Caepionis, one of the most powerful women in Rome. She was not only the mother of Marcus Brutus by her first husband but also the mother-in-law of the conspirator Cassius and half-sister of Caesar's enemy Cato. Still, there is no evidence that she knew about the plot. Most of Caesar's affairs—he seems to have gone in especially, though not exclusively, for married women—were short-lived escapades. His relationship with Servilia lasted on and off for decades. Caesar once gave her a black pearl costing 6 million sesterces, which, Barry Strauss calculates, was about 7,000 times the annual wage of the legionaries he led.

The spectacle of Caesar's wealth and power, not least his control of many fanatically loyal legions in Gaul, was duly noted by his many rivals and enemies in the Roman Senate. Roman politics by the late Republic was a contest between two factions, the "optimates" or "best men," wealthy aristocrats who had traditionally controlled the Senate, and the "populares," who favored the people's assemblies. These were not political parties but nodes of interest that Romans on their way up the career ladder catered to. Caesar, though he hailed from a minor patrician family, relied on and exploited the latter. He came by it naturally. His uncle, Gaius Marius (167–86 BC), the ambitious general and statesman who modernized the Roman army and opened it to landless citizens, was a vigorous proponent of the cause of the populares. He was also ruthless in suppressing his political enemies. On the other side was his younger rival, Lucius Sulla (138–78 BC), the general who revived the old institution of dictatorship and then set about purging his political enemies even more thoroughly than Marius had. The young Caesar barely escaped his wrath. "There's many a Marius," Sulla mused, "in Caesar."

Between them, Marius and Sulla trampled on laws and conventions that had ruled the Roman Republic for centuries. It was illegal for a general to bring armed troops into the city proper. First Marius and then Sulla flouted this law and deployed their legions as a vigilante force, slaughtering their political opposition in Rome. They displayed the heads of their enemies, real and imagined, on the Rostra in the Forum, bloody reminders of the wages of civil war and an important marker in the dissolution of the Republic.

By the time Caesar entered politics, an uneasy order had been restored, but the rivalry between the optimates and the populares was still going strong. When Caesar's term in Gaul ended in 50 BC, the Senate ordered him to leave his armies and return to Rome. Caesar faced a difficult decision. If he returned to Rome unarmed, he knew he would almost certainly face prosecution for various torts, real and fabricated. Would he do as the Senate demanded? Or would he brazen it out?

You know the answer. As always, Caesar brazened it out. But by bringing an army into Italy proper he violated the law. War was inevitable. *Alea*, as Caesar may or may not have said when he crossed the Rubicon, *iacta est*: the die is cast.

Born in 106 BC, Gnaeus Pompey was six years older than Caesar. His many youthful military successes—among other things, he rid the Mediterranean of pirates—earned him untrammelled popularity and the official nickname “Pompey the Great.” By lineage and conviction, Pompey was one of the optimates. But in 61 BC Pompey’s ambition led him into an alliance with Caesar and the immensely rich Marcus Crassus. This was the unofficial union known as the “First Triumvirate.” As always, Caesar was a busy man. He seduced both Mucia, Pompey’s third wife, and Tertulla, the wife of Crassus. If there were hard feelings, political expediency overcame them. Pompey divorced Mucia and, in 59, the year of Caesar’s consulship, married Julia, Caesar’s daughter. In some ways, Roman family life was as pliant as our own. Pompey, six years Caesar’s elder, thus became his rival’s son-in-law. Such arrangements might seem merely calculating, but they were not necessarily devoid of affection. Pompey was besotted with his bride, and the marriage helped to cement the new political union. But Julia died in childbirth in 54 and Pompey’s allegiance began to waver. Then Crassus, the third *vir* of the Triumvirate, blotted his copy book (and assured his own death) at the disastrous battle of Carrhae (in modern Turkey) in 53 BC, perhaps the biggest Roman defeat since Hannibal crushed the Roman army at Cannae in 216 BC. After Julia’s death, Caesar had offered Pompey the hand of his grandniece Octavia, sister of Octavius, the future Augustus. He refused. In 52, when he was also consul (Rome’s chief magistrate), Pompey instead married Cornelia Metella, the young widow of Crassus’s son Publius and daughter of Caecilius Metellus Scipio, another bitter enemy of Caesar. Now Pompey and much of the Roman old guard turned decisively against an ever more formidable Caesar. In 49, faced with Caesar’s growing army bearing down upon Rome, Pompey and most of the Senate fled the city, regrouped at Brundisium, down at Italy’s heel on the coast, and then made their way across the Adriatic to Epirus.

Caesar followed and picked off his opponents one by one. He shocked everyone by defeating the much larger army of Pompey at Pharsalus (in central Greece) in 48. He went on to Alexandria where he joined forces, and much else, with Cleopatra, producing a son familiarly known as Caesarion. Almost as an afterthought, Caesar defeated Pharnaces II at Zela (in Turkey) in 47. That campaign was concluded with such dispatch that Caesar could write to a friend in Rome the immortal words “*Veni, Vidi, Vici.*” It was his usual procedure. He cornered the hectoring Cato (not he of “*Carthago delenda est*” but his great-grandson) at Utica (in Northern Africa) in 46, whereupon Cato committed suicide, robbing Caesar of an opportunity for magnanimity.

Caesar could be cruel. Once, he ordered the hands of rebels in Gaul cut off and the appendages distributed across the country as a warning to others. Think again of Horace Walpole’s melancholy observation about good men not going “to the length that may be necessary.” But unlike Marius and Sulla, who executed their enemies wholesale, or Crassus and

Pompey, who seemed to delight in wanton cruelty, Caesar cultivated a reputation for clemency towards those he defeated—provided they didn't cross him a second time. In some respects, it is worth noting, the clemency was merely relative. When Crassus finally managed to crush the slave rebellion of Spartacus in 71 BC, he ordered that six thousand slaves he had captured be crucified in regular intervals along the Via Appia from Capua to the gates of Rome. He also ordered that the bodies of the unfortunate victims not be taken down but be left to rot as a grisly object lesson to others who might be contemplating rebellion. Six thousand rotting corpses along the main road leading south from Rome. No doubt it was a sobering sight. Contrast Caesar's behavior. When he was still in his early twenties, he was captured by some pirates as he crossed the Aegean Sea. They held him for ransom and were amused by the jocular arrogance of their young patrician charge. He joined in their games. He claimed to be insulted that they had asked for only twenty talents for his release and demanded they increase it to fifty. And he promised that one day he would return and have them all crucified. The fifty talents were duly paid, Caesar was released, and he soon managed to raise a fleet and capture his former captors. He did have them crucified, but had their throats slit first, sparing them a long, agonizing death.

That was a sort of clemency, I suppose. But Caesar's calculated clemency often went much further. He was bitterly disappointed when Pompey, having fled Pharsalus, was murdered by agents of the Egyptian king. What a publicity coup it would have been to welcome the great Pompey back into the Caesarian fold as an ally! It was, perhaps, an enlightened policy. Caesar believed it was cunning. He thought forgiveness a reliable prelude to cooptation. He didn't bargain on its being also a goad to resentment. Ironically, as the historian Nicholas of Damascus observed about fifty years after the assassination, "Many people were angry with Caesar because they had been saved by him." For one thing, those spared might well take preferments that loyalists coveted, a recipe for dissension. For another, clemency was a demonstration of superiority, always a bitter draught for the proud. Marcus Brutus, for example, was one who had fought for Pompey at Pharsalus but had been forgiven by Caesar. He lived on to stab another day. It was a contingency duly noted by Caesar's successors. They didn't make the same mistake.

After Munda, where Caesar defeated forces led by one of Pompey's sons, Caesar's army marched into Mediolanum (modern Milan). The lead chariot carried Caesar and his wily and talented lieutenant Mark Antony. In the next chariot rode the able general Decimus Brutus and a sickly but ambitious seventeen-year-old named Gaius Octavius, the son of Atia Secunda, a daughter of Caesar's beloved sister Julia.

Caesar had clearly grown fond of his grandnephew. Though never robust, Octavius was, as Strauss puts it in one of his many gem-like character summaries, "brilliant, shrewd, ambitious, audacious, and utterly ruthless, and so a man after Caesar's heart." The pampered boy first came to the world's attention at the age of twelve when he delivered the funeral oration for his grandmother, Caesar's sister, Julia. His pluck, if not his martial ability, impressed Caesar during the campaign in Hispania. After returning to Italy, Caesar first repaired for several weeks to his villa near Labici,

south of Rome, to rest and think about the future. When he finally returned to Rome in October 45, he celebrated a triumph—an official, state-sanctioned procession to commemorate a notable military victory. This was Caesar's fifth triumph—most generals got one at most—and like some of his earlier triumphs it was provocative because it commemorated not Rome's victory over its enemies but the wages of civil war. When Caesar returned to Rome, he also deposited a revised will with the Vestal Virgins, who looked after such things. The new testament, as all Rome would discover in March when Antony presided over its reading at his house, adopted Octavius posthumously as his son (whereupon historians start calling him "Octavian") and bequeathed to him three-quarters of Caesar's enormous fortune. Decimus Brutus was also named in the will as a secondary legatee.

It is almost impossible to take the measure of Caesar. Adrian Goldsworthy's excellent 2006 biography bears the subtitle "Life of a Colossus." That's about it. Caesar is too big to take in, to sum up. He exceeds our grasp. He was, as Strauss says, "both genius and demon, excelling at politics, war, and writing—a triple crown that no one has ever worn as well."

Alexander Hamilton once told Jefferson that Caesar was "the greatest man who ever lived." Hamilton might have been tweaking his humorless rival. He knew that his own political opponents often compared him to Caesar, and deep down he probably shared their suspicion, not to say their loathing, of the dictator. But everyone acknowledged Caesar's military genius. He was a master strategist whose tactics are still studied by generals. In Gaul, through the instrumentality of his legions, he killed or enslaved hundreds of thousands, maybe millions. Yet he brought stability and a semblance of the rule of law to those rude provinces. He greatly enriched himself at the expense of those he conquered. Yet he also greatly reformed provincial governance, sharply limiting the extent of "gifts" a Roman governor could (legally) help himself to.

By all accounts, he was a brilliant orator, deft politician, witty companion, insatiable womanizer, and passionate champion of the common man against the entrenched interests of the oligarchical senatorial class. "To the urban plebs," Strauss writes, "he brought handouts, entertainment, and debt relief—but not enough to hurt the wealthy. To his supporters in the provinces he brought Roman citizenship. To leading Roman knights he opened up public offices and seats in the Senate." Above all, perhaps, Caesar was an unstoppable egotist whose charm made him the busy point around which the world turned. Caesar would not have been surprised that the twentieth century opened with a Kaiser at the head of the German state and a Tsar at the head of Russia: the title "Caesar" reverberated in many languages for millennia. Cicero grumbled that Caesar was vain and complained that he spent too much time on his hair style. Ancient sources confirm that Caesar was a bit of a dandy in his dress and attention to personal grooming. But even Cicero, epitome of the optimates who opposed Caesar, acknowledged that he personified "talent, strategy, memory, literature, prudence, meticulousness, reasoning, and hard work."

Posterity continues to emphasize the military prowess. But there was so much more. *Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres*: it was not so long ago that every schoolboy got outside that lapidary

prose early in his studies. Caesar's commentary on the war in Gaul is a literary classic, overfull, perhaps, of *fossae*, *gladii*, and *sagittae*, but a model of clarity and narrative economy. Caesar was greatly interested in the mechanics of Latin, for he understood that the power of language was an able adjunct to political power. Against the baroque style of the senatorial class, Caesar favored a Latin that was direct and to the point. In this respect, Caesar was the George Orwell of his day. "Good prose," said Orwell, "is like a windowpane." Caesar would have agreed. His book *De Analogia* (mostly lost) laid out a vision of Latin that put a premium on precise diction and clarity of expression. (Another tidbit: it was Caesar who coined the term "ablative" — *casus ablativus* — to name that workhorse of Latin inflection.) Cicero, no fan of the overweening Caesar, minuted his style exactly. The language of the *Commentaries*, he wrote in 46 BC, was "admirable indeed . . . like naked forms, upright and beautiful, pared of all ornamentation as if they had removed a robe."

Caesar was interested in—well, just about everything. The traditional Roman calendar was based on a lunar schema of 354 days. Every now and then the Romans would add a few days in an effort to catch up, but by Caesar's time the calendar was badly out of sync. Caesar's revised calendar (the idea for which he may have got from astronomers in Egypt) was based on a solar circuit of 365 days, plus a leap year every three years (that was adjusted under Augustus to every four years). The new calendar went into effect on January 1, 45 BC and, with a couple of modest changes in the frequency of leap years, the Julian calendar has been the world's date-keeper ever since. (We call it "Gregorian" now because in 1582 Pope Gregory saw that the Julian calendar introduced an error of 1 day every 128 years.)

Augustus famously said that he found Rome a city of brick but left it a city of marble. But Caesar also contributed a huge amount of impressive building: Caesar's gardens, Caesar's forum, and many other projects to glorify Rome and, of course, the name of Caesar.

I have always been slightly puzzled about what exactly Caesar did to rouse the murderous fury of men, many of whom, after all, had been loyal supporters and, in some cases, friends. Yes, Caesar had had himself named dictator, but Rome had had plenty of dictators. True, the emergency office was supposed to be limited to six months and Caesar had that modified to "dictator in perpetuity." That raised eyebrows, as did his posthumous "deification" by the Senate. Yet I suspect that Adrian Goldsworthy was right when he observed that "it was not so much what Caesar was doing as the way he was doing it that bred discontent amongst the aristocracy." And, remember, the conspiracy against Caesar was largely an aristocratic coup, not a popular uprising. There had been some grumbling about Caesar's recent triumphs: were these not celebrations of one group of Romans killing other Romans? A proper triumph should celebrate Roman victory over foreigners, not fellow citizens. But for the most part, the people adulated Caesar.

In his *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, Edmund Burke, writing about the court of George III, noted with pointed understatement that "It was soon discovered that the forms of a free, and the ends of an arbitrary Government, were things not altogether incompatible." It is a phenomenon that we conjure with to this day. We have elections. We have institutions whose

prerogatives are supposedly limited by law. But to what extent does the American Republic circa 2015 live up to the ideals of limited government envisioned by the Founders?

Caesar did understand the importance of maintaining the outward forms of republican government even as he exercised autocratic rule. But he was not nearly as adroit in maintaining that sham—er, that public appearance—as Augustus would be when he assumed power. Patience was not conspicuous in Caesar's character. As is so often the case in political life, it was the small things that sealed his fate. Following the historian Livy (who died in 17 AD), Barry Strauss lists three "last straws." The first happened in December 45 or January 44 BC. The Senate had voted Caesar another round of honors. When a deputation of Senators came to present him with the news, Caesar did not stand to receive them. Why he omitted this sign of respect is a matter of speculation; offense may not have been intended, but grave offense was taken.

The second happened in January 44 when a person or persons unknown crowned a public statue of Caesar with a diadem, a hated symbol of kingship. Caesar suspected a put-up job. A short while later, Caesar was returning to Rome on horseback and someone from the crowd hailed him as "Rex," "King." Caesar replied, "I am not Rex but Caesar," a witty remark because, as Strauss points out, "Rex" was a family name as well as a royal title (in fact, Caesar's ancestors included Rexes). But two of the people's tribunes who heard the exchange were not amused and had the person who thus addressed Caesar arrested. An infuriated Caesar had the tribunes removed from office. This caused bad feelings all around, especially among the people who felt protective of the tribunes who represented their interests.

The third episode occurred in February during the annual Roman fertility festival of Lupercalia. At the conclusion of the festivities, Mark Antony climbed up on the Speaker's Platform where Caesar was sitting and placed a diadem on Caesar's head saying, "The People give this to you through me." The response from the multitude was not encouraging. Caesar removed the diadem. Antony tried twice more and was met with the same tepid response. Caesar then ordered the diadem taken to the Capitoline Temple, declaring "Jupiter alone of the Romans is King." It was the politic thing to do. But many felt that Caesar's public refusal of the crown was a sort of litotes: affirming something by denying its opposite.

By February 44, the atmosphere in Rome was yeasty. Caesar had many supporters, but his increasingly cavalier, not to say disdainful, behavior provoked irritation and worse. Some say that Caesar was weary. Physically, his long years on the campaign trail had taken a toll. His face was lined, his hair receding. He was fifty-five, may have suffered from epilepsy, and often observed that he had "lived long enough for nature or glory." Why should he be punctilious about convention? The fact that Caesar had Cleopatra and his illegitimate son installed in his palace across the Tiber sparked resentment as well as gossip: who was this exotic specimen? Why was she in Rome? What about the offspring?

Strauss speculates that the plot to murder Caesar did not really jell until February. All told, there were about sixty people in on the plan, though only a dozen or so wielded daggers on the Ides of March. At the innermost center of the conspiracy were Decimus Brutus, the one really close friend of Caesar's among the conspirators (Strauss calls him "the key"), Marcus Brutus, and Cassius: "Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look," Shakespeare has Caesar muse. "He thinks too much; such men are dangerous." The conspirators debated where and how to kill the dictator. Should they poison him? Ambush him with hired thugs on the Appian Way? Attack him in a public place? And should they also compass the death of Mark Antony, his second in command and most powerful puppet?

It was Marcus Brutus who was most strenuous in his opposition to killing Antony—this was meant to be a blameless act of liberation, not a grubby *coup d'état*. He carried the point, though he would come to rue the shrewd, capable, and ruthless Antony's survival. The conspirators knew that they had to act quickly. For one thing, secrets were hard to keep. With dozens of people in on the plot, news of the conspiracy was sure to leak out. Already, rumors were rife. For another, Caesar was set to leave Rome almost immediately, on March 18, to lead a longed-planned invasion of Parthia (which overlaps with modern Iran). Octavius was already across the Adriatic training and assembling troops. If Caesar embarked for Parthia, he would be gone for years. And if he succeeded in conquering it—and who could doubt the likelihood of that?—would anyone be able to check his kingly ambitions?

In the end, the conspirators decided to kill Caesar at the Senate meeting scheduled for the morning of March 15. Caesar had lately dismissed his personal bodyguard of Spanish soldiers and would be accompanied only by a handful of lictors, ceremonial attendants. The meeting, by the way, was not in the Senate House near the Capitoline Hill, as in Shakespeare, but just west of the city proper in the portico of the splendid temple complex that Pompey had built twenty years earlier in the Field of Mars.

The night before, Caesar went to a dinner party at the house of Marcus Lepidus, his "Master of the Horse," i.e., his second in command, that year. Lepidus, who was married to a half-sister of Marcus Brutus (Cassius was married to another), was a loyal Caesarian who went on to join Octavian and Antony in the Second Triumvirate. Decimus Brutus was another guest. It seems too good to be true, but apparently it *is* true that a prominent subject of discussion over dinner was: What is the best sort of death? According to Plutarch, Caesar said "unexpected." The historian Appian (90–160 AD) has him say "sudden;" Suetonius (ca. 69–122 AD) says "sudden and unexpected." You wonder what Decimus Brutus thought.

Rome rose early. Caesar was up around dawn on the Ides of March. The night had been stormy. Calpurnia had suffered ominous dreams. Some speculate that Caesar was unwell, possibly having suffered an epileptic seizure during the night. On top of that, the omens divined by Spurinna, Caesar's personal soothsayer, were bad. On the feast of Lupercalia, February 13, Spurinna had warned Caesar that the next thirty days were dangerous. On the morning of the Ides of March,

Caesar observed to Spurinna that thirty days had come. "Yes, Caesar," the soothsayer is said to have replied, "but not gone."

At the behest of Calpurnia, and possibly because he was feeling woozy from the aftermath of a seizure, Caesar decided to stay home and miss the Senate meeting. The conspirators dispatched Decimus to change his mind. The two men walked and talked in Caesar's gardens. It's anyone's guess what Decimus said to change Caesar's mind. Perhaps he admonished him not to let his actions be ruled by a woman. Perhaps he pointed out that the Senate would be offended: Caesar was sensitive on that point. Whatever his arguments, he prevailed and led Caesar out by the hand to his fate.

Republican Rome had no police force (although Caesar was in the process of forming one); it had personal vigilantes in the form of hired gladiators. Decimus installed fifty to one hundred of his gladiators around the Portico of Pompey as a precaution. Caesar arrived at about 11:30. Some sources tell us he was approached by people who tried to warn him of the plot. One Artemidorus of Cnidus, it is said, put a scroll in Caesar's hands and urged him to read it himself without delay. One of the conspirators, Trebonius, was sent to intercept and chat up the formidable Mark Antony to keep him from taking his place next to Caesar on the dais.

About two hundred Senators, including Cicero, were present, along with assorted tribunes, secretaries, and slaves. A dozen or so conspirators, daggers secreted under their togas or in document cases, clustered around Caesar as he ascended the platform and sat down on his golden chair. Strauss is very informative about those daggers. They were Roman military daggers—*pugiones*. "In construction," he writes, the *pugio* "exemplifies efficiency. The blade was iron . . . six to eight inches long and about two inches wide," just right for stabbing through the human chest, which, on average, is about six to eight inches deep. As arranged, Lucius Cimber took hold of Caesar's toga so tightly that the dictator couldn't rise. "Why, this is violence!" Suetonius has Caesar say. Cimber then pulled Caesar's toga from his shoulders, the sign for attack. It was a melee. Several of the conspirators were themselves injured, including Marcus Brutus, who suffered a stab wound in the hand. Publius Servilius Casca is said to have struck the first, glancing blow against Caesar. The suddenness of the attack stunned the Senate. Only two of Caesar's friends attempted to intervene. At first, Caesar fought back, but then, overwhelmed, he fell and pulled his toga over his face. It was all over in minutes. Julius Caesar lay lifeless in a pool of blood at the foot of a majestic statue of his great rival Pompey.

No fewer than eight ancient sources tell us that Caesar's body had received twenty-three stab wounds. According to a doctor called Antistius, who examined the body, only the second wound, struck by Gaius Casca (Publius's brother), was fatal.

Strauss devotes fully half his book to the long aftermath of the assassination, taking the reader from the vacillating allegiance of Mark Antony to the ascension of Octavian as *primus inter pares* and, eventually, *primus* without equal as the new deified Caesar, Augustus (the word means

“revered”). At first, exaltation gripped the conspirators and their sympathizers. Cicero, though not in on the plot, was delighted. “Congratulations!” he wrote to one of the conspirators. To Decimus he enthused: “Has anything greater ever been done?” The other Brutus told the shocked crowd outside that they had not committed murder but killed a tyrant. He and the other conspirators, joined by Decimus’s gladiators, paraded through the Forum and up to an easily defended redoubt on the Capitoline Hill.

In the coming days, Antony emerged as the man to conjure with. On March 17, he had the Senate proclaim amnesty for the conspirators but also affirm Caesar’s acts, which meant that scheduled state appointments and preferments would go forward. Brutus emerged to denounce Caesar, comparing him to the brutal dictator Sulla, who had terrorized Rome with his proscriptions nearly forty years earlier. On March 20 came the reading of Caesar’s will and his state funeral, two things that Brutus tried and failed to forestall. Standing by Caesar’s torn and bloody toga, hoisted aloft for all to see, Antony told the people of Rome what Caesar had done for them. All citizens were to receive a cash bonus of 300 sesterces. Caesar’s gardens were to become a public park. “He hath,” as Shakespeare put it,

left you all his walks,
His private arbours, and new-planted orchards,
On this side Tiber; he hath left them you,
And to your heirs for ever: common pleasures,
To walk abroad and recreate yourselves.
Here was a Caesar! When comes such another?

By the time Antony was done, the populace was baying for the conspirators’ blood. Decimus Brutus was, Strauss writes, “the most hated man in Rome.” Was he not Caesar’s trusted lieutenant? Had he not dined with Caesar the night before his murder? Did he not lead Caesar by the hand to his doom and then protect the assassins with his gladiators? And had Caesar not mentioned him by name in his will?

Caesar’s funeral was a huge spectacle that ended in a riot. The poet Helvius Cinna, a people’s tribune, was a supporter of Caesar, but the crowd mistook him for the praetor Cornelius Cinna, one of the conspirators. They beat him to death and decapitated him, parading the head through the street.

There is a twofold moral to *The Death of Caesar*. One concerns the military. Like Marius and Sulla before him, Caesar was able to control Rome because he controlled the army. His legions were loyal first of all to him, not to Rome. The conspirators sought to overturn that dominance of the military in civic affairs but failed—because they did not dominate the military. Strauss notes the irony that “only the legions could save the Republic from being run by legions.”

The second moral is this: revolutions are impossible to manage. The announced goals of the conspirators were moderate: to remove a dictator and restore the prerogatives of the Senate. But revolutions, as Strauss mordantly observes, are hard on moderates. Within a year, Octavian and Antony had effective control of Rome. They cancelled the amnesty for the conspirators. Then the proscriptions began anew. Property was summarily confiscated and heads rolled, including Cicero's. In December 43, the great orator was apprehended in his villa in Astura, on the coast south of Rome, while trying to escape to Macedonia to meet up with Brutus and Cassius. We know the name of the centurion who nabbed him: Herennius. When Cicero saw the soldier approaching his litter, he stopped, told him to get on with the job, and bravely stretched out his neck. Herennius slit his throat, struck off his head, and, on Antony's orders, cut off his hands. The gory trophies he sent back to Rome. The oft-told story that Fulvia, Antony's wife, set Cicero's head on her knees and repeatedly stabbed his tongue with a hairpin may be apocryphal, but then again it may not. We do know that Cicero's head and right hand, which had penned the hated Philippics denouncing Antony, were nailed to the Speakers' Platform in the Forum.

Cicero thought the Republic could be restored. He was wrong. The Roman Republic was a political mechanism that had outlived itself. Removing Caesar brought not restoration but revolution, followed by civil war and the resurgent dominance of Caesarism.

The events that Barry Strauss chronicles took place more than two thousand years ago. But their significance continues to resonate, if only we have ears to listen. Toward the end of *The Death of Caesar*, Strauss quotes my favorite line from Lampedusa's great novel *The Leopard*: "If we want things to stay the same, a lot of things are going to have to change." The Roman Republic had to change if it was going to endure. That insight escaped the wit of the conspirators and their allies. A look at the world today suggests that this is a paradox we neglect at our peril.

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