Pragmatism and Pride Before the Fall:

Julius Caesar and the Roman Triumph

The roaring crowds. The jubilating soldiers. The intoxicating honor of being ranked among the divine. These sensations marked the Roman triumphal procession as the peak of military accomplishment for Roman generals. With a history dating back to Rome’s legendary founding, the triumph gave military leaders a chance to celebrate their victory and power in an ostentatious spectacle. This procession into the city included the prisoners of war, the spoils of conquest, and the rejoicing soldiers of the campaign. What made the triumph unique, however, was that it provided the only time Roman generals could enter the city as the leader of an army – at all other times such an act would be considered an instigation of civil war. Thus, the Roman triumph provided a singular opportunity that all military leaders desired. Yet, in 60 BC Julius Caesar decided to turn down the triumph granted to him after a successful propraetorship in Hispania. The elections for the consulship were held at the same time, and the Senate did not allow a general to celebrate a triumph and run for the consulship simultaneously. Julius Caesar chose to run for the consulship – and won. While his military might is unquestioned, Julius Caesar’s decision to pass up his triumph in 60 BC represented an unexpected departure from the norm, marked a vital turning point in his rise to power, and contrasted harshly with the questionable triumphs he celebrated toward the end of his life, ultimately demonstrating that Julius Caesar wisely chose to forgo his triumph in 60 BC and made the mistake of celebrating later triumphs, which contributed to his peers’ resentment and his hubristic fall.

While the triumph itself has distant mythical origins and does not come with a written set of rules, the general outline of the tradition is known. The triumph represented the celebration for a Roman general who had conquered a foreign foe. The celebration lasted for
“a whole day, sometimes for many days” and included “captured armaments” among other things.\(^1\) The victor himself “was crowned with a laurel wreath and wore a purple tunic embroidered with palms under a purple toga.”\(^2\) The grandeur of this celebration not only showcased the success of the returning general, but, as Versnel states, “the triumphator himself has a status which appears to raise him to the rank of the gods.”\(^3\) By celebrating a triumph, a victorious general seemingly became divine for a day. Such an honor, among the already copious grandeur and loot involved, made the triumph Rome’s highest military honor.

The Roman triumph’s history dates back to the legendary founder of Rome, Romulus. The *Fasti Triumphales* document all the Roman triumphs from that of Romulus in 752 BC down to the reign of Augustus in 12 BC.\(^4\) This long history, containing dozens of various occurrences over the period, shows that triumphs had a long history in Rome. The *Fasti*, however, were compiled at the end of the first century BC, meaning that the early entries should be viewed as mythical but can nevertheless be taken as evidence of the ancient Roman view that the triumph had existed as long as the city itself. The frequency of triumphs throughout Rome’s long history, however, points to their normalization among the population. By the time of Julius Caesar, triumphs had been well established in their age and frequency as the pinnacle of military honor. The Roman triumphs, however, did change over time. While at first simple celebrations resulting from victory over enemies, triumphs soon became remarkably ostentatious, leading some to label them hubristic, as we will see below.\(^5\) By the time of Julius

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\(^2\) Ibid, 13.
Caesar, the Roman triumph had evolved from a simple homecoming after war into a highly political display of power.

The first Roman triumph, certainly more legend than history, was celebrated by Romulus and came about seemingly as the return of a successful general. Dionysius, writing in the first century AD, describes how Romulus “led his army home, carrying with him the spoils of those who had been slain … Such was the victorious procession, marked by the carrying of trophies and concluding with a sacrifice, which the Romans call a triumph.” After a successful battle against the nearby Antemnates, Romulus was simply returning home with the spoils of war and celebrating the gods with a religious sacrifice. As part of Rome’s legendary history, this episode serves as a convenient origin story for a military tradition. Dionysius continues his narrative, however, by commenting that “in our day the triumph had become a very costly and ostentatious pageant, being attended with the theatrical pomp that is designed rather as a display of wealth than as an approbation of valor, and it has departed in every respect from its ancient simplicity.” Referring back to the first triumph of Romulus, Dionysius notes that the triumph began in “simplicity,” only to grow more and more flashy as time went on. Writing in the first century AD, Dionysius certainly saw that the Roman state had become obsessed with money - showy public festivals, crowd-pleasing gladiator fights, and grandiose buildings commonly allowing the powerful to demonstrate incredible strength.

Well before the time of Julius Caesar, triumphs had already reached the crescendo of ostentation. For instance, Plutarch describes the triumph of Aemilius Paullus in 167 BC. After

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7 Ibid, 409.
defeating Perseus, king of Macedonia, Aemilius Paullus returned to Rome and celebrated his triumph. Plutarch’s description of the magnificence of this enormous triumphal procession takes up a full three pages in the standard translation. In fact, three days were required for the triumph, the first two days consisting of a parade of spoils and the third day including an exhibition of prisoners followed by a march of the victorious army. When Aemilius Paullus appears at the apex of the celebration on the third day, Plutarch reports that “He would have made a remarkable sight even without all these trappings of power; he wore a cloak dyed with purple and shot through with gold, and held in his right hand a spray of laurel … No one could keep their eyes off him; he was an object of universal admiration.” Such a flashy parade through the city of Rome certainly gave successful generals a fabulous spotlight. Such a presentation would have made such men, including Aemilius Paullus, quite popular with the citizens of Rome. After defeating enemies of the state and bringing back enormous wealth to the treasury, Roman generals could make a show of their power in the city during the triumph.

Since the triumph not only had a history harkening back to the foundation of Rome, but also gave the victorious general the unique opportunity of flaunting power and wealth while endearing himself to the people of Rome, Julius Caesar’s decision to pass up his triumph in 60 BC must have surprised his contemporaries. When Julius Caesar returned to Rome from his command in Spain, he faced a dilemma, for, as Plutarch reports, his “return to Rome coincided precisely with the consular elections.” By law, Caesar could not enter the city to declare his

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9 Ibid, 72.
candidacy for the consulship while retaining the *imperium*, or military command, necessary to celebrate his triumph. When he requested permission to run for the office via proxies, Caesar ran into trouble with Cato, whose “initial ploy to combat Caesar’s request was to insist on adherence to the law, but then, when he saw that a lot of the senators were prepared to defer to Caesar, he filibustered and used up the rest of the day with speeches. Caesar therefore decided to forfeit the triumph and go for the consulship.”\(^\text{11}\) Julius Caesar’s enemies assumed that the allure of a triumph would seduce the general’s ego and draw him away from the consular elections. Caesar, however, decided to forgo the triumph, demonstrating his long-term view of the political situation. He decided to run for office instead of celebrating the triumph. Had he celebrated the triumph, he would have shown himself as a glory hound while simultaneously delaying his political future.

While Julius Caesar encountered no issues as a direct result of passing up the triumph (he certainly caused some annoyance later as consul), previous victorious generals had faced harsh criticism for not celebrating triumphs. In 55 BC, Cicero attacked Lucius Calpurnius Piso in his invective *In Pisonem*, claiming it was “the act of a narrow and mean spirit to despise the honor and dignity of a well-earned triumph.”\(^\text{12}\) While Piso may have seen his decision to forgo the triumph as an act of humility, his contemporaries attacked the general for disrupting the status quo. Mary Beard notes that “In Rome no less than other societies, the rejection of such marks of honor might not only signal high-minded disinterest in the insubstantial trinkets of public acclaim; it might also imply disdain for the system of value and priorities that those

\(^{11}\) Ibid, 311.

‘trinkets’ legitimated.”¹³ Thus, by dismissing this public affair, Piso publicly shamed all previous generals who had celebrated a triumph. Versnel takes the argument further by applying the damage to the Roman state itself, stating that “It is fully understandable if it is seen that this victor, by refusing the triumph, deprives the city of the welfare and blessing it entails.”¹⁴ Since the triumph also held a religious importance for the Roman state, the dismissal of a triumph threatened the wellbeing of Rome itself. Caesar’s decision to forgo his triumph, therefore, was not one made lightly.

While Julius Caesar’s decision to pass up his triumph went against the norm, the great strategist did not face criticism for doing so. In fact, Caesar benefitted, since he then proceeded to run for the consulship and win. Robert Payne explains the reasoning, stating “He decided to gamble on the consulship and abandon the triumph. Dion Cassius says he abandoned it because he foresaw that as consul ‘he would be able to distinguish himself by even more numerous and memorable feats enabling him to obtain an even more brilliant triumph.’”¹⁵ Payne therefore highlights what must have been obvious to Caesar’s peers: that his passing up of the dazzling triumph simply made way for a new path to glory via the powerful office of the consulship. Caesar therefore could avoid criticism, as his passing up of the triumph had pragmatic reasons. Payne goes further, claiming that “For Caesar the consulship was only the stepping-stone to the great command which awaited him at the conclusion of his term of office.”¹⁶ Not only was the turning down of his triumph simply a way for Caesar to delay the

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¹⁶ Ibid, 111.
gratification of his victories, the simultaneous decision to run for consul signaled an even greater investment in his future. By passing up his triumph in 60 BC and proceeding to use the consulship, an office that usually represented the apex of a Roman politician’s career, to prepare for even greater achievement, Caesar demonstrated both a powerful self-control and a ravenous appetite for power.

Caesar showed prudence and a willingness to wait during his rise to power. As a result, Caesar achieved the highest political office in Rome: consul. The consulship then led to his governorship of both Cisalpine and Transalpine Gaul, where he defeated various tribes and amassed vast spoils of war. Caesar’s army, too, became a highly effective, experienced, and loyal fighting force. Despite once having a productive relationship with other prominent Romans, namely Crassus and Pompey, Caesar’s ambition soon turned him against his allies.

Thus, after immense foreign conquest, Caesar turned his sights on Rome. Famously crossing the Rubicon in 49 BC after more than a decade of consolidating power and growing his army, Caesar sparked civil war in Rome. Caesar proceeded to spend the next few years chasing his enemies across the Roman world, ultimately defeating Pompey in Greece and his remaining opponents in North Africa.

Upon eliminating the last of his armed opponents, Caesar proceeded to make peace in Rome, offering forgiveness to his enemies. Plutarch recorded the speech Caesar made in 46 BC upon returning to Rome: “when Caesar came back to Rome from Africa, he made a boastful speech to the people concerning his victory.” As Robert Payne notes, “something in his manner suggested that he had other purposes in mind, and when the speech was over it was

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observed that the people were still restless and ill-at-ease, wondering what enormity would be committed upon them next.”18 While Caesar certainly spoke like a leader intent upon preserving peace in the city, later speaking of the prosperity provided by spoils of war, the citizens of Rome nevertheless had legitimate issues with trusting him, as he had brought unprecedented strife to the city. In fact, Appian states that the reported population of the city after the civil wars was “only one half of the number existing before the war.”19 Even if Appian’s numeration misrepresents the actual losses suffered by the city, the citizens of Rome nevertheless had reason to express discomfort and anxiety concerning Julius Caesar, who had just finished a brutal and costly civil war. The discomfort among some of the citizens of Rome laid the groundwork for Caesar’s ultimate demise.

Despite his gestures of peace and amnesty, Julius Caesar’s actions as he moved toward celebrating his triumphs frightened some citizens in the city of Rome. Amid this uncomfortable anxiety following the civil disruption, in 46 BC Caesar “permitted himself four triumphs: ex Gallia, ex Aegypt, ex Ponto, ex Africa ... To make a more striking impression he arranged that the triumphs should follow one another at intervals of a few days.”20 Each of his triumphs held different meanings. The Gallic Wars certainly warranted a triumph, as this conquering of a foreign enemy and amassing of plunder had precedent in Roman military history. The other three triumphs, however, had more dubious foundations since all related to Caesar’s fights against fellow Romans, namely Pompey and his allies.

18 Ibid, 115.
20 Payne (1963), 115.
While Caesar did not explicitly celebrate the defeat of his countrymen, Appian notes the fine line Caesar toed during the presentation of his triumphs, stating that “Although he took care not to inscribe any Roman names in his triumph (as it would have been unseemly in his eyes and base and inauspicious in those of the Roman people to triumph over fellow citizens), yet all these misfortunes were represented ... all except Pompey, whom alone he did not venture to exhibit.”²¹ Appian notes that, while Caesar did not make formal mention of the Romans he had defeated in this civil dispute, he nonetheless depicted their defeats on banners, or panels, including pictures of the suicides of Lucius Scipio, Petreius, and Cato.²² Caesar did attempt to frame his triumphs as victories over foreign enemies, namely Ptolemy XIII in Egypt, Pharnaces II in Pontus, and Juba II in Africa. Yet, the message of his victory over other Romans was clear. Indeed, Robert Payne states that “These panels were intended as a warning to the Romans not to hope for any revival of Pompey’s cause ... Pompey’s former supporters were heard to groan with fear and misery as the procession passed.”²³ Payne describes the banners depicting the defeats and suicides of Caesar’s various enemies, signs that Caesar may have forgiven his remaining enemies but would not hesitate to end their lives for future disloyalty. While Caesar spoke of peace and forgiveness to the people of Rome, he still overtly threatened those who dared oppose him.

Apart from the ominous undertones of Caesar’s triumphs, the grandeur of the festivities signaled both cause for celebration and alarm among the people of Rome. The wealth which Caesar brought into Rome certainly made an impression. Monroe Deutsch reports that “The

²¹ Appian, 415.
²² Ibid, 415.
²³ Payne (1963), 121.
total for the various triumphs amounted, it is said, to 60,500 or 65,000 talents (roughly equivalent to $70,000,000, or more).”\textsuperscript{24} Considering Deutsch wrote in 1926, the 2019 value of these riches is over $1,000,000,000. Such an influx of money, as well the subsequent payments made to soldiers and celebrations shared with citizens, surely gained Caesar much love and support among the masses of Rome. The display of such riches, however, certainly scared some of the more powerful citizens and politicians of Rome, who then began to fear the might of Julius Caesar. These fears and anxieties crescendoed in 44 BC, resulting in Caesar’s assassination.

In addition to inciting anxiety among some citizens in Rome by displaying enormous power in the form of both money and soldiers, Caesar also began exhibiting more callous behavior. Suetonius, writing in the second century AD, reports, among other arrogant acts, that when Caesar “in one of his triumphal processions rode past the benches of the tribunes, he was so incensed because a member of the college, Pontius Aquila, did not rise, that he cried ‘Come then, Aquila, take back the republic from me, you tribune’ ... an insult which so plainly showed his contempt for the Senate.”\textsuperscript{25} While Suetonius wrote long after these events occurred, the fact remains that the Senatorial class at Rome at best started to view Caesar as arrogant - at worst, however, Caesar appeared to be exhibiting symptoms of unchecked pride and growing despotism. Further signs of authoritarian aims appear when Caesar “in 44 B.C. assumes a dictatorship which is not to be limited as to time, in the same year exchanges the toga

praetexta for the purple triumphal robes ... Here we see a king.”26 Beyond taking the role of dictator, Caesar even wore the triumphal robes all the time, demonstrating an arrogant desire to display strength constantly. Living as a god for a day and wearing the triumphal robes during the triumphal procession did not sate Caesar’s thirst for glory – so he unnaturally extended this period of divinity.

Another of Caesar’s transgressions occurred in 44 BC when receiving the Senate at the rostra, a platform in Rome used for public orations. Plutarch’s description of the event explains Caesar’s error: “as the praetors and consuls drew near, with the whole senate following them, he did not rise to receive them ... This vexed not only the senate, but also the people.”27 While Plutarch later goes on to explain that Caesar actually wanted to rise but was convinced not to by an advisor, his actions nevertheless appeared to the Senate as an arrogant display of superiority. As Caesar began to show more and more signs of monarchic aims, some leading citizens formed the conspiracy aiming to end the great general.

Julius Caesar’s pursuit of glory and power brought him into a tricky relationship with triumphs. The Roman triumph, having been celebrated for hundreds of years and cemented as the apex of a Roman military commander’s career, certainly whetted Caesar’s burning desire for glory. When presented with an opportunity to triumph in 60 BC, however, Caesar was forced to pass up the tantalizing opportunity to instead pursue the consulship. Instead of forgoing the triumph as a statement of humility - a statement which had a history of drawing criticism - Caesar’s decision was based upon the pragmatic promise of greater future glory.

26 Versnel (1997), 397.
27 Plutarch, Life of Caesar, 583.
Indeed, Julius Caesar’s consulship of 60 BC would lead to a command in Gaul and his ultimate victory in the civil strife that scarred the 40s BC. By showing such patience, Caesar proved worthy of attaining great heights. Once he had reached the pinnacle of his career, however, Julius Caesar showed his true colors: power-mongering and arrogance. Besides the obvious threat Caesar posed during his triumphs by marching into the city at the command of a powerful army bearing fabulous riches, Caesar added threats aimed at the supporters of Pompey. Julius Caesar continued down this path of arrogance, insulting prominent politicians, wearing triumphal robes all the time, and not standing for the Senate. Caesar showed more and more that his position of supreme power was not compatible with the survival of the Republic. While no single action of Caesar’s sealed his fate, the collection of his arrogant behaviors broke the norms of the Roman political sphere and offered no future for the republican system in Rome. Caesar’s assassins saw no other avenue for maintaining the Republic they sought to uphold. Thus, the same glory and power that motivated Caesar to accomplish amazing feats, demonstrate immense self-control, and triumph over the whole city of Rome doomed him to an inevitable hubristic fall.
References


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