

The American Republic and the Long Shadow of Rome

“Beware the Ides of March!” Thus the soothsayer warned Emperor Julius Caesar on the 15th of March, 44 B.C. On that day, Caesar, who had overturned the Roman republic and made himself a tyrant, was assassinated by a group of Senators, including his friend, Brutus. In the eponymous play by William Shakespeare, the Senators begin to stab Caesar, who tries to resist the assault until he sees Brutus also wielding a knife against him. “Et tu, Brute?” Caesar utters in disbelief before collapsing.

The figure of Brutus—the assassin of the tyrant— cast a long shadow over American history. “Brutus” became the pseudonym of one of the most famous Antifederalist authors (probably Robert Yates of New York), who wrote essays in opposition to the proposed Constitution of 1787, which he believed dangerously consolidated power in the central government. In setting up their own republic, the American Founders looked to the Roman Republic as a model for what they should be and to the Roman Empire embodied by Caesar as a portent of what they feared the republic could become. Americans feared that liberty was fragile and that the republic could be undone by the ambition of one man.

The Framers of the American Constitution were indeed wary of the rise of a Caesar —after all, King George III was in their minds—and designed the presidency with great care in an effort to prevent any abuse of executive power. Under the Articles of Confederation, there had been no executive, no judicial branch. The government consisted of a unicameral legislature, which lacked, among other powers, the authority to tax either the people directly or the states. All that the Congress could do was request money from the states. It was the perceived weakness of this government that sparked the call for the Philadelphia convention of 1787.

The debate about the structure of the executive branch was a source of much contention among the delegates at Philadelphia. At least twelve of the fifty-five wanted the executive power diffused among two or more men. Though a strong executive was considered dangerous by many, there was among other delegates a fear of making the executive too weak. As colonies and now young states, Americans had seen that legislatures could act just as tyrannically as executives. And this was true even of their experience with England. Many—perhaps most—of the American colonists’ complaints in the 1760s and 1770s were directed against Parliament, not the king.

James Madison and another dozen or so delegates at the outset favored a strong executive, which would counteract the “powerful tendency in the Legislature to absorb all power into its vortex.” Of course, the idea of a

single executive carried the day, and Alexander Hamilton defended the convention's decision in Federalist No. 70, citing ancient history in support of his argument against a plural executive. "The Roman history," Hamilton wrote, "records many instances of mischiefs to the republic from the dissensions between the Consuls, and between the military Tribunes, who were at times substituted for the Consuls. But it gives us no specimens of any peculiar advantages derived to the state from the circumstance of the plurality of those magistrates."

Hamilton contended that weak executive leadership in the Roman republic often necessitated the appointment of one man to rule them all. "Every man the least conversant in Roman story," Hamilton wrote, "knows how often that republic was obliged to take refuge in the absolute power of a single man, under the formidable title of Dictator, as well against the intrigues of ambitious individuals who aspired to the tyranny, and the seditions of whole classes of the community whose conduct threatened the existence of all government, as against the invasions of external enemies who menaced the conquest and destruction of Rome."

Hamilton would go on to argue that a single executive was actually a better safeguard of liberty, for he could be watched more closely by the people and could not pass blame for misdeeds of the executive onto others. History proved, Hamilton averred, that tyranny was most often the result of a combination of men, not the actions of a single man.

The Framers put restraints on the president, of course. A two-thirds vote of the Congress overrides a presidential veto; treaties and court appointments require the advice and consent of the Senate; the president can be impeached and removed from office for "high crimes and misdemeanors." To guard against the election of a demagogue, the Electoral College was created, which filtered the "passions" of the people in selecting the chief executive.

Some historians argue that the Philadelphia convention would never have approved the single executive if it were not widely assumed that George Washington would fill that role. Recall that the Constitution at the time did not limit the number of terms that the president could serve, so it was a possibility that Washington might serve for life—such was his popularity. But Washington had already proved that he was no Caesar in laying aside his sword after independence was won; and he did this despite having the temptation to become a despot place right in front of him.

In March of 1783, Washington's army was encamped near Newburgh, New York. The war not yet over, though victory was within reach. Washington's men became restive, as the Continental Congress had not paid them in months. Washington himself had pleaded with Congress over the course of the war, asking for more food, supplies, and men. He must have shared his men's frustration when a letter circulated among the officers calling for a

meeting to discuss a march on Philadelphia to overthrow the government and institute military rule.

Washington learned of the meeting, planned for March 11, forbade it, and then confronted the some 500 mutinous officers at a meeting he called four days later at the Temple of Virtue, a large meeting hall near his Newburgh headquarters. The date of the new meeting, March 15, was significant, as it was that day—the Ides of March—when Brutus killed the tyrant Caesar and preserved the Roman Republic.

At the Temple of Virtue, Washington told his men that he would do everything in his power to make sure that Congress paid the army, and he urged the officers to exercise patience, and assured them of his support, reminding them of their shared sacrifice. Washington chastised the author of the letter advocating a march on Philadelphia, and by implication, those sympathetic to its mutinous plans. Concluding his speech, Washington took from his pocket a letter from Congressman Joseph Jones of Virginia, which promised Washington that the men would be fairly compensated. Washington looked at the congressman's letter, squinted, and then removed a pair of spectacles from his pocket. Only his aides had ever seen him wear these, a sign of unmanliness among soldiers. There was stunned silence in the hall, and Washington paused, looked at his men, and said: "Forgive me, but I have not only grown gray but almost blind in the service of my country." The officers began to weep openly—a sign of manliness in the eighteenth century—and the mutiny was ended then and there. Addison might have penned the scene.

In the scene at Newburgh, Washington conveyed a republican idea rooted in the Ancient world – the idea of self-sacrifice for the common good, which was called "virtue." Virtue—which comes from the Latin *vir*, meaning "man"—was viewed by the Ancients as "the actuating principle" of republics. Now virtue had other shades of meaning, specifically Christian ones. It also entailed the notions of frugality, honesty, humility. To indulge in luxury and "baubles" was seen to be effeminate, the opposite of being republican. Patriot leader Samuel Adams, the archetypal "old republican" who made it a point to dress simply, pined for the creation of a "Christian Sparta" on the American continent.

While the example of Sparta inspired some of the American Founders, the history of Athens troubled them. Athens was a democracy, the Athenian Assembly being made up of every adult male in the city. But Greek democracy often led to demagoguery. For every virtuous Pericles produced by the Athenian assembly there was a conniving Alcibiades. The problem was so great that the custom of ostracism was invented, in which a man deemed dangerous to the city was sent away in permanent exile. Democratic Athens, Americans knew well, executed Socrates and grew into an empire that tyrannized its neighbors.

Americans were, however, influenced quite a bit by one Romanized Greek thinker. They read the Hellenistic historian Polybius' description of the ideal government, which was a mixed one, combining elements of the three general types of government: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy—the rule of the one, the few, and the many. The problem according to Polybius was that these forms inevitably degenerated over time into, respectively, tyranny, oligarchy, and mob rule.

Polybius' ideas were adapted and expounded upon by Roman thinkers, like Livy, Tacitus, Plutarch, and Cicero. It was primarily these Roman authors that fired the American imagination in the attempt to resurrect republicanism. Thomas Jefferson called Tacitus “the first writer in the world without a single exception. His book is a compound of history and morality of which we have no other example.” John Dickinson owned a copy of Tacitus' *Germania* and praised the Roman as “that excellent historian and statesman...whose political reflections are so justly and universally admired.” The challenge for republicanism, according to the Renaissance humanist Niccolo Machiavelli, was to break the cycle of decay that Polybius had identified.

Americans thus turned to the proper structure of society and government as the solution to republican longevity. Republics—whether of the Ancient Greek, Renaissance Italian, or early Roman variety—had traditionally been small in size. It was an axiom that republicanism, if it could work at all, could only work in a relatively small area, where the customs, manners, and habits of the people were uniform. After all, these things are what unites people. James Madison famously addressed this concern in *Federalist 10*. Madison acknowledged that “faction,” defined as a group—whether in the minority or majority—that seeks to oppress the rest of the citizenry for its own benefit, would inevitably arise in republics. The cure, Madison said, was not to destroy liberty by trying to give all the citizens of a republic “the same opinions, the same passions, the same interests,” but rather “to extend the sphere” of the republic—to expand its geographic borders—so as to encompass so many groups of diverse interests that no one can dominate the others. “Extend the sphere,” Madison wrote, “and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other.”

It was this extended republic that was the key to Madison's “new science of politics.” By the time of the writing of the Constitution in 1787, many of the American Framers had moved beyond Samuel Adams' hope for a “Christian Sparta” and had turned against the ancient republican models. Rejecting the ancient idea that virtue was the “actuating principle” of republics, these Framers instead offered a mechanistic approach to the republican conundrum.

A proper construction of society and government—and not of the soul itself—would make the American republican experiment a success. Pointing to the “disorders” that infected the ancient Greek and Roman and Renaissance Italian republics, Alexander Hamilton boasted of the new knowledge of Americans:

