

The Worst Emperor of Ancient Rome: Caligula

During the question-and-answer period after a lecture on ancient Rome, an audience member asked me, "Who would you rank as the Empire's worst Emperor?"

That was a tough one. I deplore concentrated power so I really don't like any of them. Of the grand total of 178 emperors—81 in the Western Empire and 97 in the Eastern—dozens of them were loathsome tyrants with little redeeming value. The worst, as [Hayek told us](#), really do find their way to the top.

Power does so much more than corrupt. It attracts the already-corrupted and gives them the wherewithal to administer their corruption. It feeds on arrogance, narcissism, and self-deception. It dementes the mind until it embraces schemes that ruin the lives of others. It rots the soul. I can think of no more destructive motivation than the lust for it. Rare is the individual who emerges a better person for having possessed it. Roman history demonstrates these truths vividly.

An Embarrassment of ~~Riches~~ Despots

Could the most reprehensible of the emperors be Nero, who burned Christians as human torches, commenced the process of diluting the precious metal content of Roman money, and murdered his own mother? One Roman historian claims that Nero once rubbed his hands together as he proclaimed, "Let us tax and tax again. Let us tax until no one owns anything."

For sure, put Nero on the short list.

How about Commodus, a megalomaniac if there ever was one? He ordered the months of the year renamed in his honor because he thought he was a god. He maintained a harem of 300 female

concubines and 300 young boys—many of them kidnapped and all of them, effectively, enslaved. He allowed corruption in the government to reign supreme while he indulged his depravities.

Don't forget Diocletian, who tried in vain to stem the effects of his predecessors' currency debasement by imposing draconian price controls. Death was the penalty for charging more than the Emperor deemed appropriate. It was not history's only successful experiment with price controls because there just isn't one. It failed.

Then there's the absolute nutcase whose name, Elagabalus, sounds like the sound you'd make if you tried to say "elderberries" with a mouthful of marbles. British historian Edward Gibbon wrote that Elagabalus "abandoned himself to the grossest pleasures and ungoverned fury." The German historian [Barthold Georg Niebuhr](#) asserted that "The name Elagabalus is branded in history above all others" on account of his "unspeakably disgusting life."

This being a family-friendly website, I won't even begin to describe what he did but I can tell you this much: He did it all in the space of four years as emperor before his unlamented assassination at the tender age of 18.

Picking a really bad despot out of 178 despots is like shooting fish in a barrel. You'll get one no matter where you aim.

And the "Winner" Is...

So, it's with a healthy dose of caprice that I commend to you the name of Caligula as my personal choice for Worst Roman Emperor Ever. His story was even made into a [bad movie](#) in 1979. It remains a cult classic among sadists and those with poor taste in film.

He was only the third of the 178 emperors, ruling for three

years and ten months, from March of 37 A.D. to January of 41 A.D. He was 28 when his rule came to an end by assassination. Some might say that because he held high office, Caligula was a “public servant.” Though contemporary sources are sparse, I believe large swaths of the Roman public might have had good reasons to differ in their opinion of him.

It wasn't always so. Very early in his reign, Caligula was apparently a decent chap. But whether it was epilepsy as some allege or some other ailment, or simply the unwholesome effects of his power-lust, it didn't take long for him to evolve into a beastly monster of epic proportions. He reminds me of another political figure of nearly 18 centuries later—Maximilien Robespierre, the architect of “The Terror” of the French Revolution, who only a few years before had opposed the death penalty. I think power went to his head, as it likely did with Caligula, too.

He butchered people mercilessly, often for trivial offenses. When there was a shortage of cattle to feed the beasts in public arenas, he ordered humans to be fed to them. Of his own citizens, he famously declared, “I wish the Roman people had but a single neck” so he could hang them all at once.

He couldn't get along with the Senate and made sure senators were killed because of it. In fact, he apparently couldn't get along with anybody, not even with his many wives, relatives, and lovers of both sexes.

His economic policies weren't much better. When a financial crisis gripped the Empire in 38, his administration responded with a massive issuance of zero-interest credit. That introduced distortions from which the economy never fully recovered. He spent lavishly on “public works” including many intended to simply glorify himself, all of which added to a growing burden of taxation and debt. Ancient historians such as Suetonius and Cassius Dio report that when his taxes were insufficient to cover his spending, “he began falsely

accusing, fining and even killing individuals for the purpose of seizing their estates.” This was 1,800 years before Karl Marx turned that into a philosophy.

As if there weren't enough problems at home, Caligula expanded the empire by annexing the kingdom of Mauretania (in Africa) after inviting its ruler to Rome, only to have him executed for accepting the invitation.

Late in his tenure, Caligula convinced himself (but likely few others) that he was divine. Historian Chris Scarre reports that he “built a temple to himself on the Palatine, and forced leading citizens to pay enormous sums for the honour of becoming his priests.”

Caligula attracted many would-be-but-unsuccessful assassins before three of them finally got the job done. They stabbed him 30 times in January of 41.

The Intoxicant Known as Power

The Senate briefly debated the idea of restoring the old Republic, then folded under pressure from the military and the mob of citizens who preferred handouts from the Emperor over responsibility and freedom for themselves. It was the last time that debate ever happened. Rome would suffer 78 more emperors before succumbing to the crushing burdens of a welfare/warfare tyranny and foreign invasion in 476. (For more on Roman history and its lessons, see [here](#).)

The intoxicant known as power knows no equal. It is malevolent by its very nature. It has enslaved, tortured, and murdered more people than any other poisonous impulse in history. Perhaps the philosopher [Eric Hoffer](#) put it best when he wrote,

The corruption inherent in absolute power derives from the fact that such power is never free from the tendency to turn man into a thing, and press him back into the matrix of

nature from which he has risen. For the impulse of power is to turn every variable into a constant, and give to commands the inexorableness and relentlessness of laws of nature. Hence absolute power corrupts even when exercised for humane purposes. The benevolent despot who sees himself as a shepherd of the people still demands from others the submissiveness of sheep. The taint inherent in absolute power is not its inhumanity but its anti-humanity.

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