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978-1-107-03285-9 - Crisis Management during the Roman Republic:

The Role of Political Institutions in Emergencies

Gregory K. Golden

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CRISIS MANAGEMENT DURING THE ROMAN REPUBLIC

The Role of Political Institutions in Emergencies

“Crisis” is the defining word for our times, and it likewise played a key role in defining the scope of government during the Roman Republic. *Crisis Management during the Roman Republic* is a comprehensive analysis of several key incidents in the history of the Republic that can be characterized as crises and the institutional response mechanisms that were employed by the governing apparatus to resolve them. Concentrating on military and other violent threats to the stability of the governing system, this book highlights both the strengths and weaknesses of the institutional framework that the Romans created. Looking at key historical moments such as the Second Punic War (218–201 BC), the upheavals caused by the Gracchi (133 and 121 BC), the conflict between Marius and Sulla (88 BC), the conspiracy of Catiline (63 BC), and the instability following Caesar’s assassination in 44 BC that marked the end of the Republic, Gregory K. Golden considers how the Romans defined a crisis and what measures were taken to combat them, including declaring a state of emergency, suspending all non-war-related business, and instituting an emergency military draft, as well as resorting to rule by dictator in the early Republic.

Gregory K. Golden is an assistant professor in the Department of History at Rhode Island College in Providence, Rhode Island. His research interests center on the political institutions of the Roman Republic and Empire and the roles they played in maintaining Roman power over a diverse and multicultural Mediterranean world. His current research focuses on the use of mass media, such as they existed in ancient times, by the Roman governing structures to communicate political messages as part of the means of maintaining control over their vast network of allies and subjects. He is the author of entries on “states of emergency” and “senatus consultum ultimum” for the forthcoming *ABC-CLIO Encyclopedia of Conflict in Greece and Rome*.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Briscoe, <i>Livy</i> 1	John Briscoe, <i>A commentary on Livy, Books xxxi–xxxiii</i> (Oxford, 1973).
Briscoe, <i>Livy</i> 2	John Briscoe, <i>A commentary on Livy, Books xxxiv–xxxvii</i> (Oxford, 1981).
Briscoe, <i>Livy</i> 3	John Briscoe, <i>A commentary on Livy, Books 38–40</i> (Oxford, 2008).
CAH ²	<i>The Cambridge Ancient History</i> , 2nd ed.
Greenidge and Clay, <i>Sources</i> ²	A. H. J. Greenidge and A. M. Clay, <i>Sources for Roman history, 133–70 B.C.</i> 2nd ed. rev. by E. W. Gray (Oxford, 1960).
MRR	T. R. S. Broughton, <i>The magistrates of the Roman Republic</i> , 3 vols. (New York, vols. I and II: 1951 and Atlanta vol. III: 1986).
Oakley, <i>Livy</i> 1–4	S. P. Oakley, <i>A commentary on Livy, Books vi–x</i> , 4 vols. (Oxford, vol. 1: 1997, vol. 2: 1998, vols. 3–4: 2005).
Ogilvie, <i>Livy</i>	R. M. Ogilvie, <i>A commentary on Livy, Books 1–5</i> (Oxford, 1965).
RE	A. Pauly, G. Wissowa, and W. Kroll, <i>Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> (Stuttgart, 1894–1980).
SB	D. R. Shackleton Bailey, <i>Cicero's letters to Atticus</i> . 7 vols. <i>Epistulae ad Familiares</i> . 2 vols. <i>Epistulae Ad Quintum Fratrem et M. Brutum</i> (Cambridge, 1965–1980).
St. R.	Th. Mommsen, <i>Römisches Staatsrecht</i> , 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1887).

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Walbank, *Polybius* F. W. Walbank, *A historical commentary on Polybius*, 3 vols. (Oxford, vol. 1: rev. 1970, vol. 2: 1967, vol. 3: 1979).

All dates relating to persons and events in the text are BC except where noted.

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PROLOGUE

The Winter of Discontent

Following the assassination of Caesar the Dictator on the Ides of March 44, the Roman ruling class was thrown into grave uncertainty. Into the vacuum would step the consul Mark Antony, but he was not in full control of Caesar's faction and forces. Young Gaius Octavius, calling himself C. Julius Caesar (as was his right, having been adopted in his great-uncle's will), appeared and made overtures to Caesar's friends and veterans for support, even though he was an untested youth who had not yet completed his nineteenth year. The two would-be heirs of Caesar then embarked on a dangerous rivalry for control of the Roman state. That rivalry would draw in others, including those few senior members of the Roman ruling class who hoped that the Caesarian faction might be dislodged completely and the old political *libertas* of the senatorial class could be restored. Antony, however, had the advantage in armed force at his disposal; in the dying days of his consulship, he attempted to entrench himself by seizing the province of Gallia Cisalpina (northern Italy), putting him in a position to menace Rome and its leading men with his army as a means of assuring his political supremacy after his term as consul came to an end.

His attempt to control the Cisalpine territory was not unopposed. D. Brutus, the governor of Gallia Cisalpina, resisted Antony's attempt to take control of the province, as both men had legal claims to it. By the winter of 44/43, a strange coalition of conservatives who desired a return to the old ways, combined with moderate Caesarian elements and Caesar's heir – the young adventurer whom we call Octavian for convenience – had been melded together by the strong and sharp oratory of the senior consular M. Tullius Cicero into an alliance determined to remove Antony from political life.

In the depths of that winter that saw the beginnings of the ultimate crisis of the Roman Republic, the final threat to the “free” workings of the institutions by which the Roman people had been governed for (allegedly)

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almost five centuries, the senior consular Cicero turned to the established tools of state for emergency situations, which the crisis created by Antony's armed attack on D. Brutus triggered, in order to rally the Republic against its own former consul and still proconsul. He proposed a full range of measures: the declaration of a *tumultus*, a state of emergency, combined with a suspension of all non-war-related business (*iustitium*) and an immediate emergency military draft with no exemptions from service (*vacationes*) being honored. In addition, he pushed for the passage of a political resolution that would signal that the very safety and existence of the state were at stake, the so-called *senatus consultum ultimum*.

All of these measures had long histories as Roman responses to crisis situations, although in the early days of the Roman Republic, another response mechanism was the favored means of reacting to a serious, and often survival-level, threat. This was the extraordinary (*extra ordinem*, as it was outside of the normal rungs on the ladder of offices that comprised the *cursum honorum*, the normal magistracies of the Roman Republic) office of *dictator*. From the earliest days (according to the historical accounts that the Romans wrote for themselves), the Roman ruling class, when faced with a sudden invasion or menaced by internecine strife at home, handed over all executive authority to a single man, the dictator, who was appointed to have full charge of affairs during the emergency. More often than not, this remedy served the Romans of the early Republic well, as one problem with the Roman system of government in terms of rapid and focused governmental response was its deliberate policy of dividing authority and placing checks and balances on those who wielded power within the system. Assigning one man to govern in times of extreme pressure and stress removed the problems sometimes caused by disagreement between decision makers and different policy aims on the part of different groups.

Over time, however, the Romans began to resort to the use of a dictator on fewer and fewer occasions. We shall discuss the reasons later. In general, it was a reflection on the growth and development of the Roman state itself. Handing over all authority to a single man when we are speaking of a small city of 10,000 or so is one thing. When Rome expanded in the course of the fourth and third centuries BC, however, new conditions needed to be faced – new crises that called for more than the simple expedient of appointing one man to deal with it all. Although the use of states of emergency – the *tumultus* and the *iustitium* – did not change (for they had proven their usefulness and did not require single leadership as a prerequisite for their being put into effect; we will discuss these two measures in full detail later), the ruling class – the men who comprised the Roman Senate – began to take

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upon themselves the task of directing the state in crises under the leadership of regular magistrates. The Roman state had greater resources available to itself now, as it had created new means of placing men in charge of armed force, prorogation, and there was a need for greater flexibility than the limited office of dictator could supply.

Thus, during two of the major wars of the third century, the war against King Pyrrhus and the first war against the mighty trading empire of Carthage, the Romans did not make great use of the dictatorship even in situations where they had suffered a major reverse at the hands of the enemy. The dictatorship as an emergency response mechanism would reappear briefly when the Romans faced the most dire of threats to their very survival in the dark days of the Second Punic War. After two occasions on which the Carthaginian general Hannibal Barca had annihilated a Roman army in the field, killed a consul, and left the Romans back home trembling in fear for their very lives (Trasimene and Cannae), the Romans would again resort to the appointment of a dictator to lead the state in crisis.

After the long, nearly twenty-year emergency that was the Second Punic War, the Roman ruling class did not resort to the irregular office of dictator again. When it was later revived, it was done in a completely unprecedented manner, and the dictatorships of Sulla and then Caesar bear no true resemblance and have no claim to descent, other than in name, from the constitutional, although *extra ordinem*, office of dictator from earlier centuries. Instead, the ruling senatorial oligarchy preferred to rely on regular magistrates and prorogation to meet their immediate military needs, with states of emergency being instituted as necessary through the normal methods. And some crises that challenged the ruling group of decision makers within the Roman state would require measures other than those designed to meet immediate emergencies.

This state of affairs could have continued indefinitely, were it not for the expansion of the Roman state and the consequent problems that empire brought in its wake. The senate could function as an effective decision-making body when the state was small and the ruling class as a group had largely the same goals and same intentions. As the state grew, so did its population, and so did those who aspired to become leaders within the state. The military requirements also grew as it was no longer just a small patch of land that needed to be held but a large overseas empire. As military manpower began to be squeezed, calls for government action to increase available military manpower were made by members of the ruling elite. But instead of the ruling class as a whole sharing similar interests now, these calls for changes were met with fierce opposition. It resulted

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in a split within the ruling class that broke the senate as an effective body for resolving internal political disputes, a role it had managed to fulfill successfully for many centuries.

From this point, the last decades of the second century BC, the Roman state would be beset more by internal crises than external ones. When two brothers from a very prominent family, Tiberius and Gaius Sempronius Gracchus, decided to bypass a senate that they saw as intransigent in order to appeal directly to the Roman people for changes that would restock the pool of available military manpower, both brothers would be met with violence on the part of the senatorial factions that were most opposed to their plan for increasing the number of men eligible for conscription, which involved reclaiming public lands that had fallen into private hands, largely the hands of senators and their allies. In the case of the latter Gracchus, the consul L. Opimius in 121 passed a new type of senate decree, one that called on him to “defend the state and see that it received no harm.” This new decree represented both a departure from current practice while at the same time bringing back an older sensibility in the handling of internal crises. For the so-called *senatus consultum ultimum* passed the baton of decision maker from the senate back to a single executive officer. This did not make L. Opimius dictator, but it expressed the decision of the senate to pass full decision-making authority to Opimius to handle the matter in whatever manner he felt justified.

The expansion of the Roman state also resulted in unprecedented growth in the number of slaves that the Romans acquired, initially through military conquest but later through trade. This, too, presented an increasing internal threat to the Roman state, as greater numbers meant the threat of revolt increased as well. Slave revolts in the provinces, such as the two great slave rebellions in Sicily (in the 130s and 104–100), would occupy Roman minds and affect commodities prices, but slave revolts on Italian soil were a much more serious matter, as they threatened the safety of the state itself. Normally, a state of emergency and the quick call-up of a militia force could see to the suppression of such local threats, as occurred near the beginning of the second century when a group of Carthaginian prisoners of war bound for slavery rose and seized the Italian town where they were being held, and later near the end of the century when a young man who had put himself too far into debt over a beautiful slave girl attempted to raise a slave revolt to escape his self-made predicament. In both of these cases, the hastily improvised militia was enough to overcome the threat. The normal method of response, however, proved inadequate when a much more grave slave uprising occurred in the 70s under the leadership of Spartacus. The normal tumultuary measures there did not

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suffice; long years of warfare were required to end the threat to Rome. And again, Rome turned to a single executive official to handle the crisis.

Rome in the time of Spartacus's revolt, however, was markedly different from the Rome of the second century. The body of citizens had expanded dramatically after the failed revolt of the Italian allies, who were also incapable of being suppressed by quick tumultuary measures but instead had to be won over by a political as much as a military solution. The place of these new citizens within the Roman governing structure, however, provided a new issue over which members of the Roman senatorial elite could struggle in the attempt to gain an advantage over their peers. Personal rivalries came to the fore that proved to be incapable of settlement either through political compromise or the employment of emergency measures. Brute armed force decided the issue, as L. Cornelius Sulla twice marched on the city of Rome with a formally constituted army and twice conquered Rome. On the second occasion, the regime in Rome passed the *senatus consultum ultimum* against Sulla, but it made no difference as the faction in Rome lost on the battlefield. Sulla would march into Rome and install himself as Rome's dictator in the modern sense of the word. When another man, C. Julius Caesar, moved toward Rome with an army and the same intention, again, the prime emergency response mechanism of the late Republican government, the passage of the *senatus consultum ultimum*, availed them not.

This, in outline, is the history of governmental response to crises that presented the potential to do lasting harm to the Roman state. In the following chapters, we shall first discuss what exactly constituted crises, ones that required the use of the emergency measures that have been briefly described, and then others that did not. After this introductory chapter, the next several chapters will focus on the specific emergency response mechanisms separately in detail to demonstrate continuity and change in their employment over time. Next, situations that clearly were crises but where the Roman decision makers did not, as far as the historical record informs us, employ the use of the emergency measures examined before will be discussed. Then we shall return to the year 43, when two crises led directly to the end of the free functioning of the Roman Republic. Finally, from the vantage point of the final crises of the Roman Republic, we can gauge Roman attitudes toward crisis response throughout the Republic and observe what the study of crisis response by the Roman government has to tell us about the very nature of the system the Romans used to govern themselves.