

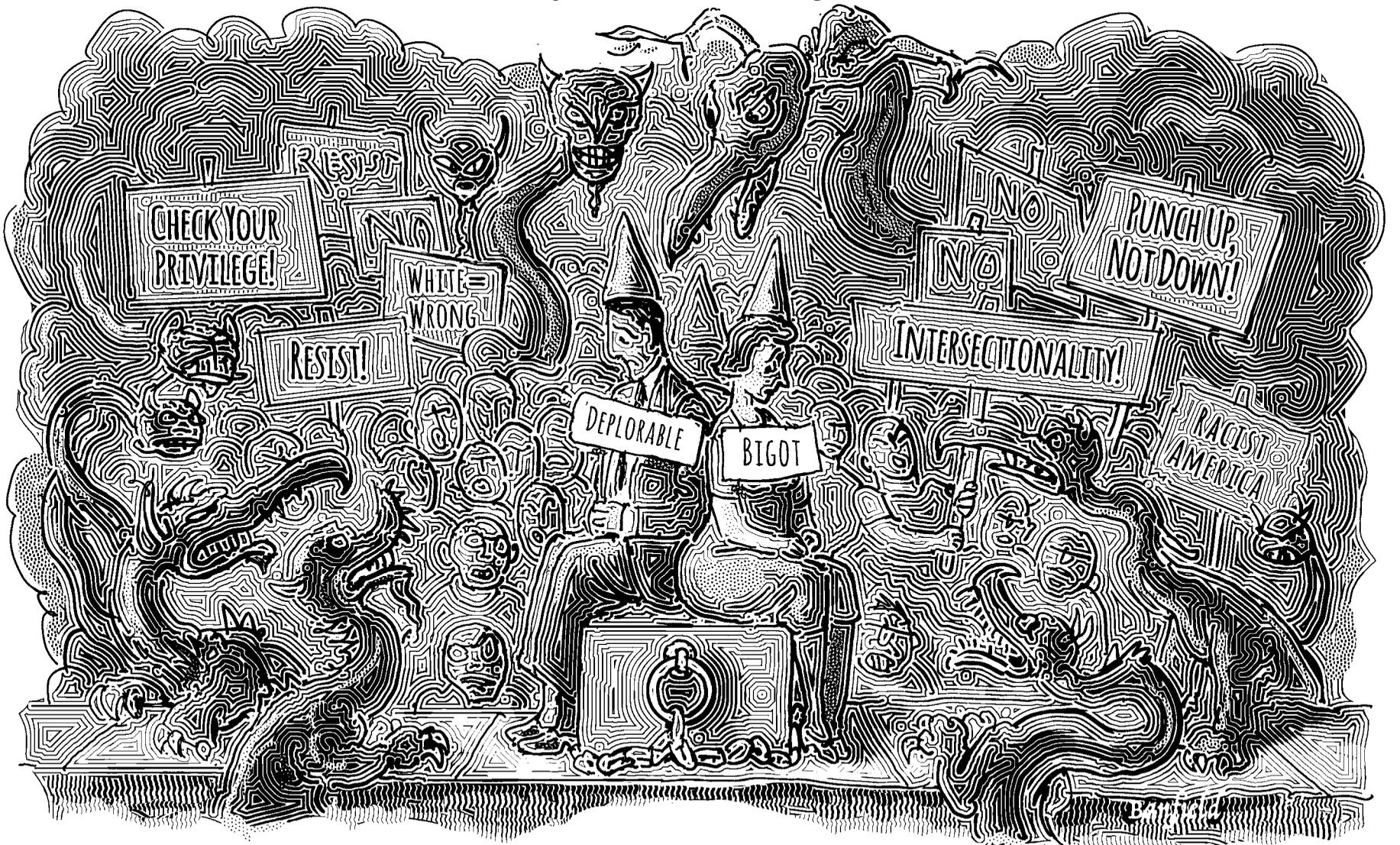
VOLUME XVIII, NUMBER 4, FALL 2018

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A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

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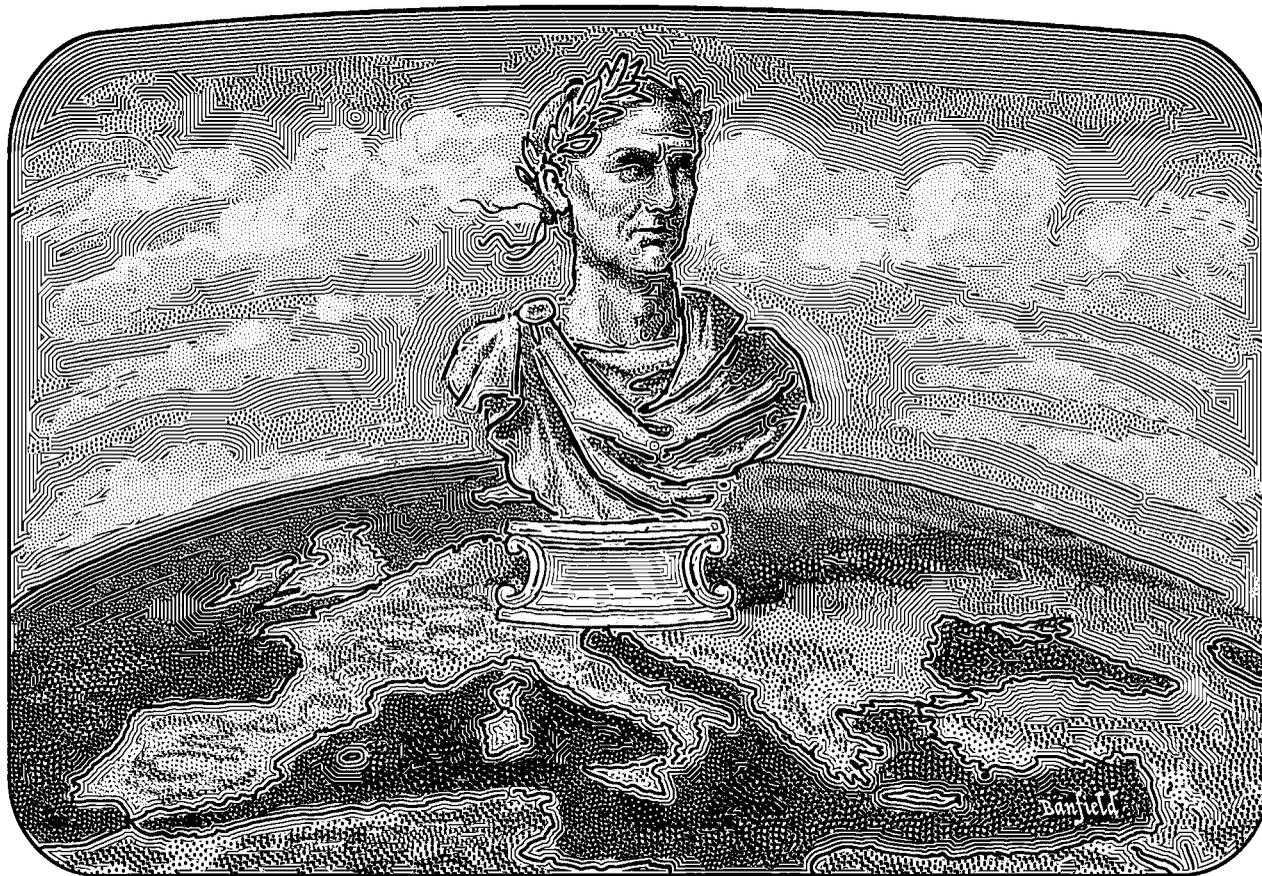


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CONSTANT AS THE NORTHERN STAR

The Landmark Julius Caesar: The Complete Works: Gallic War, Civil War, Alexandrian War, African War, and Spanish War, edited and translated by Kurt A. Raaflaub. Pantheon, 896 pages, \$50



EVER SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF ITS inaugural volume, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (1996), Pantheon's *Landmark Ancient Series* has set the gold standard for modern editions of ancient Greek and Roman historical works. Edited by Robert Strassler, a businessman turned scholar, the series supplements each of its translations with extensive prolegomena that assist the reader in understanding each historian's context and significance. Comprehensive introductions, chapter summaries, glossaries, illustrative figures, battle diagrams, reference maps and directories, indices, appendices, and bibliographies provide readers with a wealth of information in each volume. For the more ambitious, over 40 supplemental essays to the volume under review are made available online.

The Landmark Julius Caesar, the fifth volume in the series, collects Julius Caesar's "Commentaries" on his Gallic campaigns and

the civil war with Pompey the Great, as well as commentaries (written by his lieutenants) on three lesser wars waged by Caesar in Alexandria, North Africa, and Spain. By providing accessible commentaries and annotations of these important primary sources, *The Landmark Julius Caesar* has made it convenient for lay readers to understand one of the greatest world-historical figures from the ancient world, who was not just a military genius but a polished stylist as well.

CICERO—CAESAR'S CONTEMPORARY, one-time friend, and political rival—memorialized both Caesar's military and his literary achievements, remarking on the "magnitude of the conflicts, the number of battles, the variety of places, the speed of completion, the dissimilarity of the wars." He praised the plain style of *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, Caesar's history of his campaigns against the Gauls (58-50 B.C.) as "splendid"—"bare, straight, and handsome,

stripped of rhetorical ornament like an athlete of his clothes." Indeed, literary style was one of Caesar's abiding interests. During the Gallic campaign, he wrote *On Analogy*, a two-volume treatise, now lost, which argued for a plain style focused on unadorned accuracy.

The longest history comprises the eight books of *De Bello Gallico*. It is also the best known, since it traditionally has been the first book of Latin prose encountered by students back in the days when Latin was a staple of high school curricula. Even more significantly, the 50 battles Caesar successfully waged against the Gauls laid the foundations of modern France, Belgium, the Rhineland, and most of Western Europe, whose diverse peoples and cultures spring from the semi-barbarian tribes Caesar fought, observed, and eventually Romanized.

But the brilliance of Caesar's history is greater than the documenting of his campaigns, battles, and strategic exploitation of the endemic inter- and intra-tribal power-

struggles that made the Roman victories possible. Other generals have written memoirs, such as Ulysses S. Grant, whose book (like Caesar's) is considered a masterpiece of concision and clarity. But Grant wrote his *Personal Memoirs* at the end of his life, 20 years after Appomattox. Caesar composed the *Commentaries* during the winter when fighting was usually suspended, and even while on campaign, dictating from horseback to his secretaries. Moreover, each of the seven books of *De Bello Gallico*—the eighth was later written by his lieutenant Aulus Hirtius—was likely circulated and read in Rome after each year's campaigning season ended.

IN THIS WAY CAESAR SOLVED THE DILEMMA of an ambitious Roman who needed military victories, and the resulting plunder, to advance his career. Military success, however, necessarily meant being absent from Rome, which meant being unable to defend himself against his enemies and counter their machinations, and to cultivate allies and bribe voters and supporters. That's why Quintus Tullius Cicero, brother of the famous orator and member of Caesar's staff, in his *Commentariolum Petitionis* (often translated as "How to Win an Election"), advised office-seekers, "Don't leave Rome!" Publishing the *Commentaries* serially kept Caesar's name and glorious deeds fresh in the citizens' minds.

And that was Caesar's principal aim: not just to write history, but to publicize his achievements and describe his actions in such a way that they became a political ad for his leadership qualities. Moreover, his plain, unadorned style made the subtle, sometimes duplicitous descriptions of his actions and decisions even more effective. This use of battle history to advance his career recalls another political leader and military historian, Winston Churchill. He, too, was known for his relentless ambition and the literary talents that aided his self-promotion. (Arthur Balfour quipped of Churchill's history of World War I, "Winston has written an enormous book about himself and called it *The World Crisis*.") During Churchill's early military experiences in Afghanistan and in the Sudan, he sent dispatches to newspapers back in England; and after those campaigns had ended, he quickly followed each with a popular book that celebrated his imperial achievements as well as his own personality and character. Indeed, his newspaper reporting and books made him a celebrity, as did Caesar's serial histories of his campaigns. But Churchill was a subaltern, not a commanding general and politician like Caesar.

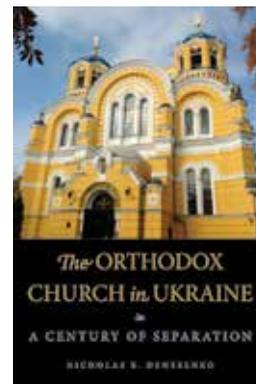
There are numerous examples from *De Bello Gallico* in which Caesar describes a battle

in ways that highlight his skills as a leader of men—and as a leading politician of the *populares*, those Romans who championed the common people and equestrian class against the *optimates*, the oligarchic Senatorial party. One of the best examples occurs in a passage describing a critical moment in a battle with the Nervii, a Belgic tribe, in 57 B.C. In the longest sentence in *De Bello Gallico*, Caesar describes his arrival on his right "horn," as the Romans called an army's flank, where his soldiers are being hard-pressed and nearing collapse. Stringing together several adverbial participial phrases, Caesar swiftly catalogues all the factors of impending doom—dead and wounded centurions, demoralized men trickling away from the front line, no reserves at hand, the maniples packed too close together, thus disrupting their battle formation and hindering the use of their swords—and just as quickly narrates his orders that correct the situation and save the day. His use of multiple phrases and only three verbs in 156 words creates speed and excitement in the narrative; this artfully intensifies the seriousness of the situation and the need for quick action. And it magnifies the sentences' three verbs—*vidit*, *iussit*, *impetum est*: "he saw," "he ordered," "[the enemy] was driven back"—which emphasize Caesar's skill for swift action and anticipate his famous description of the Romans' victory at Zela ten years later: "I came, I saw, I conquered."

WHILE ADVERTISING CAESAR'S ABILITY to scan and forestall the causes of coming disaster, other details in this passage show why he is a successful leader of men. When he arrived at the scene, he jumped down from his horse, snatched a shield from a retreating soldier, and moved to the front line close to the action. There the men recover their morale when they see their *imperator* sharing their danger, and are spurred to bravery before the eyes of the man who fairly rewards valor, calls them "comrade," and seldom inflicts draconian punishments like flogging or "decimation," in which one man out of every ten was randomly chosen to be beaten to death by his fellow soldiers. Once at the front line, Caesar identifies by name several of the wounded and dead centurions, who usually came from the plebeian rather than the noble class. Caesar shows at once why he is a great general and the leader of the *populares'* cause. And he does so with stylistic flair.

Throughout, Caesar finds opportunities to slyly remind readers of his military and political techniques. Though he mentions by name centurions when they deserve praise, he prefers to name nobles, the class of most of his

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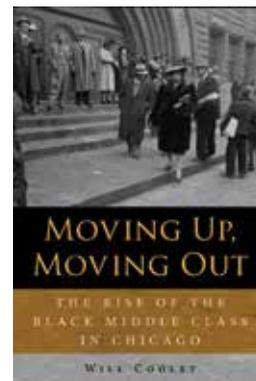
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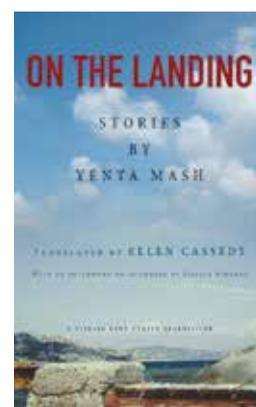
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lieutenants, when they blunder. He devotes a whole paragraph to two centurions Titus Pullo and Lucius Vorenus, whose names may be familiar to readers as the heroes of the HBO series *Rome*. These two “very brave men,” Caesar writes, who were locked in bitter competition for advancement to the first ranks of the 11th Legion, ultimately saved each other’s lives during a reckless encounter with the Nervii. “Fortune so dealt with both in this rivalry and conflict,” Caesar writes, “that the one competitor was a succor and a safeguard to the other, nor could it be determined which of the two appeared worthy of being preferred to the other.” Caesar’s men knew that the proverbial “praise from Caesar” was in fact “praise indeed”—and often included generous prizes and promotion.

CAESAR ACCOMPLISHES MORE IN *DE Bello Gallico*, however, than writing advertisements for himself. He also contributes to the ethnography of the Gauls, highlighting their barbarity and the weaknesses of tribal culture, which in turn justify Romanizing them at the cost of over a million dead and enslaved. Though admiring their bravery and enthusiasm for war—Caesar’s contemporary Strabo said they were “mad for war”—Caesar continually highlights the Gauls’ indiscipline, impulsiveness, treach-

ery, and sudden swings from braggadocio to groveling. The same chieftains who bluster about what horrors will befall the Romans will, he writes, “throw themselves weeping at the feet of Caesar” once their fortunes change. Another frequent motif is the Gauls’ treachery, their consideration of treaties and bonds of friendship as ad hoc and transient. And like many tribal peoples, they are clanish and parochial, preferring to let Caesar destroy their enemies rather than form a coalition to defeat him. The coalition of tribes assembled by Vercingetorix in 52 B.C. was too late to overcome superior Roman discipline, fortifications, siege technology, weapons, and experience.

Caesar also provides valuable information about the Druids, the priests and mystics who wielded immense power in Gallic communities, and who sanctioned practices that the Romans found pointlessly brutal. Displaying an enemy’s severed head on the door, and burning people alive in a giant wicker man, were signs of savagery even to the Romans. Caesar’s comments on the Gauls’ political organization are equally useful contributions to our understanding of these proto-Europeans.

But his ethnography also reinforces one of his main themes: the superiority of a civilized culture and political order that inculcates discipline and self-control, and creates commu-

nal loyalty that transcends tribal differences, to a savage one that is chronically fissile and centrifugal, bound by superstition and priestly obscurantism, and lacking the intellectual curiosity that ultimately led to the superior technologies, engineering skills, and political order that contributed to the Romans’ dominance over their enemies.

ONCE CAESAR HAD PACIFIED GAUL, the region quickly Romanized, and apart from some scattered resistance, no large-scale rebellion took place in Roman Gaul until the barbarian invasions. The sophistication of its Gallo-Roman culture is still visible today along the Rhône, in cities like Lyon, Vienne, Nîmes, Arles, and Orange, with their still surviving fragments of Roman roads, aqueducts, walls, arenas, theaters, triumphal arches, temples, mosaics, villas, and baths that constituted the physical infrastructure of Romanization, and the cultural inheritance that inspired the foundations of Europe and the West. *The Landmark Julius Caesar* is the best place to become reacquainted with one of ancient Rome’s most consequential achievements, and the remarkable man who brought it about.

Bruce S. Thornton is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution.

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