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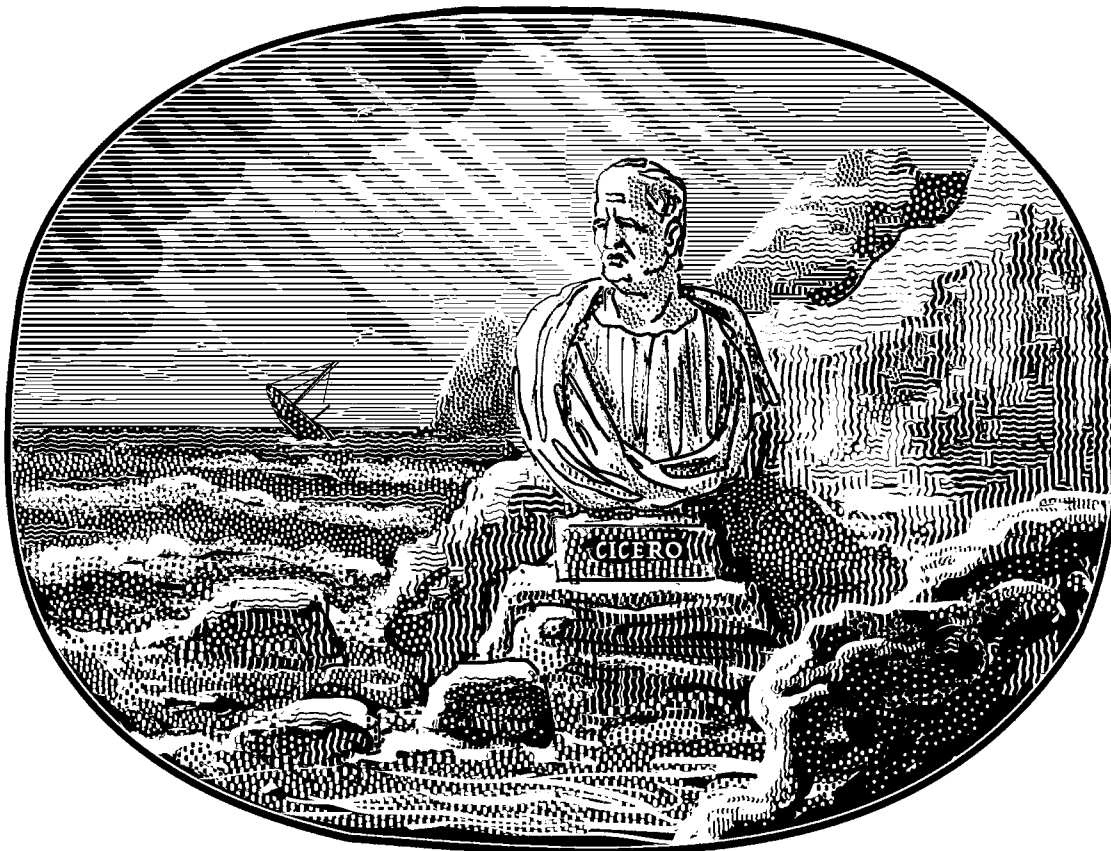
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Book Review by Timothy W. Caspar

## The Cicero Test

*Rome's Revolution: Death of the Republic and Birth of the Empire*, by Richard Alston.  
Oxford University Press, 408 pages, \$29.95

*The Death of Caesar: The Story of History's Most Famous Assassination*, by Barry Strauss.  
Simon & Schuster, 353 pages, \$27 (cloth), \$16.99 (paper)



How a historian treats the ancient Roman statesman, philosopher, and orator Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 B.C.) usually tells us a great deal about his approach to the study of history more generally. Call it the Cicero test.

The dominant view of Cicero, almost from the time of his death at the hands of the Second Triumvirate, focused on his voluminous writings and doomed efforts to save Rome's republic. His reputation peaked in the period stretching from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and American Founding. During those four centuries, as the classics scholar A.E. Douglas noted, "every educated man had studied something of Cicero's philosophical writings at school or university." Cicero's admirers today tend to share his view that history reveals timeless lessons about the human character, applicable in any age.

Today, almost no college student or professor reads anything at all of Cicero, let alone reveres him as a model of virtuous behavior and intellectual activity. By the early 20th century, as Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Daniel Walker Howe has chronicled, Cicero and the other classics had virtually disappeared from educational curricula. What happened? Beginning in the 19th century, German scholars following the lead of G.W.F. Hegel propagated a new, pinched view of Cicero. Cicero's political philosophy, they believed, did little more than translate Greek ideas into Latin. As Hegel taught them, they celebrated Julius Caesar as the great world-historical figure who despite himself advanced the cause of reason and freedom. Cicero's modern critics tend to share the view that Cicero was on the wrong side of history but was too clueless or egotistical to realize it.

Now we have two new historical works on the fall of the Roman Republic in the first century B.C. Though each has a different scope and focus, Cicero figures prominently in both. Do they pass the Cicero test?

*Rome's Revolution* by Richard Alston, a professor of Roman history at the University of London's Royal Holloway college, does not. The book covers many of the major events from the rise of Tiberius Gracchus as tribune in 133 B.C. to the death of Augustus Caesar in 14 A.D. Though frequently lapsing into academic jargon and explicitly embracing the Hegelian notion of the world-historical figure, it offers a workmanlike narrative, and is at its best when it draws directly on ancient sources—that is, when it sets aside the modern theory it attempts to impose on the past. Alston's descriptions of battle can be grip-



ping, such as the climactic confrontation on the coast of Actium in 31 B.C., when Antony and Cleopatra's naval forces went down to defeat, in part because of the flaming arrows and pitch launched by Octavian's troops onto the decks of their ships.

The book, it must be said, is miserably edited. Typographical errors abound, as do split infinitives. Words are misspelled, missing, or repeated. Punctuation marks are absent here and duplicated there, while elsewhere maps are mislabeled.

Alston's thesis is that political life, in all times and places, is best understood as the competition for power: "The story I will tell here is of the fundamentals of politics: power, money, and violence." In other words, power and self-interest, not political ideas or principles, are the key. Consequently, in thinking about Roman politics and society, we need to start "not from the speeches and philosophical discourses of Cicero and his friends, nor from the values of citizenship and Roman political culture as they have been received and modified over generations of modern political thought, but from the perspective of the soldier in the camp, or the poor man in the street or the old."

What of Cicero? Alston makes clear his personal distaste for the man: he refers to Cicero's "long and sadly not quite completely lost poem" about his own consulship; and says that immodesty was "a trait with which Cicero should have been abundantly familiar." It is Cicero's political failure that he finds most significant, however.

Cicero's suppression of the Catilinarian conspiracy during his consulship in 63 B.C. is a harbinger of things to come: though he was hailed at the time as *pater patriae*, or Father of his Country, and would subsequently be revered through much of Western history for his actions, Alston sees Cicero as a "controversial figure" whose actions identify him not as a hero but as a "potential tyrant." By contrast, the populist and future dictator Julius Caesar is on the right side of history, a defender of "law and the rights of Roman citizens."

By the end of his life, with the republic crashing down around him, Cicero's political failure is complete. "His political vision of a Rome governed by the senators in accord with a social and political hierarchy dominated by the traditional values of the traditional aristocracy of the city," according to *Rome's Revolution*, "was exposed as flawed and failed by the very fact that he had to explain himself to Octavian."

But does the fact of failure prove a cause deserved to fail? It would mean that success in fact corresponds to success in theory, which is nothing other than the doctrine that might makes right. In that case, Alston would be correct to say we should not think of politics "in terms of classes, institutions, constitutions, and political structures." Instead "we should think of politics in terms of networks of power," and in particular the "patrimonial network" established by Caesar and Augustus.

Determining who holds power in a regime is indeed fundamental. As Aristotle says, the first question for the student of regimes is: who rules? The one, the few, or the many? But there is a second question, more decisive or fundamental than the first: do the rulers rule in their own interest, or for the good of the entire political community? It is the answer to this question that reveals whether any particular regime is a good or bad one, a conclusion we cannot reach simply by counting the number of rulers.

Alston would render Aristotle's second question moot: rulers never act, voluntarily at least, for the good of the entire community, but only in their own interest. They may be coerced into accepting changes to the political order but that merely confirms the original thesis. Unhappily for Alston, if his thesis is correct, it removes any ground for condemning, as he frequently does, the actions taken by the Roman ruling class to defend its own interest. But condemn he does, and in so doing he makes it clear that he thinks there is a timeless standard of justice that limits what power may rightfully do.

One lesson has to do with the role of a just government. In Alston's retelling, the redistributive policies of the Gracchus brothers, and later of Caesar and Augustus, become a kind of ancient precursor to today's liberal welfare state. The *New Deal in Old Rome* (1939), by H.J. Haskell, was an earlier statement of this theme. As Alston writes, the "Roman grain dole" was a policy "very similar to those adopted by modern states in order to alleviate poverty." The "best hope for the poor" is not limited constitutional government and the enforcement of property rights, but some form of "social provision" from the ruling political class. The proper task of government, whether in ancient Rome or a contemporary liberal democracy, is to bring about historical progress toward a better future. Accordingly, Alston disdains those "elite Roman moralists" who looked to the past and had an inordinate focus on "moral decline," the political "conservatives" of every age—Cicero, for example—

who seek a return to a mythical "golden age." In fact, Cicero was far from the reactionary this book imagines him to be, but to discover that you will have to read him for yourself.

And yet, though Alston may not like the conclusions of the "elite" authors of antiquity, he cannot help consulting them. They did not look at the world solely in terms of power, knowing that such a stinting framework prevents consideration of fundamental alternatives, such as better and worse uses of power, freedom and tyranny, or a Cicero and a Caesar. They understood that the demise of the Roman republic includes many figures who, by word and deed, offered heroic resistance to the eventual—but by no means inevitable—outcome. The reader is left with the impression that Alston's thesis is disproved by the story he tells.

The *death of Caesar*, by Barry Strauss, a professor of history and classics at Cornell University, is quite different. Its scope is narrow: the major events surrounding the famous assassination on the Ides of March in 44 B.C. At the same time, it is an entertaining history written in a popular, colorful style, vividly bringing characters to life. Strauss's text and copious endnotes demonstrate full mastery of the ancient sources.

Strauss rejects Alston's dismissive attitude toward the conclusions of "elite" historians, but acknowledges those sources are scanty by today's standards. Just a few detailed accounts of Caesar's assassination have come down to us, only one contemporary with the event itself. The rest, written later, relied on contemporary accounts now lost. Although there is "basic agreement" among the detailed accounts "about the conspiracy and the crime," nevertheless there are a few crucial disagreements. Because none of the available sources is "impartial" and "each author has an axe to grind," the historian must "exercise imagination, ingenuity, and caution." The need to practice "informed speculation" is a theme running through the book.

Is it true, for example, that Caesar laughed as he entered the Senate house on that fateful day? Yes, we would like to believe it, since it illustrates so well the "hubris" that most sources emphasize as the cause of Caesar's downfall. But because the sources are incomplete and uncertain, this may or may not be true, and so the "good historian...must be highly skeptical." One fact about which eight ancient sources do agree is that Caesar received 23 stab wounds. Strauss rigorously follows his own rules, constantly weighing the various sources' motivations to assess how their biases may color their presentations.

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As for the Cicero test, *The Death of Caesar* passes easily, treating the man, the politician, and the political philosopher discerningly and generously. With no hint of irony, Strauss speaks in praise of the voluminous writings Cicero produced in his last few years of life: “In an outpouring of philosophical writing between 46 and 44 B.C. Cicero offered a brilliant description of republican ideals.”

Strauss not only takes Cicero seriously as a political thinker, but celebrates him as “the last lion of the Republic.” Cicero offered “heroic resistance from the well of the Senate” as he delivered a series of speeches against Antony in 44–43 B.C., collectively known as the Philippics. He could have led Italy, but instead chose to stay and fight: “Whatever happened, Cicero could be sure of one thing. Never again would he have to say that he lacked courage. By taking his stand, particularly at the age of 62, Cicero risked everything for the Republic.” Courageous to the end, Cicero “died with dignity and without offering resistance.”

Strauss provides portraits in full—the virtues as well as the vices—not only of Cicero but also of several other major players in Roman politics at the time: Caesar, of course, as well as Octavian (later the Emperor Augustus), Mark Antony, Cassius, and Brutus. He also does good service in resurrecting the little-remembered Decimus Junius Brutus Albinus, whom Strauss argues was “no mere detail” but was rather “the key” to the whole conspiracy. Decimus, the “linchpin of the plot,” goes to Caesar’s home on the morning of the Ides of March and persuades him to attend a meeting of the Senate, despite his wife’s desperate pleas and Spurinna’s ominous prophecy.

Strauss’s narrative of the centrality of Decimus runs contrary to the story told by Shakespeare and his source Plutarch, who make only passing references to Decimus while mythologizing Brutus instead. Indeed, one of the striking aspects of Strauss’s narrative is its emphasis on the lasting influence of Shakespeare’s play, which has shaped what we think we know about the assassination.

“Beware the Ides of March,” for example? Purely a Shakespearean invention: Spurinna’s

prophecy covered a month’s worth of days, of which the Ides was merely the last. Brutus as selfless republican hero? Only if one reads Plutarch, as Shakespeare did, and neglects other counterbalancing sources. Nicolaus’s account, in particular, is decidedly hostile to the conspirators. Though “Brutus believed in ideals that were bigger than himself,” Strauss rejects Shakespeare’s unmixed view of Brutus as a “model of ethics,” because the ancient sources say differently. Strauss instead describes Brutus as “misunderstood” and “multifaceted,” someone who acted from a mix of principle and self-interest. In other words, Strauss reminds us that Brutus was a real human being before he was a poetic hero.

And what about the most famous line we think we know from history, “Et tu, Brute?” Turns out that is not quite right either. Caesar’s last words, if he had any, were probably in Greek, not Latin: “Kai su, teknon?” or “You too, child?” Strauss dismisses the notion believed by some that these are the words of a father to an illegitimate son, but thinks they could very well have been meant as a curse. What is lost in terms of poetry is gained in historical accuracy—and foresight, as Brutus would die by his own hand following the Battle of Philippi in 42 B.C.

Finally, what about his central subject? Strauss leaves no doubt that Caesar’s goal was personal glory and power at the expense of the republic. The portrait of Caesar drawn by Brutus in his speech to the Roman people two days after the assassination is “scathing but accurate.” According to Brutus, Caesar killed the best citizens while also attacking liberty and the people’s tribunes, in his pursuit of unlimited power. “To sum up [his] speech in a phrase, Caesar was a tyrant.”

Agreeing with the sources, Strauss points to Caesar’s character flaws as the ultimate cause of his death: an inveterate “gambler,” a “risk taker” and “addict,” and driven by his immense hubris, he wanted to have “one last roll of the dice.” Thus, Caesar goes to the meeting in the Senate on the Ides of March without a bodyguard, not because he thinks it safe, but precisely because he believes it’s dangerous. Caesar had beaten the odds on the battlefield so many times he was convinced his luck could not run out.

Given this unstinting sketch of Caesar’s tyrannical character, it is puzzling that Strauss would say of Caesar that he “was what Aristotle called a great-souled man.” The great-souled or magnanimous man is indeed courageous. But this means he will not hesitate to brave dangers for some worthy cause, not that he is addicted to risks, which would be evidence of the vice of rashness. The magnanimous man possesses all the virtues. Tyranny, by contrast, is a vehicle for the display of the greatest human vices, especially injustice and immoderation.

This misdiagnosis stands out precisely because it is an aberration. Strauss tells us that Caesar was able to maintain his power by assiduously cultivating “a few trusted loyalists,” the elites of Italy, the provinces that benefited from him, the urban plebs, and the army “above all”—which sounds strikingly similar to Alston’s “patrimonial network.” And later he says the “secret of Roman politics,” which was only “revealed” in the aftermath of Caesar’s assassination, was that “Caesar was dead but Caesarism lived on.”

For Strauss to state the realities of tyrannical political power is not, however, to deny humans’ ability to choose a different course. Indeed, the conspirators demonstrate by their words and deeds the fundamental alternative to tyranny that exists in any age. As Strauss concludes, even “if they didn’t save the Republic, they saved republicanism.” In so doing, they became “powerful reminders that as long as men and women remember the names of those who killed Julius Caesar, dictators will not sleep safely.”

The lasting lesson of the death of Caesar, and of the broader Roman revolution that replaced a republic with tyranny and empire, is that what endures is something the politics of power can never hope to explain. Humans possess the capacity to stand against tyranny. Whether they succeed or fail, they can demonstrate timeless qualities worthy of imitation in any age.

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