

In a recent survey of the Roman Empire the following observation was made: "Yet as the historian Appian observed of Caesar, the man who in reality ended the Republic, 'he strengthened, systematized and secured [power] and, while preserving the form and name of the republic, made himself the absolute master of all'" (Chester Starr, The Roman Empire, Oxford, 1982, p.4). One of the major reasons why Caesar ended the republic, but did not truly create the empire (a task undertaken by his successor, Augustus) was Caesar's personality.

In the first place Caesar was a classic over-compensator. As Plutarch in his biography of Caesar states, "He was a slightly built man, had a soft and white skin, suffered from headaches and was subject to epileptic fits" (Fall of the Roman Republic, Penguin, 1966, p.231). Yet rather than submit to his malady, Caesar drove himself extra hard, eating simple fare, sleeping out at night while on campaign,, and travelling far and fast. That such a man should wish to dominate all others goes without saying. His ambition, as many anecdotes attest, was profound, and Caesar was dedicated to reaching the top, spending money lavishly, making war vigourously, delivering speeches and making political accommodations at a frightful pace.

Yet there was another, softer side to Caesar; "he had an ability to make himself liked", and was noted for "his easy manners and the friendly way in which he mixed with people" (Fall of the Roman Republic, p. 219). We would say of him today that he had a natural charisma and charm. The vigour and drive of the man coupled with this affability made for a most formidable and effective combination. What could not be attained by the one character trait could always be brought about by the other. So we hear that in the Civil Wars, in which Caesar ended the Republic, Caesar and his army, outnumbered and outsupplied often by the enemy, prevailed again and again through their sheer perseverance of spirit. Then, with the fighting over, Caesar would trot out his charm and, exercising his vaunted mercy (clementia), would seek to conquer his foes all over by pardoning them with open-handed generosity.

It was no wonder that such a man would come, in the end, to believe that all things touching the affairs of men were open to his manipulation and control. All Caesar need do was to focus the redoubtable powers of his efficacious personality upon a given problem and it would evaporate and resolve itself. So it was that in his vaunting overconfidence (hybris to the Greek dramatists) he played with the notion of kingship, but settled for being named dictator for life (dictator perpetuus). On the Ides of March of 44 B.C. neither his vigour nor his charm prevailed against the daggers of the assassins, and it was left to his now warned grand-nephew, Octavius, to find a more balanced solution to Rome's constitutional problems.