# The Roman Empire. Or Republic. Or...Which Was It?: Crash Course World History #10

Crash Course: World History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=oPf27gAup9U
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Hi, I'm John Green; this is Crash Course World History and today we're going to learn about the Roman Empire, which of course began when two totally nonfictional twins, Romulus and Remus, who'd been raised by wolves, founded a city on seven hills.

Mr Green, Mr Green, what, what does SPQR stand for?

It means shut pie hole quickly, rapscallion. No, it means SenÄ•tus Populusque RÅ•mÄ•nus, one of the mottos of the Roman Republic.

So today we're going to do some old school Great Man History and focus on Julius Caesar while trying to answer a question: When, if ever, is it OK to stab someone 23 times?

(Intro)

Shakespeare answers that question by saying that Roman senators killed Caesar because he was going to destroy the Roman republic, but even if that's true, we still have to answer whether:

a. The Roman Republic was worth preserving, and

b. whether Caesar actually destroyed it.

One of the things that made the Roman republic endure, both in reality and in imagination was its balance. According to the Greek historian Polybius, "THE THREE kinds of government, monarchy, aristocracy and democracy, were all found united in Rome. And it was no easy thing to determine with assurance, whether the entire state was an aristocracy, a democracy, or a monarchy."

At the heart of this blended system was the Senate, a body of legislators chosen from a group of elite families. (Rome was divided into two broad classes: the Patricians – the small group of aristocratic families and the Plebeians, basically everybody else. The Senators were drawn from the Patricians.) The Senate was a sort of a mixture of legislature and giant advisory council. Their main job was to set the policy for the Consuls.

Each year the Senate would choose from among its ranks 2 co-Consuls to serve as sort of the chief executives of Rome. There needed to be two so they could check each other's ambition, and also so that one could, you know, take care of Rome domestically, while the other was off fighting wars, and conquering new territory.

There were two additional checks on power: First, the one-year term. I mean, how much trouble could you really do in a year, right? Unless you're the CEO of Netflix, I mean he destroyed that company in like two weeks.

And secondly, once a senator had served as consul, he was forbidden to serve as consul again for at least 10 years. Although that went a little bit like you say you're only going to eat one Chipotle burrito per week, and then there are a few exceptions, and then all of a sudden you're there every day, and YES, I know guacamole is more, JUST GIVE IT TO ME!

But right, we were talking about the Romans. The Romans also had a position of dictator, a person who would who'd take over in the event the Republic was in imminent danger. The paradigm for this selfless Roman ruler was Cincinnatus, a general who came out of comfortable retirement at his plantation, took command of an army, defeated whatever enemy he was battling, and then laid down his command and returned to his farm, safe in the knowledge that one day the second largest city in Ohio would be named for him.

If that model of leadership sounds familiar to Americans by the way, it's because George Washington was heavily influenced by Cincinnatus when he invented the idea of a two term president. So along comes Caesar. Gaius Ju- Gay-us? No it's Gaius, I know from Battlestar Galactica.

Gaius Julius Caesar was born around 100 BCE to one of Rome's leading families. His birth was somewhat miraculous, requiring a surgical procedure that we know as Cesarean section. Coming as he did from the senatorial class, it was natural that Caesar would serve in both the army and the Senate, which he did. He rose through the ranks, and after some top-notch generalling, and a gig as the governor of Spain, he decided to run for consul.

In order to win, Caesar needed financial help, which he got from Crassus, one of Rome's richest men. Crassus ran a private fire company whose business model was essentially, "Hey, I notice your house is on fire. Give me some money and I'll help you out with that."

Caesar succeeded in becoming consul in 59 BCE and thereafter sought to dominate Roman politics by allying himself with Crassus and also with Rome's other most powerful man, the general Pompey. You'll no doubt remember Pompey from his fascination with Alexander the Great. Pompey, Crassus, and Caesar were the so-called first triumvirate, and the alliance worked out super well, for Caesar. Not so well for the other two.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble. After a year as consul that included getting the senate to pass laws largely because of intimidation by Pompey's troops, Caesar landed the governorship of Gaul, at least the southern part of Gaul that Rome controlled. He quickly conquered the rest of Gaul and his four loyal armies - or legions, as the Romans called them - became his source of power. Caesar continued his conquests, invading Britain and waging another successful war against the Gauls.

While he was away, Crassus died in battle with the Parthians and Pompey, who had become Caesar's rival and enemy, was elected Consul. Pompey and the Senate decided to try to strip Caesar of his command and recall him to Rome. If he returned to Rome without an army, Caesar would have been prosecuted for corrupt consuling and also probably exceeding his authority as governor, so instead he returned with the 13th Legion.

He crossed the Rubicon River, famously saying, "The die is cast" or possibly, "Let the die be cast." Sorry, Thought Bubble, sources disagree. Basically, Caesar was invading his own hometown. Pompey was in charge of Rome's army but like a boss fled the city, and by 48 BCE Caesar was in total command of all of Rome's holdings, having been named both dictator and consul.

Caesar set out to Egypt to track down Pompey only to learn that he'd already been assassinated by agents of the Pharaoh Ptolemy. Egypt had its own civil war at the time, between the Pharaoh and his sister/wife Cleopatra. Ptolemy was trying to curry favor with Caesar by killing his enemy, but Caesar was mad in that the-only-person-who-gets-to-tease-my-little-brother-is-me kind of way, except with murder instead of teasing. So Caesar sided with - and skoodilypooped with - Cleopatra. Thank you, Thought Bubble.

Cleopatra went on to become the last Pharaoh of Ancient Egypt and bet on Marc "I am the Wrong Horse" Antony instead of Emperor "There is a Baby Attached to My Leg" Augustus. But before all that, Caesar made his way back from Egypt to Rome, stopping off to defeat a few kings in the east, and was declared dictator again. That position that was later extended for ten years, and then for life.

He was elected consul in 46 BCE and then again in 45 BCE, this last time without a co-consul. By 45 BCE Caesar was the undisputed master of Rome and he pursued reforms that

strengthened his own power. He provided land pensions for his soldiers, restructured the debts of a huge percentage of Rome's debtors, and also changed the calendar to make it look more like the one we use today.

But by 44 BCE, many Senators had decided that Caesar controlled too much of the power in Rome, and so they stabbed him 23 times on the floor of the Roman senate. Caesar was duly surprised about this and everything, but he never said, "Et Tu, Brute" when he realized Brutus was one of the co-conspirators. That was an invention of Shakespeare.

The conspirators thought that the death of Caesar would bring about the restoration of the Republic, and they were wrong. For one thing, Caesar's reforms were really popular with the Rome's people, who were quick to hail his adopted son Octavian, as well as his second-in-command Mark "I am the Wrong Horse" Antony and a dude named Lepidus, as a second triumvirate.

This triumvirate was an awesome failure, degenerating into a second civil war. Octavian and Antony fought it out. Antony, being the wrong horse, lost. Octavian won, changed his name to Caesar Augustus, became sole ruler of Rome, attached a baby to his leg, adopted the title Emperor, and started printing coins identifying himself as Divini Filius: The Son of God. More on that next week.

Although Augustus tried to pretend that the forms of the Roman republic were still intact, the truth was that he made the laws and the Senate had become nothing more than a rubber stamp. Which reminds me, it's time for the open letter.

Movie magic! An open letter to the Roman Senate. Oh, but first, let's see what's in the secret compartment. Ah, it's a harmonica! Stan, do you want me to play some old, Roman folk songs? Very well. Stan, I just want to thank you for doing such a good job of overdubbing there.

Dear Roman Senate, Whether you were rubber stamping the laws of Emperor Augustus, or stabbing Caesar on the floor of your sacred hall, you were always doing something! I don't want to sound nostalgic for a time when people lived to be 30, a tiny minority of adults could vote, and the best fashion choice was bed-sheets, but oh my god, at least you did something!

Your senate was chosen from among the Patrician class. Our senate here in the United States is chosen from among the obstructionist class. But don't get me wrong, Roman senate, you were terrible. Best wishes, John Green.

So did Caesar destroy the Republic? Well, he started a series of civil wars, he seized power for himself, he subverted the ideas of the republic, he changed the constitution, but he's only really to blame if he was the first one to do that. And he wasn't.

Take the general Marius, for instance, who rose to power on the strength of his generalship and on his willingness to open up the army to the poor, who were loyal to him personally, and not to Rome, and whom he promised land in exchange for their good service in the army. This of course required the Romans to keep conquering new land so they could keep giving it to new legionnaires. Marius also was consul 5 times in a row, 60 years before Caesar.

Or look at the general Sulla who, like Marius, ensured that his armies would be more loyal to him personally than to Rome, but who marched against Rome itself, and then became its dictator, executing thousands of people in 81 BCE, 30 years before Caesar entered the scene.

There is another way of looking at this question altogether if we dispense with great man history. Maybe Rome became an empire before it had an emperor. Like, remember the Persian Empire? You'll recall that empire had some characteristics that made it, imperial. Like a unified system of government, continual military expansion, and a diversity of subject peoples.

The Roman empire had all three of those characteristics long before it became The Roman Empire. Like Rome started out as a city, and then it became a city state, then a kingdom, and then a Republic, but that entire time, it was basically comprised of the area around Rome.

By the 4th century BCE, Rome started to incorporate its neighbors like the Latins and the Etruscans, and pretty soon they had all of Italy under their control, but that's not really diversity of subject peoples. I mean, nothing personal, Italians, but you have a lot of things in common, like the constant gesticulations.

If you want to talk about real expansion and diversity, you've got to talk about the Punic Wars. These were the wars that I remember, primarily because they involved Hannibal crossing the Alps with freaking war-elephants, which was probably the last time that the elephants could have risen up, and formed their awesome secret elephant society with elephant planes and elephant cars.

In the First Punic War, Rome wanted Sicily, which was controlled by the Carthaginians. Rome won, which made Carthage cranky, so they started the second Punic war. In 219 BCE, Hannibal attacked a Roman town and then led an army across Spain, and then crossed the freaking Alps with elephants.

Hannibal and his elephant army almost won, but alas, they didn't, and as a result the Romans got Spain. People in Spain are definitely NOT Romans (despite Russell Crowe's character in Gladiator), which means that by 201 BCE Rome was definitely an empire.

The third Punic War was a formality – Rome found some excuse to attack Carthage and then destroyed it so completely that these days you can't even find it on a map. Eventually this whole area, and a lot more, would be incorporated into a system of provinces and millions of people would be ruled by the Roman Empire.

And it's ridiculous to say that Rome was a Republic until Augustus became Rome's first official emperor, because by the time he did that, Rome had been an empire for almost 200 years. There's a reason I'm arguing that the death of the Republic came long before Caesar and probably around the time that Rome became an Empire.

If anything destroyed the idea of Republican Rome, it was the concentration of power into the hands of one man. And this man was always a general. I mean, you can't march on Rome without an army, after all. Why were there such powerful generals? Because Rome had decided to become an Empire, and empires need to expand militarily. Particularly, the Roman empire needed to expand militarily because it always needed new land to give its retired legionnaires.

That expansion created the all-powerful general and the incorporation of diverse peoples made it easier for them to be loyal to him, rather than to some abstract idea of the Republic. Julius Caesar didn't create emperors: Empire created them.

Next week we'll be discussing Christianity, so that shouldn't be controversial. Until then, thanks for watching.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script

supervisor is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself and our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

Last week's Phrase of the Week was "Pre-Distressed Designer Jeans" If you want to guess at this week's Phrase of the Week or suggest future ones, you can do so in Comments where you can also ask questions about today's video which our team of historians will endeavor to answer.

Thanks for watching, and as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.

Whoah! Geez! Yikes! Everything is fine!