

On the Rise of Augustus

Cicero, *Letters* DCCCXVI (F X, 28); DCCCXXXIX (BRUT. II, 5), DCCCXLI (BRUT. I, 3, §§ 1-3), CMIX (BRUT. I, 15). In *The Letters of Cicero; the whole extant correspondence in chronological order*, in four volumes. Evelyn S. Shuckburgh. London. George Bell and Sons. 1908-1909.

These letters were written in 43 BCE, after the assassination of Julius Caesar, whom Cicero regarded as a tyrant and a danger to Roman liberty. Cicero here shows that he regards the 19-year-old Octavian, usually referred to as young Caesar (after Caesar's death he was adopted via the dictator's will, becoming C. Julius Caesar Octavianus, or Octavian in modern histories), as a defender of the state against Caesar's ambitious lieutenant, M. Antonius, and—most tellingly—as a protégé of Cicero himself.

To C. Trebonius (In Asia): Rome, 2 February

How I could wish that you had invited me to that most glorious banquet on the Ides of March! We should have had no leavings! While, as it is, we are having such a trouble with them, that the magnificent service which you men then did the state leaves room for some grumbling. In fact, for Antony's having been taken out of the way by you—the best of men—and that it was by your kindness that this pest still survives, I sometimes do feel, though perhaps I have no right to do so, a little angry with you. For you have left behind an amount of trouble which is greater for me than for everyone else put together.

For as soon as a meeting of the senate could be freely held, after Antony's very undignified departure,¹ I returned to that old courage of mine, which along with that gallant taking over the province, as though he were "succeeding" to the governorship, without allowing his predecessor even the thirty days beyond his year given him by the Julian law. citizen, your father, you ever had upon your lips and in your heart. For the tribunes having summoned the senate for the 20th of December, and having brought a different piece of business before it, I reviewed the situation as a whole, and spoke with the greatest fire, and tried all I could to recall the now languid and wearied senate to its ancient and traditional valor, more by an exhibition of high spirit than of eloquence.²

This day and this earnest appeal from me were the first things that inspired the Roman people with the hope of recovering its liberty. And had not I supposed that a gazette of the city and of all acts of the senate was transmitted to you, I would have written you out a copy with my own hand, though

¹ When Antony had met the legions from Macedonia at Brundisium, he preceded them with a strong detachment to Rome, arriving between the 15th and 22nd of November, his main body of troops being ordered to muster at Tibur. He ordered in an edict a meeting of the senate on the 23rd, but did not appear, having put off the meeting by another edict to the 28th. He, however, only transacted some formal business—a supplicatio in honour of Lepidus, and a sortitio of the provinces—and then hurriedly left the city for Tibur, probably on hearing of the desertion of the two legions.

² This is the speech known as the third Philippic.

³ Cicero had advocated in the senate on the 1st and following days of January the most uncompromising hostility to Antony, the fullest

I have been overpowered with a multiplicity of business. But you will learn all that from others. From me you shall have a brief narrative, and that a mere summary. Our senate is courageous, but the consulars are partly timid, partly disaffected.³ We have had a great loss in Servius.⁴ L. Caesar entertains the most loyal sentiments, but, being Antony's uncle, he refrains from very strong language in the senate. The consuls are splendid. D. Brutus is covering himself with glory. The youthful Caesar is behaving excellently, and I hope he will go on as he has begun. You may at any rate be sure of this—that, had he not speedily enrolled the veterans, and had not the two legions transferred themselves from Antony's army to his command, and had not Antony been confronted with that danger, there is no crime or cruelty which he would have omitted to practice. Though I suppose these facts to have been told you, yet I wished you to know them still better. I will write more when I get more leisure.

To M. Junius Brutus (At Dyrrachium): Rome, 16 April

I believe that your friends—to not one of whom do I yield in affection to you—have written to tell you what dispatches were read in the senate on the 13th of April from you, and at the same time from Antony. But though there was no need for us all to repeat the same story, yet it is necessary that I should write and tell you my feeling, deliberate opinion, and sentiments as to the nature of this war generally. My object, Brutus, in imperial politics has always been the same as your own: my policy in certain points—not in all—has perhaps been somewhat more drastic. You know that it was always my opinion that the Republic should be delivered not only from a tyrant but from a tyranny also.⁵ You took a more indulgent view—to your own undying honor, no doubt. But which was the better course we have felt to our bitter sorrow, and are still feeling to our grave peril. More recently you have directed all your efforts to secure peace—which could not be brought about by mere words—I to secure liberty, which is impossible without peace.⁶ But my view was that peace itself could be brought about by war and arms. There was no want of enthusiasts who were eager to fight, but we checked their enthusiasm and damped their ardor. And so it had come to such a pass that, had not some god inspired Caesar Octavianus

recognition of Octavian and of the action of the two legions, and of D. Brutus. But he could not get his motion passed, the embassy to Antony being voted on the 7th, as a tentative measure before proceeding to extremities.

⁴ Ser. Sulpicius Rufus, who died while on the mission in Antony's camp, near Mutina.

⁵ That is, that Antony should have shared the fate of Caesar. See pp. 174, 214, etc.

⁶ Cicero puts the converse in Phil. 2.113, when he says that "peace is liberty without war," *pax est tranquilla libertas*.

with that resolution, we must necessarily have fallen under the power of M. Antonius, the most abandoned and depraved of men, with whom you see at this very moment in what a desperate contest we are engaged. Now that, of course, would never have occurred if Antony had not been spared at that time.⁷ But I pass over these reflections: for the deed which you performed—ever memorable and all but divine—disarms all criticism, for it is one which can never be even praised in terms adequate to its merit....

To M. Junius Brutus (At Dyrrachium): Rome, 21 April

Our cause seems in a better position: for I feel sure that you have had letters telling you what has happened.⁸ The consuls⁹ have shown themselves to be the sort of men I have often described them in my letters. In the youthful Caesar indeed there is a surprising natural strain of virtue. Pray heaven we may govern him in the flush of honors and popularity as easily as we have held him up to this time. That is certainly a more difficult thing, but nevertheless I have no mistrust. For the young man has been convinced, and chiefly by my arguments, that our safety is his work, and that at least, if he had not diverted Antony from the city, all would have been lost.¹⁰ Three or four days indeed before this glorious news, the city, struck by a sudden panic,¹¹ was for pouring out with wives and children to seek you. The same city on the 20th of April, with its fears all dispelled, would rather that you came here than go to you. On that day in very truth I reaped the most abundant harvest of my great labors and my many sleepless nights—that is, at least, if there is a harvest in genuine and well-grounded glory. For I was surrounded by a concourse of people as great as our city can contain, by whom I was escorted to the Capitol and placed upon the rostra¹² amidst the loudest cheers and applause. I have no vanity in me—and indeed I ought to have none: yet after all a unanimous feeling of all orders, thanks, and congratulations do move my heart, because it is a thing to be proud of that in the hour of the people's preservation I should be the people's hero. But these things I would rather you heard from others. Pray inform me of your own doings and plans with the greatest exactness; and do be careful that your generosity does not bear the appearance of weakness.¹³ This is the sentiment of the senate, and of the people, that no enemies ever more richly deserved condign punishment than those citizens who have taken up arms against their country in this war. Indeed in every speech I make in the senate I call for vengeance upon them and attack them amidst the applause of all loyal citizens. What your view of this is I must leave you to judge for

yourself: my opinion is that all three brothers stand on one and the same ground.

To M. Junius Brutus (In Macedonia): Rome (mid-July)

...But what has been my aim during this war in the motions I have made in the senate I think it will not be out of place to explain. After the death of Caesar and your ever memorable Ides of March, Brutus, you have not forgotten what I said had been omitted by you and your colleagues, and what a heavy cloud I declared to be hanging over the Republic. A great pest had been removed by your means, a great blot on the Roman people wiped out, immense glory in truth acquired by yourselves: but an engine for exercising kingly power had been put into the hands of Lepidus and Antony, of whom the former was the more fickle of the two, the latter the more corrupt, but both of whom dreaded peace and were enemies to quiet. Against these men, inflamed with the ambition of revolutionizing the state, we had no protecting force to oppose. For the fact of the matter was this: the state had become roused as one man to maintain its liberty; I at the time was even excessively warlike; you, perhaps with more wisdom, quitted the city which you had liberated, and when Italy offered you her services declined them. Accordingly, when I saw the city in the possession of parricides, and that neither you nor Cassius could remain in it with safety, and that it was held down by Antony's armed guards, I thought that I too ought to leave it: for a city held down by traitors, with all opportunity of giving aid cut off, was a shocking spectacle. But the same spirit as always had animated me, staunch to the love of country, did not admit the thought of a departure from its dangers. Accordingly, in the very midst of my voyage to Achaia, when in the period of the Etesian gales a south wind—as though remonstrating against my design—had brought me back to Italy, I saw you at Velia and was much distressed: for you were on the point of leaving the country, Brutus—leaving it, I say, for our friends the Stoics deny that wise men ever “flee.”

As soon as I reached Rome I at once threw myself in opposition to Antony's treason and insane policy: and having roused his wrath against me, I began entering upon a policy truly Brutus-like—for this is the distinctive mark of your family—that of freeing my country. The rest of the story is too long to tell, and must be passed over by me, for it is about myself. I will only say this much: that this young Caesar, thanks to whom we still exist, if we would confess the truth, was a stream from the fountain-head of my policy. To him I voted honors, none indeed, Brutus, that were not his due, none that were not inevitable. For directly we began the recovery of

⁷ That is, when Caesar was murdered. Cicero still labours under the delusion that the revolution all depended on one man. If Antony had been murdered on the Ides of March, were there no others ready to play his part, and still more ably? Augustus is the best answer. It is well to observe how little mere assassination has ever been able to effect in political movements.

⁸ The victory of Forum Gallorum over Antony's troops, let in part by Octavian.

⁹ C. Vibius Pansa Caetronianus and A. Hirtius, whom Octavian assisted as a private citizen.

¹⁰ Cicero argues that Octavian's consciousness of having done the loyalists a good service will attach him the more to them. He will be unwilling to forfeit the good opinion he has earned. He little knew Octavian and his secret purposes.

¹¹ This appears to have been caused by the action of the praetor Ventidius Bassus, who enrolled two legions of veterans, and was supposed to be coming to Rome to seize Cicero and the leading opponents of Antony. He, however, marched to Ariminum, and succeeded in joining Antony after the battle by a splendid march across country to Vado (Appian, BCE 3.66).

¹² The rostra of course was not on the Capitol, and this has been put forward as an argument against the genuineness of the letter. I think Cicero may be putting the story shortly. The procession first went to the Capitol to offer thanks to Jupiter, and then came down to the forum to be addressed from the rostra.

¹³ That is, in sparing C. Antonius.

liberty, when the divine excellence of even D. Brutus had not yet bestirred itself sufficiently to give us an indication of the truth, and when our sole protection depended on the boy who had shaken Antony from our shoulders, what honor was there that he did not deserve to have decreed to him? However, all I then proposed for him was a complimentary vote. of thanks, and that too expressed with moderation. I also proposed a decree conferring imperium on him, which, although it seemed too great a compliment for one of his age, was yet necessary for one commanding an army—for what is an army without a commander with imperium?¹⁴ Philippus proposed a statue; Servius at first proposed a license to stand for office before the regular time. Servilius afterwards proposed that the time should be still farther curtailed. At that time nothing was thought too good for him.

But somehow men are more easily found who are liberal at a time of alarm, than grateful when victory has been won. For when that most joyful day of D. Brutus's relief from blockade had dawned on the Republic and happened also to be his birthday, I proposed that the name of Brutus should be entered in the fasti under that date. And in that I followed the example of our ancestors, who paid this honor to the woman Laurentia, at whose altar in the Velabrum you pontiffs are accustomed to

offer sacrifice. And when I proposed this honor to Brutus I wished that there should be in the fasti an eternal memorial of a most welcome victory: and yet on that very day I discovered that the ill-disposed in the senate were somewhat in a majority over the grateful. In the course of those same days I lavished honors—if you like that word—upon the dead Hirtius, Pansa, and even Aquila. And who has any fault to find with that, unless he be one who, no sooner an alarm is over, forgets the past danger? There was added to this grateful memorial of a benefit received some consideration of what would be for the good of posterity also; for I wished that there should exist some perpetual record of the popular execration of our most ruthless enemies. I suspect that the next step does not meet with your approbation. It was disapproved by your friends, who are indeed most excellent citizens, but inexperienced in public business. I mean my proposing an ovation for Caesar. For myself; however—though I am perhaps wrong, and I am not a man who believes his own way necessarily right—I think that in the course of this war I never took a more prudent step. The reason for this I must not reveal, lest I should seem to have a sense of favors to come rather than to be grateful for those received. I have said too much already: let us look at other points....

¹⁴ This is founded on *Phil.* 5.45.