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Should Julius Caesar Have Crossed the Rubicon?

In the opening lines of the *Aeneid*, the poet Vergil wrote, “Regina deum tot volvere casus insignem pietate virum, tot adire labores impulverit,” or “How was the Queen of the gods offended to drive a man noted for his virtue to endure such tasks?” The poem that defines the characteristics of a great man, an exceptional Roman, lists piety above all other ideals. Of all things, Romans valued piety over strength and wit. Piety is defined as faithfulness to country, gods, and family. One who was pious would be reverent to his gods, patriotic and respectful to his country, and providing and caring to his family. Julius Caesar contradicted the proper, pious Roman, because he disobeyed the government of his nation, broke the sanctity of Italy, and brought war on the people of Rome. It is for these reasons that Caesar should not have crossed the Rubicon.

For the first point, he impiously disobeyed the government of his nation, the Senate, and the people of Rome. After his consulship, he was given charge over Roman forest. An unusual task for an ex-consul, but it was a task given to him by his countrymen. This was actually warranted. During his consulship, he passed laws that broke governmental custom and were disastrous for the Republican system. Instead of accepting his post as Roman forester, he used his power in the First Triumvirate to gain control of the provinces of Illyricum and Cisalpine Gaul, an illegal measure in itself. After this, he conquered Gaul proper and invaded Britain, illegally, because it was not at the behest of the Senate, at the cost of thousands of Roman lives and inflating the currency nearly a third of its total value. As if this wasn't enough, he promptly added Transalpine Gaul to his demesne. When defending Caesar, people often enjoy blaming the Senate for playing politics, but the fact is that they were merely trying to prevent seizure of power and preserve the Republic. Through his actions regarding his consulship and governorships, he entirely abused his power and insulted the integrity of the Republican system.

Secondly, Casesar broke the traditional laws regarding Italy by crossing the Rubicon with a legion, specifically the Legio XIII Gemina, his own personal gubernatorial army. He was requested to disband his army prior to entering the province, but he refused the emissary of the Senate. During the Republic, laws were made restricting an armed force being brought into the province of Italy, so that civil wars were avoided and power rested with those popular in the senate, not the military. Generally, people overlook the true significance behind Caesar's action. He effectively declared war on the Republic by disobeying the governing institution and breaking traditional laws designed to protect the government.

Finally, Caesar was not justified in crossing the Rubicon, because he brought war and devastation onto the people of Rome, those whom he claimed to be defending. Due to his rash actions, Caesar cost the people of Rome nearly 97,000 lives from combat alone, not to mention disease and attrition. His civil war also cost the lives of brilliant Roman minds such as Pompey, Curio, Titus Labienus, and many others. All of the death, destruction, and entanglements with other nations could have been saved if he had merely respected the Roman government and its people.

In other words, if Caesar had truly respected his country, if he had truly had respect for his fellow Romans, if he had truly been a pious man, he would not have crossed the Rubicon. He would have left his army at the border of Italy and continued on towards Rome, where he would be forced to rely on other people to elect him Consul for a second term, rather than pure military might and his own urge to power. Furthermore, this action of his was against his belief system, as a populares. If he cared for the well-being of the Roman people, he would have saved them from the slaughter of war.

In today's world, where history is written by the victor, Caesar is seen as a man who defied a corrupt Senate, brought glory to Rome, led the Republic to greatness, and fought against forces that were tearing the Republic apart. In actuality, Caesar contributed to the demise of the Republic more so than any one man. The Republic relied on status quo. It relied on genteel, educated, landowning noblemen who made up the Senate to make prudent and well thought-out decisions. Rome was a nation of laws and order. Caesar contradicted this at every turn by acting illegally far too frequently by inflating the currency, brutally occupying neighboring cultures under the guise of self-protection, invading other nations with dubious reasoning, and taking power without proper consent.

To conclude, Caesar should not have crossed the Rubicon, because the very act was anti-Roman. He did not really care about his nation, as a pious man would. He lacked proper regard for Rome's rules and customs, for its governing body, for its role, one of order and enlightenment on the fringes of society, in the world, and for its people. The entire action of crossing the Rubicon was a power play for him. He knew what he did would begin a war. His action immediately after crossing the river shows this. Not long after his phrase "Alea iacta est," or "The die has been cast," was uttered, he marched on and occupied Rome, the capital of the place that he claimed to hold so near and dear. He promptly forced the Roman senators still in Rome to name him dictator. If he was truly a great man, and not one corrupted by power, he would have maintained his legitimacy after the civil war. Instead he manipulated himself into the position of "Dictator Perpetuo," or "Dictator-for-Life," and was killed by the men whom he considered to be his colleagues. The fall of a redeemable man began alongside a river, and it ended alongside a river, albeit a different one. Even his urge for, rush to, and seizure of power were filled with rivers. Those of greed, those of blood, and those of water.