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The *Existimatio* of Julius Caesar

Steve O'Bryan

The *existimatio* of Julius Caesar was a decisive factor in the events immediately following his assassination on the Ides of March, 44 B.C.. It is, therefore, somewhat of a surprise to note that given the extensive body of literature, which has examined every aspect of his life and political career, little has been written about the connection between Caesar's *existimatio* and the events that followed his death. A possible exception to this is an article by Zwi Yavetz entitled "*Existimatio*, Fama, and the Ides of March," in which he deals with the meaning and use of the word *existimatio* in the late Roman republic.¹

In Rome, *existimatio* referred to the perception of a politician by the people- his public image. *Existimatio* was based partially on birth (*genus*), official position (*honos*), and wealth (*copiae*).² The most important component of an individual's *existimatio*, however, was influential friends. They spoke well of a man in the right places. And at the right times they were indispensable in creating a favorable *existimatio*. *Existimatio* was not always based on actual merit. In contemporary politics, *existimatio* is analogous to the efforts made by today's campaign managers to project a positive image of a political candidate. A favorable *existimatio* depended primarily on what other people were doing and saying on behalf of a particular individual. "For this reason Roman politicians expended considerable effort in order to make people speak favorably of them and even organized the dissemination of rumors in order

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to enhance their reputations."³ Caesar was a realist. He, and his enemies were continually engaged in propaganda offensives.

Caesar encountered strong opposition from the Roman Senate. This opposition consisted primarily of two groups of senators, both of which objected to Caesar but for different reasons. The first group consisted of men like Cicero and Brutus, who were in the minority. They objected to Caesar on philosophical grounds, the basis of which was their knowledge of and background in Greek culture in general and Greek political theory and history in particular. "People like Cicero know that the Greeks admired tyrannicides and indulged in a similar attitude... it was a disgrace to associate with him (a tyrant) and there was no nobler enterprise than to murder him."⁴

The second group was more representative of the Senate, generally. This group consisted of senators who did not have the extensive Greek background of someone like Cicero. These senators looked at Caesar not through the perspective of Greek political theory, but rather as a man who had trampled on the traditional, republican, consitutional conventions, however anachronistic they might have been. They judged Caesar according to his "faithfulness to Republician tradition" and "his devotion to *mos maiorum*."⁵ In their eyes, he was found wanting on both counts.

Caesar's enemies attempted to damage his *existimatio* through the manipulation of several propagandistic techniques common to republican Rome, the spreading of false rumors and the distributing slanderous pamphlets.⁶ These were difficult to ignore but at the same time difficult to deal with in a positive fashion. Further, Caesar's own enigmatic behavior added additional fuel to the complaints of his enemies.⁷

Nevertheless, despite the efforts to discredit Caesar in the eyes of the people, his popularity remained high. Yavetz concludes that the conspirators misjudged the political situation in Rome and did not take into account the positive character of Caesar's *existimatio* at the time of his assassination. However, Yavetz does not go far enough in his analysis of Caesar's *existimatio* by including a discussion of the events immediately following the assassination. He does not consider the funeral oration of Antony nor does he consider the myriad of details that are documented in the sources as leading up to the funeral of Caesar.

After the death of Caesar, the urban plebs reacted adversely to the news of his murder. What was the basis for this negative reaction? Was the loss of Caesar, in itself, enough to move the people or were they misled and manipulated by Antony for his own ends as traditionally held? What affect did the events immediately following the murder of Caesar have on public opinion in Rome? Did Antony orchestrate the negative reaction of the urban plebs to the assassination of Caesar?

The Events of 15 March to 17 March 44 BC

Julius Caesar was murdered in the late morning of 15 March 44 BC. In the immediate aftermath of the assassination, the panic-stricken senators fled from the Senate house.⁸ Antony, who had been detained at the door by Trebonius before the assassination,⁹ fled in fear for his life and fortified his house.¹⁰ Lepidus, *magister equitum* and equally fearful, withdrew across the Tiber.¹¹ The conspirators left the body of Caesar in the Senate house. Eventually, the body was carried home on a litter by three slaves.¹² The conspirators, however, originally intended to leave the body unburied, since they held that it was right to kill a tyrant who had abused his power.¹³ Further, the body was to be exhibited as an example and thrown into the Tiber.¹⁴ As the sequence of events unfolded and the smoke began to clear, two factors prevented this from happening: the negative reaction of the urban plebs and the intervention of Antony.

After the murder, one of the conspirators fixed the liberty cap on the end of a spear.¹⁵ The conspirators then marched *en masse* through the streets from the Senate house to the Capitol openly displaying their daggers and exhorting the people to freedom. They declared that liberty had been restored.¹⁶ However, *libertas* had little significance for the common man on the streets of Rome. *Libertas*, as espoused by Brutus and the other conspirators, was, in the eyes of the plebs, merely political rhetoric and political idealism that had no direct bearing on their everyday affairs. The urban mob had little to lose in the passing of the conspirator's idea of *libertas*. Consequently, when the conspirators made their ascent to the Capitol, marching through the streets of Rome in apparent triumph, as Plutarch describes,¹⁷ they received a rather bewildered and perplexed response from the people. What further response they did receive was one of relief that no one else was to be killed. The conspirators received no support for their actions at this time and were alarmed. Appian reports their subsequent anxiety and apprehension over the attitude of the plebs and the probable attitude of Caesar's soldiers.¹⁸

For when you have killed a tyrant, it is disconcerting to find yourself surrounded by people who are not convinced, from the acts performed during his lifetime, that the man whom you have killed was a tyrant at all.¹⁹

Their triumphal procession had turned into a flight. "They had failed to create an image themselves as liberators."²⁰ The conspirators held the key to future action. It was quickly becoming apparent, however, that the conspirators had no plan of action beyond the elimination of Caesar. They believed that once they had killed the tyrant the Republic would

automatically be restored. Not only was the Republic not restored, but it could not be restored. The real power in the Roman state had passed out of the hands of the Senate, and it was now in the hands of the general who could command the largest and most powerful army. This was the legacy of decades of civil war and assault on republican institutions and traditions. The Republic was gone and no amount of political exhortation by the conspirators would revive it. Brutus and Cassius could not command the loyalty of the large army,²¹ which had passed into the hands of Caesar's supporters and successors. Neither did they have the support of the plebs. Their position was therefore weak and deteriorating rapidly.

Realizing the true state of affairs and no longer fearing for their own safety, Lepidus, and particularly, Antony, re-emerged. During the late night of the fifteenth (or the early morning of the sixteenth) Lepidus moved his troops from across the Tiber and secured and occupied the Forum.²² Apparently, Lepidus and Balbus, Caesar's secretary, were eager for revenge, but Antony sided with the "more moderate and prudent Hirtius," the designated consul for the next year.²³ Antony asserted himself more forcefully on the sixteenth. For the time being, at least, the army was in the service of Antony and Lepidus.

Sometime during the sixteenth, the conspirators, led by Brutus and Cassius, descended from the Capitol into the Forum to make another vain appeal to the plebs.²⁴ The speech of Brutus fell flat and, according to Plutarch the only thing that saved Brutus was that the crowd was struck with sympathy and awe at the sight of him. The speech was a controlled, logical, patriotic exposition of the position of the conspirators that made strong appeals to republican tradition.²⁵ However, the speech was met with an apathetic hostility and his attempt for acceptance failed. Brutus sent a copy of the speech to Cicero for his approval prior to its publication and Cicero commented on it in a letter to Atticus dated 18 May 44.²⁶ Cicero did not criticize the content nor the logical exposition of the speech. Rather, he would have given more consideration to the context in which the speech was delivered and put more fire into it.²⁷ Cicero, recognizing the critical opportunity Brutus had squandered, criticized the speech only from hindsight. But at this point, the plebs would have been unreceptive to any speech regardless of how it was delivered.

Reacting to this second rejection by the plebs, Brutus and Cassius returned to the Capitol. Here they were joined by Cicero who urged that the *praetors*, M. Brutus and C. Cassius should assume command of the state and convene the senate.²⁸ This advice was rejected and the conspirators decided to open negotiation with Antony, which were carried on via messengers between the conspirators and Antony during the day of 16 March. The negotiations culminated in the summoning of the Senate by

Antony to convene on the morning of 17 March to resolve the present crisis.²⁹

Up to this moment one important point is clear, the urban plebs thoroughly disapproved of the murder of Caesar and demonstrated their displeasure despite attempts by the conspirators to sway their thinking.³⁰ The sources make it clear that this had nothing whatever to do with Antony. They indicate that prior to the Senate meeting on the morning of 17 March, Antony was relatively inconspicuous. Further, on 15 and 16 March, it was not yet known that Caesar had bequeathed his gardens along the Tiber to the city of Rome, nor was it known that Caesar had also bequeathed a sum of three hundred *sesterces* to each individual citizen.³¹ It cannot be said that the plebs had been bought off by the contents of Caesar's will, or, up to this point, manipulated by Antony. Ideology aside, the people remained faithful to a man they considered both friend and benefactor. For this reason, the urban population was a factor that could not be ignored. The conspirators had, indeed, misread the *existimatio* of Caesar. The *existimatio* of Caesar had worked against the conspirators and placed them in a most precarious position, with the urban population of Rome on one side and the re-emerging Antony on the other.

As for the funeral oration of Antony and the alleged role it played in the manipulation of public opinion and emotion, there are a number of brief points to be made.³² 1) There is no agreement in the ancient sources as to what it was that Antony actually said in his speech.³³ It certainly was not as dramatic and demagogic as Shakespeare would write in his *Julius Caesar*.³⁴ However, the ancient sources range from the obvious fabrication of Dio to the reticence of Suetonius.³⁵ 2) The traditional belief that Antony deliberately stirred up and excited the masses into riotous behavior by means of his funeral oration probably has its source in Cicero. In *Philippic* 2.91 Cicero writes:

Tua illa pulchra laudatio, tua miseratio, tua cohortatio; tu, tu, inquam, illas faces incendisti, et eas, quibus semustulatis ille est, et eas, quibus incesta L. Bellieni domus deflagavit; tu illos impetus perditorum hominum et ex maxima parte servorum, quos nos vi manuque reppulimus, in nostros domos inmisisti.

There is little doubt, however, that Cicero probably goes too far in his condemnation of Antony; he blames him too severely. Of course, by this time (October-November 44), Cicero's attitude toward Antony had hardened. However, the sources do attest to the fact that the funeral excited popular demonstrations and riots. The sight of Caesar's body and bloody clothes probably precipitated the riotous action of the people. It

seems that this one picture contained more evocative power than any funeral oration could hope to have delivered. These brief comments, however, hardly do justice to the problems raised by the funeral oration of Antony.

Antony's prospects were improving rapidly. He was responsible for the negotiations with the conspirators that led to the meeting of the Senate on the morning of 17 March. Also there were a number of other circumstances in his favor; he was the surviving consul for the year and he had been closely associated with Caesar and could realistically hope to inherit the loyalty of his troops. Along with Lepidus, Antony held the immediate control of the troops in the city of Rome. The urban population had thoroughly rejected the entreaties of the conspirators for support. The hopes of the conspirators had fallen far short of their expectations and it was quite obvious that they had no firm basis for action much less a plan. Their political idealism had little in the way of tangible support at this time. Cicero's comment "*Acta enim illa res est animo virili, consilio puerili*" is especially appropriate at this point.³⁶ All of the above factors combined to negate any claims to power the conspirators might have entertained. Antony probably realized that this could be his moment.

The Senate met on the morning of 17 March, having been summoned by Antony the previous day. A small minority of the senators openly praised the action of the conspirators.³⁷ One senator, Tiberius Claudius Nero, proposed that the tyrannicides be voted special honors.³⁸ The conspirators, however, were neither to be honored nor condemned. Proposals for amnesty and the confirmation of Caesar's *acta* were brought forth for consideration.³⁹ Cicero was present at this meeting. The speech he delivered included a call for amnesty that was to be extended to all those involved in the conspiracy.⁴⁰ Antony, being more pragmatic, pointed out to the Senate how many of its individual members owed their positions to Caesar's *acta*.⁴¹ The conspirators, who were not condemned by the *acta* of Caesar, were confirmed and allowed to stand.⁴² Antony, most assuredly, expected the confirmation of Caesar's *acta* to be of great benefit to him, advocated their confirmation of the *acta*, and was generally conciliatory in his behavior.⁴³

At this point, Antony must have considered his prospects promising. However, the prospects of the conspirators had been shut into total darkness. The outcome of the Senate's meeting on the morning of 17 March merely confirmed what had become obvious. The conspirators "had lost, at once and forever, the chance to gain ascendancy over the Senate. The people, unfriendly to begin with, turned sharply against them...The session of 17 March was the real calamity."⁴⁴ Cicero laments this lost initiative in a letter to Atticus dated 19 April 44.⁴⁵ Nothing had been gained except the elimination of Caesar and that had brought the

odium of the masses down on the conspirators. Caesar's *acta* and his political supporters had survived his assassination.⁴⁶ However, contradictory though it may seem, the compromise reached by the Senate was the only real option open to sensible men. Aside from an absolute bloodbath, the conspirators had no choice but to accept the amnesty and the conciliatory gestures of Antony. The conspirators were in no position to bargain. Knight gives a rather grim but realistic assessment of their position:

The reaction to the murder of Caesar by the populace of Rome alone was enough to show that the liberators were perhaps fortunate to be still alive, and to have declared open hostility to Antony, who led the Caesarian party and therefore the Roman army in the West, would have been tantamount to a public announcement of an intention to commit suicide. The Republicans had little to support them at this stage except their platform and this would have done them little good, in an open declaration of hostility, in view of the forces that could be arraigned against them.⁴⁷

The Republic was dead and its revival was impossible.

Concluding Remarks

Regardless of the public reaction to his funeral, the ancient sources suggest that popular feeling for Caesar was positive at the time of his death. The people judged political figures by the benefits wrought by them and by this standard Caesar was a friend in their eyes. The urban plebs had no roots in Rome's past and had little regard for the republican traditions so jealously guarded by the aristocracy. The *libertas* excitedly proclaimed by the conspirators following the assassination meant nothing to the urban plebs. To the surprise of the conspirators, the people did react adversely to the news of Caesar's death. Had the people enthusiastically supported and celebrated the murder of Caesar, Antony would have had no basis whatever for further action. Having been so closely tied to Caesar, it would have been impossible for him to have initiated any action, conciliatory or otherwise.

The negative reaction of the plebs and the hostility it produced gave Antony the opening by which he was able to assert himself against the claims of the conspirators. The plebs needed no promptings from Antony or inducements from Caesar's will to demonstrate their positive feelings for the dictator and their sincere sense of loss at his death. The *existimatio* of Caesar was positive and had been misread by his assassins.

NOTES

¹ Z. Yavetz, "Existimatio, Fama and the Ides of March," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 78 (1974), 35-65.

² Yavetz (supra n. 1) 56.

³ Yavetz (supra n. 1) 55.

⁴ Yavetz (supra n. 1) 63.

⁵ Yavetz (supra n. 1) 64.

⁶ Yavetz, *Plebs and Princeps* (Oxford, 1969), 62-67.

⁷ Plutarch, *Caesar* 60; Dio 44.8.

⁸ Appian *Bellum Civile* II 118; Cassius Dio, *A Roman History* 44.20.

(All references to ancient sources are taken from the Loeb Classical Library)

⁹ Appian *BC* II 117.

¹⁰ Appian *BC* II 118; Dio 44.22.2-3; Plutarch *Brutus* 18, *Antony* 14, *Caesar* 67; Cicero *Philippic*, 2 88.

¹¹ Appian *BC* II 118.

¹² Suetonius *Julius Caesar* 82.3; Appian *BC* II 118. "These had all fled except three slaves, who placed the body on a litter and, unsteadily enough, as bearers would, bore homeward him who, a little before, had been master of the earth and sea."

¹³ Suetonius *JC* 76.1 "...iure caesus..."

¹⁴ Suetonius *JC* 82.4

¹⁵ Appian *BC* II 119.

¹⁶ Plutarch *Caesar* 67; Appian *BC* II 119.

¹⁷ Plutarch *Caesar* 67.

¹⁸ Appian *BC* II 119.

¹⁹ Baldson, J. P. V. D., "The Ides of March," *Historia* (1958) 82.

²⁰ Yavetz (supra n. 6) 63-64.

²¹ Appian *BC* II 124, D. Brutus had been chosen by Caesar to be governor of Cisalpine Gaul, which had a large army; however, the loyalty of this army was an unknown factor at this time.

²² Appian *BC* II 126; Dio 44.22.1-2.

²³ Syme (supra n. 9) 97 n. 1.

²⁴ Plutarch *Caesar* 67; *Brutus* 18; Appian *BC* II 122; Dio 44.21; Syme (supra n. 9).

²⁵ Cicero *Ad Atticum* 15.1A.2; Syme (supra n. 9), 97.

²⁶ Cicero *Ad Atticum* 15.1A.2.

²⁷ "Ego tamen, si illam causam habuissem scripsissem ardentius."

²⁸ Cicero *Ad Atticum* 14.10.1.

²⁹ Appian *BC* II 124-126; Dio 44.22.3.

³⁰ The most graphic display of their displeasure prior to the funeral was their treatment of Cinna. Appian *BC* II 121, 126.

³¹ Suetonius *JC* 83; Dio 44.35.4, gives the sum of 120 sesterces.

³² The following two articles are important for any discussion of Antony's funeral oration: Deutsch, Monroe, E., "Antony Funeral Speech," *University of California Publications in Classical Philology* v. 9 n. 5 (1928) 127-148; Kennedy, George, "Antony's Speech at Caesar's Funeral," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 54 (April 1968), 99-106.

³³ Appian *BC* 144-146; Dio 44.35-50; Suetonius *JC* 84.2; Plutarch *Antony* 14, *Brutus* 30; Cicero *Philippic*, 2.91.

³⁴ Deutsch (supra n. 46); Kennedy (supra n. 46), 99.

³⁵ Suetonius *JC* 84.2, "...quibus perpauca a se verba addidit."

³⁶ Cicero *Ad Atticum* 14.21.3, dated 11 May 44.

³⁷ Appian *BC* II 127.

³⁸ Syme (supra n. 9) 98.

³⁹ Appian *BC* II 128; Cicero *Philippic* I 16-17. Caesar's *acta* consisted of numerous directives and memoranda regarding policy decisions, and appointments to city offices, magistracies and provincial commands. Scullard Cary and H.H. Scullard *A History of Rome* 3rd edition (New York, 1975), 284, 624 n.2) characterizes *acta* as an "agenda". Cicero doubts the authenticity of some of the *acta* offered to the Senate for confirmation on 17 March,... "ut multis multa promissa non fecit, quae tamen multo plura illo mortuo reperta sunt quam a vivo beneficia per omnis annos tributa et data."

⁴⁰ Cicero *Philippic* 1.1; Dio 44, 23-33; Millar, Fergus, *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Oxford 1964) 51-52, 79. Millar points out that "There can be no doubt that the speech was made by Cicero but there is no evidence that it was published and none of the sources seems to know anything of its content in detail. There can be little doubt that the speech in Dio is a free composition by himself...It must be assumed that Dio set out to write the speech with no clearer evidence that was given at the beginning of the First Philippic, or by sources deriving from it."

⁴¹ Appian *BC* II, 127-129.

⁴² Cicero *Ad Atticum* 14.10, dated 19 April 44, Cicero's comment on this action about one month after the fact, "...ut omnia facta, scripta, dicta, promissa, cognitata Caesaris plus valerent, quam si ipse viveret?"

⁴³ Cicero *Philippic* 1.31. Y

⁴⁴ Syme (supra n. 9) 98-99.

⁴⁵ Cicero *Ad Atticum* 14.10.

⁴⁶ Cicero (supra n. 39).

⁴⁷ Knight, D.W., "The Political Acumen of Cicero," *Latomus* 27 (1968) 157-158.