Octavian Augustus Essay, Research Paper

Octavian Augustus

Octavian Augustus is known as the first, and one of the greatest, Roman Emperors ever. Octavian enabled the long, peaceful time of the Pax Romana by changing Rome from a fragile, crumbling republican government to a great and mighty empire. Octavian’s government was strong enough to withstand weak emperors who mishandled the Empire. His changes proved to be the cornerstone of the greatest empire the world has ever seen.

During the Conflict of Orders, the lower class Romans, or plebeian, forced the upper class Romans, known as patricians, to give them more rights and liberties (Hadas 1969). The Republican government in Rome was established to satisfy the plebeian, while still leaving a majority of the control with the patricians. The government consisted of three main parts: the senate, the assemblies, and the magistrates. The Senate was a group of former state officials, usually patricians, who acted as advisors, controlled public finances and handled all diplomatic dealings with other states. The assemblies were the various public meetings where citizens voted on laws and public office (Hanes 1997). Magistrates were the elected officials who put the laws into practice. The most important of these magistrates were the consuls. The two consuls, each elected for one year, acted as the chief executives of the state. Censors were also very important magistrates. Censors were elected every five years to take a census and record the wealth of the people. Censors also had two other very important jobs. The first was to appoint candidates for the Senate and the second was to award contracts for government projects (Hanes 1997). As time passed, the Romans also began to elect other magistrates called praetors. Praetors acted as judges but could also fill in for the Consuls when they were away (Hanes 1997). Our government still today takes a Census every 10 years and is conducting one this very year.

The Republic first started to lose power in 133 B.C.E. Tiberius Gracchus and his brother Gaius were the leaders of a campaign to help the landowners/soldiers of Rome (Hanes 1997). The brothers tried to redistribute the public land of Rome to small farmers. The Senate, however, feared that the brothers were trying to take power away from the government. They ordered mobs to kill the brothers and hundreds of their supporters. The Gracchi’s efforts were the beginning of the Roman Revolution (Hanes 1997).

In 107 B.C.E., a popular general named Marius was elected consul. Because of his military background, Marius was interested in improving the army. He started to accept anyone into the army regardless of whether they owned any land. This created a vast change in the makeup of the armies. Many poor people decided to join in hopes that they would benefit financially from any victories. Soldiers became attached to Roman generals rather than the state because of the possible economic gains (Hanes 1997). The government’s separation of the army would prove to be a major problem. Laws could only be enforced if The Republic controlled the armies. When the army followed a general rather than the government, the government lost all power.

In 90 B.C.E., Roman allies in Italy finally rebelled against the city. The allies were angry that they were not considered citizens of Rome. They had benefitted little from Roman expansion even though their citizens had served in the military. After a very bloody campaign, the Social War, as it was called, eventually ended when the allies were defeated. The Senate, however, decided to grant citizenship to the allies (Hanes 1997). This move expanded the Roman state to all of Italy. As the number of citizens grew, The Republic became harder and harder to manage.

During the Social Wars, one general, Lucius Cornelius Sulla, proved to be very successful in battles. Based on this military success, Sulla was elected consul in 88 B.C.E. After completing his term, Marius tried to stop Sulla from taking any military command. Sulla countered by marching his troops on Rome (Hanes 1997). Civil war broke out. Sulla led his troops to victory and became dictator. After killing many of his opponents, Sulla tried to change Rome back to its days of Republican government. When he felt he had accomplished his task, Sulla retired to his farm in the country. Sulla’s brief reign as dictator did not prove helpful to the Republic. Instead, Sulla had shown the power and opportunity that a dictator possesses. Though he did not intend to, Sulla had moved Rome one step closer to becoming an empire.

Octavian used this army to occupy Rome and force the Senate to make him consul. Marc Antony, who had been consul with Caesar, was now forced to create the alliance with Lepidus, a high priest, and Octavian. These three men who would vie for this power: Gauis Pompey, Julius Caesar and Licinius Crassus. These three formed the First Triumvirate, or rule of three men, by dominating Rome with their personal armies (Drinkwater & Drummond 1993). When Crassus later died, Caesar defeated Pompey and became Rome’s sole leader (Hadas 1969). In 44 B.C.E., the senate declared Caesar dictator for life. But, he was murdered later that year by a group of senators hoping to maintain the Republic (Drinkwater & Drummond 1993). The Triumvirate had shown that a large Senate was not needed to successfully govern Rome.

The assassination did not help the Republic because within a year, three more men had come to power: Marc Antony, Ledipus and Octavian. They were to form the Second Triumvirate.

Octavian was born on September 23, 63 B.C.E. (Coppolino 1997). His great-uncle was Julius Caesar and therefore he had many political connections in Rome. Octavian was favored by Caesar from an early age (Coppolino 1997). “In 48 Caesar had his fifteen-year-old great-nephew elected to the priestly college of the pontifices, and he also enrolled him in the hereditary patrician aristocracy of Rome”(Coppolino 1997). Octavian joined Caesar in 46 B.C.E. on campaign against Pompey in Spain. Later, Octavian was sent to Apollonia, on the coast of Greece, to attempt to finish his education. While in Apollonia, Octavian trained with Roman legions stationed there. (Coppolino 1997) Only months after arriving in Apollonia, Octavian learned that Caesar was murdered. He also learned that he was named as the beneficiary in Caesar+s will and had been formally adopted as his son. The will thrust tremendous power on Octavian. He was now the leader of a great army ready to follow the commands of Caesar’s heir.

The three leaders divided the land that Rome had conquered. Antony controlled the East and Octavian the West. Lepidus controlled Africa. The leaders led a ruthless campaign to punish Caesar’s assassins but soon turned on each other. Octavian first attacked Lepidus and took control of Africa and all of Italy. Antony strained relations between Octavian and himself by divorcing Octavian’s sister, in favor of Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt. Finally, in 31 B.C.E., war broke out between Octavian and the combined forces of Cleopatra and Antony. Octavian defeated his foes at the naval battle of Actium and became sole ruler of Rome. He returned to Rome in 29 B.C.E. and celebrated his recent victories against Antony.

In 27 B.C.E., Octavian made a bold and clever political move by declaring the Republican Government restored (Nardo 1994). To the public, this sounded sincere, but it was really a ploy to gain more power. He immediately offered to resign from the position of consul, but the Senate, instead of accepting his offer, decided to give him the position of princeps, or first citizen(Coppolino 1997). The Senate also gave him the name Augustus, meaning revered one’. The Senate knew that it could not accept Octavian’s offer to resign; he controlled a vast army and had tremendous personal wealth not to mention being the man who brought the civil wars to an end. The Senate decided to give Octavian control of the provinces of Gaul, Syria, Spain and Egypt. These areas had large numbers of troops stationed within their borders giving Octavian almost total military authority(Coppolino 1997). In 23 B.C., Octavian renounced his position as consul and became proconsul. He now had absolute control over the army without the administrative hassles of consul (Nardo 1994). Octavian was next granted the title of tribune of the people. Tribune was a very important position to Octavian. The Tribune was supposed to represent the citizens of Rome and had the authority to veto any laws passed by the Senate. Octavian now had all the political powers of an emperor without the hatred that came with the title.

To help run the empire, Octavian established an imperial household. The household ran the affairs of the empire and completed the various political tasks required by Octavian. He filled positions not only with former senators and statesmen, but also talented laborers and even an occasional slave (Nardo 1994). Octavian’s appointed men were much more efficient than the Senate. The household gained more and more power as time passed.

While the household managed the daily affairs of the empire, Octavian made it his duty to beautify the city. He once said that he had found the city in brick, and left it in marble. Octavian also organized fire and police brigades within the city (Coppolino 1997).

Octavian reformed the tax system by taking a census to determine how much each province should pay in taxes. He used this extra money to improve roads and harbors which in turn increased trade.

Although the Senate held little power, Octavian treated them with the utmost respect. Octavian addressed the Senators by their full names and attended any events he was invited to. Octavian was careful to consult members of the Senate before making political decisions, even if he held little value in their opinions. In these ways, the Senators remained happy with Octavian even as they gradually lost their power.

Octavian became more and more powerful by becoming pontifex maximus , the religious head of state, in 12 B.C.E. and pater patriae, or father of the country, in 2 B.C.E. (Drinkwater & Drummond 1993). Octavian held strong beliefs in traditional Roman religion. He restored over 80 temples and passed strict moral laws that mirrored older Roman values. The return to traditional values was influential in uniting the empire.

With his position solidified, Octavian set about on yet more reforms of government. He cast out Senators that he deemed unworthy and filled their spaces with provincial governors and army commanders. Octavian had by now changed the government exactly to his liking. He knew that his system would remain strong for many years to come. When Octavian died in A.D. 14, his achievements seemed remarkable, and they would only become more remarkable as time passed.

One thing Octavian had not prepared well for was who would succeed the emperor. Octavian had adopted his stepson Tiberius and made it clear he would be his successor but could anyone govern as well as Octavian had? Tiberius, although highly experienced and a superb commander of troops, did not have the personal touch of Octavian (Drinkwater & Drummond 1993). Tiberius left Rome and lived on the island of Capri where he maintained his power as emperor, but was the target of many rumors and plots back in Rome.

After the disappointments of Tiberius and Caligula, there was much talk of truly restoring the Republican Government. The emperor’s personal bodyguards, known as the Praetorian Guards, quickly found a replacement emperor before the talk could proceed (Drinkwater & Drummond 1993). They chose Claudius, an uncle of Caligula, to become the next Roman emperor (Hadas 1969). Claudius was successful in managing the government but his personal life was marred with unstable marriages. Claudius+ son, Nero, was the next to succeed and his reign was disastrous. A devastating fire in A.D. 64 was rumored to have been started by the emperor simply so he could win praise for rebuilding the city. When Nero committed suicide in A.D. 68, it brought an end to Octavian’s line (Nardo 1994).

The empire, however, was far from finished. Titus Flavius Vespasianus, who won the support of many troops soon emerged as the next emperor (Hadas 1969). His two sons succeeded him and returned peace and prosperity to the empire. The Pax Romana, or Roman Peace, was a time of great prosperity for all people under Rome’s rule. Roman citizens enjoyed the spectacles of the gladiators in the coliseum and the comedies performed at the many theaters (Hadas 1969). The Romans are attributed with the development of concrete which enabled them to build large structures such as aqueducts.

As Rome grew into the primary world leader, it is Republican government was falling apart. The Senate was ineffective because it had no control of the vast armies that provided power. A strong general who took sole control would immediately be targeted by conservative Romans who believed strongly in the Republic. Rome was in need of a solitary, powerful leader. Octavian skillfully turned himself into an emperor without suffering the fate of his great-uncle, Caesar. He controlled the army, and managed to please the masses. Once in the position of power, he changed the government not only to benefit himself, but also to benefit the Empire and ultimately the people. This structure was so strong, that it could survive through weak emperors such as Caligula and Nero and major problems like who the next emperor should be. Octavian was so influential that eventually the Romans did not care that they were no longer a Republic. They knew that with Octavian, they could become the greatest empire in the world.