

primarysourcedocument

The Dictatorial Authority Did Good, and Not Harm, to the Roman Republic

The Dictatorial Authority Did Good, and Not Harm, to the Roman Republic

“The Dictatorial Authority Did Good, and Not Harm, to the Roman Republic”

By Niccolò Machiavelli

1514–1519

(Formally published 1531)

[Machiavelli, Niccolò. “The Dictatorial Authority Did Good, and Not Harm, to the Roman Republic.” Book 1, Chapter 34 in *Discourses on Livy*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1996. 73–75. Reproduced with permission of University of Chicago Press (Grant no. 110177; expires 4/10/2022).]

34. The Dictatorial Authority Did Good, and Not Harm, to the Roman Republic; and That the Authorities Citizens Take for Themselves, Not Those Given Them by Free Votes, Are Pernicious to Civil Life

The Romans who invented in that city the mode of creating the dictator^[1] have been condemned by some writer^[2] for a thing that was the cause, in time, of the tyranny of Rome. He cites the fact that the first tyrant^[3] in that city commanded it under the dictatorial title; he says that if it had not been for this, Caesar would not have been able to put an honest face on his tyranny under any public title. This thing was not well examined by the one who holds the opinion, and it was believed against all reason. For it was neither the name nor the rank of dictator that made Rome servile, but it was the authority taken by citizens because of the length of command. If the dictatorial name had been lacking in Rome, they would have taken another; for it is forces that easily acquire names, not names forces. One sees that while the dictator was appointed according to public orders, and not by his own authority, he always did good to the city. For magistrates that are made and authorities that are given through extraordinary ways, not those that come through ordinary ways, hurt republics; so one sees that in Rome the result was that in so much course of time no dictator ever did anything but good to the republic.

There are very evident reasons for this. First, if a citizen wishes to be able to offend and to seize extraordinary authority for himself, he must have many qualities that in a noncorrupt republic he can never have. For he needs to be very rich and to have very many adherents and partisans, which he cannot have where the laws are observed; and even if he had them, men like these are so formidable that free votes do not concur in them. Besides this, the dictator was appointed for a time, and not perpetually, and so as to obviate only the cause by means of which he was created; and his authority extended to being able to decide by himself regarding remedies for that urgent danger, and to do everything without consultation, and to punish everyone without appeal.^[4] But he could not do any-

thing that might diminish the state, as taking away authority from the Senate or from the people, undoing the old orders of the city and making new ones, would have been. So, when the brief time of his dictatorship, the limited authorities he had, and the noncorrupt Roman people are added up, it was impossible for him to escape his limits and to hurt the city; and one sees by experience that he always helped.

And truly, among the other Roman orders, this is one that deserves to be considered and numbered among those that were the cause of the greatness of so great an empire, for without such an order cities escape from extraordinary accidents with difficulty. Because the customary orders in republics have a slow motion (since no council and no magistrate can work anything by itself, but in many things one has need of another, and because it takes time to add these wills together), their remedies are very dangerous when they have to remedy a thing that time does not wait for. So republics should have a like mode among their orders; and the Venetian republic, which is excellent among modern republics, has reserved authority to a few citizens who in urgent needs can decide, all in accord, without further consultation.^[5] For when a like mode is lacking in a republic, it is necessary either that it be ruined by observing the orders or that it break them so as not to be ruined. In a republic, one would not wish anything ever to happen that has to be governed with extraordinary modes. For although the extraordinary mode may do good then, nonetheless the example does ill; for if one sets up a habit of breaking the orders for the sake of good, then later, under that coloring, they are broken for ill. So a republic will never be perfect unless it has provided for everything with its laws and has established a remedy for every accident and given the mode to govern it. So, concluding, I say that those republics that in urgent dangers do not take refuge either in the dictator or in similar authorities will always come to ruin in grave accidents.

In this new order the mode of electing is to be noted, as it was wisely provided by the Romans. For since the creation of the dictator brought some shame for the consuls, who as heads of the city had to come under obedience like others, and since they supposed that disdain among the citizens had to arise from this, they wished the authority of electing him to be in the consuls. They thought that if an accident came in which Rome might have need of this kingly power, they would have to make him voluntarily; and in making him themselves, it would pain them less. For wounds and every other ill that a man does to himself spontaneously and by choice hurt much less than those that are done to you by someone else. Indeed, in the last times the Romans used to give such authority to the consul instead of to the dictator with these words: "Let the consul see that the republic comes to no harm."^[6] To return to our matter, I conclude that by seeking to crush them, Rome's neighbors made them order themselves not only to be able to defend themselves but able to attack them with more force, more counsel, and more authority.

^[1] Livy, II 18.

^[2] The writer or writers have not been clearly identified.

^[3] Presumably Sulla.

^[4] Livy, HI 29; IX 34.

^[5] Presumably the Council of Ten, instituted in 1310 as an extraordinary measure to deal with a revolt, then regularized in 1355.

The Dictatorial Authority Did Good, and Not Harm, to the Roman Republic

Published on Natural Law, Natural Rights, and American Constitutionalism (<https://nlmrac.org>)

[6] Quoted in Latin. Cf. Livy, III 4; VI 19.

Original Author Sort: Machiavelli, Niccolo

Publication Date: 11514.00.00.##

Topic: [Critics of the Natural Law Tradition](#)

Subtopic: [Machiavelli](#)

Publication Date Range: 1514-1519

Source URL: <https://nlmrac.org/critics/machiavelli/primary-source-documents/discourses-on-livy-book-i>