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Gleaves on the Leadership of Augustus

In world history, is there any generation of leaders that rivals the American founders?*

Classics professor Rufus Fears makes a plausible case that there were two points in world history when a near-perfect political solution came about through great leadership: one was at the beginning of American history, when the revolution, Constitution, and first president established the new republic (1775-1797); the other was at the outset of the *Pax romana*, when a single man -- Augustus -- brought peace and prosperity to what had been a chaotic Roman world (31 B.C.-14 A.D.). Fears wryly adds that such a comparison would make our Founders "spin in their graves," since none of them aspired to be emperor!^[1]

Even for the historians who study him professionally, it is difficult to grasp -- let alone to overstate -- the achievement of Augustus. Little in his youth hinted at greatness. Yet through extraordinary personal skills and strength of character, he stamped an entire era of human history, on the one hand bringing an end to a century of social tumult and civil war -- what historians call the Roman Revolution -- and on the other establishing institutions and precedents that would endure a quarter of a millennium after his death -- a longer time than our nation has existed. This greatest of ancient emperors, who reigned 45 years, was no mere politician; he was a true statesman.

What leadership qualities did Augustus possess that enabled him to put such a strong scent on human history? Fears explicitly mentions or implies several.^[2]

1. Like virtually all great leaders, Augustus enjoyed **luck**. He grew up in extremely dangerous times, in which one wrong calculation would have meant exile or death. It was luck that prompted Julius Caesar to adopt his great nephew Octavian (Augustus' given name) to be his sole son and heir; after all, they hardly knew each other. It was luck that enabled the youthful Octavian, with virtually no military experience, to defeat Marc Antony, one of Rome's greatest generals, in the great naval battle in Actium Bay. It was luck that drew Augustus and Vergil together in a relationship that would inspire an epic (the *Aeneid*) that would broadcast the glories of Augustan Rome to the end of time.

2. Augustus had **vision**. He believed Rome was the greatest civilization that had ever existed -- or would ever exist -- and that it had an unparalleled destiny in human history: an *imperium sine fine*, an empire without end. More, he foresaw (with the help of an astrologer) his destiny as the supreme leader of the Romans. This sense of personal destiny propelled his passion to lead his people for almost a half century. It is such an audacious story -- how one man could conflate Rome's destiny with his own destiny, and identify her greatness with his own greatness -- and yet Augustus was no madman.

3. Augustus had **foresight**. The Greek historian Thucydides believed foresight was one of the essential qualities of the statesman: It is the ability to see problems before they overwhelm a polity, and to respond with solutions that work in both the short term and long term. Augustus understood, as had Julius Caesar before him, that the empire had grown too big to be governed by the old republican constitution. Staying the course was not an option.

4. Augustus had **principles**. He developed a pragmatic political philosophy that guided his actions as a statesman. His North Star was anything that made Rome greater. With few exceptions, he had an unflinching sense for policies that increased the strength, security, order, peace, and prosperity of the empire. To demonstrate his respect for property rights, he granted the request of an old woman to keep her little house at the edge of the new Forum he wanted built, and so ordered the wall around the Forum to zigzag around her property.

5. Augustus had **moral fiber**. He led by example, reinvigorating Roman religion through his personal piety and construction (and reconstruction) of temples. To inspire Roman soldiers and citizens, he time and again adopted an austere lifestyle to recall the sturdy yeomanry of the republic. He obeyed the laws of the realm, even exiling his own daughter Julia when her sexual escapades scandalized Rome.

6. Augustus was a **consensus builder**. Indeed, this was a minimum qualification in the first century B.C. if one wanted to avoid assassination. With prudence and patience, with remarkable insight into human nature and uncanny timing, Augustus knew when to strike at enemies and when to show mercy. He successfully managed such dangerous personalities as Marc Antony, Lepidus, and paranoid senators, advancing past each of them on the chess board of power without getting himself checkmated.

7. Augustus was a great **communicator**. In his student days at Apollonia, he was tutored by Greek orators and already by the age of 19 was unusually eloquent. He early learned the power of symbols -- whether on coins or in architecture, sculpture, or literature -- to broadcast his achievements. Perhaps better than any other leader of the ancient world, he recognized the value of mass communication and propaganda. He wrote his own autobiography and had it disseminated to temples throughout the Empire. More significantly, he encouraged Vergil to write a moving epic of Rome, the *Aeneid*, one of world literature's eminent poems (some would argue the greatest). We should not forget that this masterful verse started out as Augustan propaganda.

8. Augustus' leadership was ratified by **results**. His reign launched the *pax Romana*, a time when the average Roman lived with greater material well-being and security than would any generation of common people until the second half of the 19th century. His vision led to a building program to make the city more beautiful and awe-inspiring. "I found Rome a city of brick," he wrote, "and left it a city of marble." It was also more sanitary: one of his greatest gifts to the city was a beautifully engineered sewage system. The empire was greater in extent than the Continental U.S., yet unified by one language, one currency, and one system of justice. Moreover, Augustus was an extremely capable administrator who cultivated an army of dedicated civil servants -- the greatest civil service system in the world until the 20th century. The system of roads he built to connect the empire would not be rivaled until the 19th century. The people lived in peace. There was tolerance of foreign religious practices (which allowed the Jews to worship their messiah and not the Roman emperor). And there was unusual social mobility. Observes Fears: "You could be born a slave in this empire, achieve your freedom, go on to become a multi-millionaire, and play an important role in society. This was not an isolated case. It happened again and again." All of this peace and prosperity were purchased with a relatively lean state bureaucracy and tax burden. The average Roman had to work about two days a year to pay his taxes. (The average American has to work about 130.) No wonder it is said of the Augustan age that it was one of the great ages of humankind.

9. Augustus, with his finely honed political instincts, was **opportunistic**. His entire political life, he displayed a sense of superb timing whenever he wanted something to change. Sometimes opportunity arose due to the death of a political opponent; sometimes due to an enemy's mistake; sometimes a new situation presented itself, and Augustus had the ability to see exciting new possibilities where others just saw "one damn thing after another."

10. To the common citizen Augustus must have had uncommon **charisma**. It was apparently no problem for everyday Romans -- a polytheistic people -- to welcome him into their pantheon of gods while he still walked among them. They truly adored him. Based on the honorifics he received in life, it is arguable that he was more loved by more people than any other ancient emperor (something like the outpouring of affection for Queen Victoria in the nineteenth century, or Pope John Paul II in the 20th).

Augustus was not God, of course. His relationships with his own family were notoriously problematic. He was divorced twice before he settled



Augustus of Prima Porta - Vatican City, Rome

This essay is adapted from a speech Gleaves Whitney delivered to teachers at the Houston Museum of Natural Science. The museum works in partnership with the Hauenstein Center and Center for the American Idea to sponsor Whitney's lectures, whose purpose is to heighten interest in new historical exhibits. For example, the partnership recently drew more than a quarter-million visitors to an exhibit on Benjamin Franklin. In February 2007, a path-breaking exhibit on Imperial Rome opened.



Forum of Augustus

down with his true love, Livia. (His first marriage was never consummated, so he returned the bride to her mother in "mint condition.") The *pater patriae* who could govern the greatest empire the world had ever known was utterly incapable of governing his daughter and granddaughter (both named Julia). Their outrageous sexual behavior brought shame to the family name. And although he adored Livia, she apparently poisoned all possible heirs-apparent so that her son by a previous marriage, Tiberius, would be the only prince left standing. There is even speculation that Livia fed her beloved Augustus a poisoned pear when he was 77 years of age to get him out of the way so that Tiberius, who at that point was himself no youth, could finally reign. (In today's terms, he faced the Prince Charles problem.)

Augustus as a leader certainly had to bear his share of disasters and defeats, the most famous being the three Roman legions wiped out by Arminius in 9 A.D. on the German frontier. And, as noted previously, the emperor so disliked his stepson Tiberius that he could hardly abide him as a successor.

There was also an unappealing rawness to Augustus. He was no stranger to brutality on the path of power. Despite the affection he must have felt toward Julius Caesar, the great uncle who adopted him, that affection hardly transferred to Caesarion, the child of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra (and, interestingly, the only son by blood that Julius Caesar was known to have had). I am not sure what technically to call the relationship between Octavian and Caesarion (step-brothers? distant cousins?), but I am certain that the future Augustus was jealous of his status as Julius Caesar's sole heir. As Plutarch famously recorded, "Too many Caesars are not well."^[3] After Cleopatra committed suicide, Augustus had the 17-year-old Caesarion murdered in cold blood.

This dark side of Augustus' biography balances out the lights and shades in our picture of the Roman emperor, a flesh-and-blood being whose "warts and all" made him eminently human. Nevertheless, in terms of political leadership and statecraft he is arguably a rival to our founders, if not the inspirer of them.

**Full question: In world history, is there any generation of leaders that rivals the generation of American leaders that included George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and other heroes of the American Revolution?*

^[1] J. Rufus Fears, *Famous Romans*, vol. 2, (Chantilly, VA: Teaching Company, 2001), pp. 39, 40.

^[2] For much of the following, see Fears, *Famous Romans*, vol. 2, pp. 35-73, *passim*; for the broader context, consult a solid text such as Thomas F. X. Noble, Barry Strauss, Duane J. Osheim, et al., *Western Civilization: Beyond Boundaries*, 5th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), pp. 152-58.

^[3] Plutarch's *Lives*, "Antony," vol. 2 (New York: Modern Library, 2001), p. 531.