

Grasping Reality with Both Hands

The weblog of Brad DeLong. Comments (mostly) welcome, or email me at delong@hey.com with "delong-weblog" as the subject.
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Burns: Pompey's Strategy and Domitius' Stand—Noted

In his *The Civil War* Gaius Julius Caesar presented "just the facts" in a way that made Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus look like a cowardly and incompetent idiot. The attractive interpretation is that Ahenobarbus was just trying to do the job of defeating Caesar, but had failed to recognize that Pompey was not his ally. Pompey, rather, was somebody whose first goal was to gain the submission of Ahenobarbus and the other Optimates, and only after that submission was gained would he even think about fighting Caesar. Still an idiot, but not an incompetent or a cowardly one:

Alfred Burns: *Pompey's Strategy and Domitius' Stand at Corfinium* <https://github.com/braddelong/public-files/blob/master/readings/article-burns-pompey.pdf>: 'In early 49, the alliance confronting Caesar consisted of the old republican senate families who under the leadership of [Lucius] Domitius [Ahenobarbus] tried to maintain the traditional institutions and of Pompey who clung to his own extra-legal position of semi-dictatorial power. Both parties to the alliance were as mutually distrustful as they were dependent on each other...

...Marcus Antonius, Cassius, Caelius and Curio left Rome on January 7th 49 B.C. Caesar left Ravenna and occupied Ariminum on the tenth or the eleventh. There he was met by the tribunes, Caesar immediately began his probing military moves and, emboldened by the lack of effective resistance, increased the speed and scope of his operations. He sent Marcus Antonius with five cohorts toward Arretium while he himself conducted levies around Ariminum and dispatched single cohorts to occupy Pisaurum, Fanum and Ancona. According to Caesar's [false] report, he undertook these steps only after Lucius Roscius and Lucius Caesar arrived with unsatisfactory replies to his latest compromise offer....

Rome was thrown into panic and confusion when Caesar's successes became known. When Pompey mentioned the possibility of a withdrawal from Italy, he was severely criticized because of his previous bland assurances.... Plutarch, Appian and Dio complement each other in their descriptions of the chaos in Rome and of Pompey's helplessness.... Pompey allowing himself to be swayed by whomever he met, gave conflicting directions, contradicting himself sometimes on the same day. He left Rome on the 17th of January... most of the senate followed him the next day.... By the 23rd Domitius was collecting troops... and rallying the various contingents in retreat for an attempt to block Caesar.... By February 9th, Cicero knows that Domitius is preparing his stand at Corfinium... [in] a striking contrast to the frantic confusion in Rome and to Pompey's indecision. For even though Pompey had mentioned the possibility of withdrawal from Italy, he apparently hesitated, and kept his associates in the dark about his intentions...

Caesar resumed his movement into Picenum on January 27 or 28th. For the second time he misrepresents... claiming... he did so after Roscius and Lucius Caesar arrived with a new unsatisfactory answer.... Caesar now advanced rapidly through Picenum where Pompey and Labienus supposedly had a strong following. But... the towns opened their doors... and... welcomed him with open arms. Even if we... take with caution Caesar's reports... we must believe them since Cicero... confirms them.... Pompey had lost the basis of his popular support to Caesar. That this also held true in the Picenian territory was an especially hard blow.... It had been mentioned by Pompey as the area where he would halt Caesar, and it was where Domitius attempted his stand....

In the first days of February Caesar was joined by the 12th legion.... Lentulus Spinther... was deserted by "magna parte militum"... The juncture of Vibullius and Domitius occurred on the 8th of February.... Domitius now had 33 cohorts in Corfinium, a traditional stronghold in previous wars.... On the 8th Domitius was planning to set out on the 9th to join Pompey. But he changed his plan overnight... The addition of Vibullius' troops almost doubled Domitius' forces. At least temporarily, he was superior to Caesar in numbers and in a much better position than before to resist. Even if he had no doubts about Pompey's will to resist, the defense from a fortified position on the approach route to Rome was obviously far more advantageous from a strategic point of view to a stand in the much more open country around Luceria leaving Rome wide open to Caesar.

Most general histories discuss Domitius' actions as if they had been the arbitrary act of a recalcitrant subordinate of Pompey, but such a view is unjustified. Pompey had not been given a supreme command. Domitius was technically equal in rank to Pompey as a proconsular and outranked him in family prestige as the fifth descendant of his family to attain the consulate in unbroken succession. He had every right to disagree with Pompey....

The plan proposed by Domitius seems simple and logical. If Caesar attacks him, he will resist and he will expect Pompey to attack Caesar in a pincer movement. If Caesar by-passes him to attack Pompey, he will come to Pompey's support. But Domitius' most crucial reason would have been his justifiable distrust of Pompey. Pompey had been playing the two sides against each other for such a long time and had come twice to terms with Caesar in the last minute, both times with disastrous consequences for Domitius and his associates. Missions and messages were still being exchanged between the two former allies. Many like Cicero, were still hoping for their reconciliation....

If Italy were to be abandoned and reconquered by Pompey's provincial armies with the help of Pompey's client potentates in the East, then, in case of victory the power would be all Pompey's. His dominatio would be absolute and the senate would be at his mercy. Only a shared victory of Domitius and Pompey now, would give the senate a partnership in the government. Therefore this was Domitius' opportunity.... Domitius suddenly finds himself not only with his own but also a good part of Pompey's troops, almost twice the force he had before. By committing such a large part of their available troops, he will force Pompey's hand... Pompey could not afford not to help him. Together they would be able to block Caesar's path and to defeat him before he could bring up additional reinforcements. Caesar arrived at Corfinium on the fifteenth of February and established a fortified camp facing the city wall. Domitius reacted with vigor: He made the physical preparations for the defense of the city, he did not spare his personal fortune to offer a real incentive to his troops, and he finally wrote a letter designed to leave Pompey no other choice but to come to his aid....

Domitius and his troops apparently were convinced that they had Caesar in a trap to which Pompey would spring the door. Their confidence was justifiable since the idea that Pompey could abandon them appeared inconceivable.... Even Cicero, who suspected Pompey's plan, finds it at first impossible to believe that Pompey would go through with his proposed course of action.... Pompey, of course, proceeded to evacuate his army from Italy. Without support from Pompey, Domitius' situation soon deteriorated....

We shall try to show that Pompey did not necessarily know better [than Domitius] and that even if he did, Domitius might not have been to blame because Pompey had never definitely informed him of his plan. But even assuming that Pompey's plan was sound and that Domitius knew about it, he would still have had to make an attempt to force a decision in Italy if he wanted to keep the republic from domination by either Pompey or Caesar....

In the senate session of January 17th, Pompey's intimation of possible withdrawal from Italy had caused general consternation.... Italy first invaded and sacked by Caesar's Gallic hordes, then re-conquered by Pompey's foreign armies from the East in an orgy of vengeance. Von Fritz believes the suggestion caused such a storm of opposition that the idea of a maius imperium for Pompey was abandoned, and that he henceforth thought it wiser to act as if he had given up his plan.... Pompey did not mention withdrawal any more for the next month. On the contrary, the letters to Domitius and the consuls are full of ambiguities implying a plan by Pompey to make a stand in southern Italy. Kurt von Fritz draws the conclusion that Pompey left Domitius deliberately in the dark about his intentions....

Domitius had every interest to force Pompey... if he wanted to prevent a complete domi- nation of the state by Pompey. Cicero was convinced that *dominatio* was Pompey's ultimate objective. A re-conquest of Italy by his eastern armies was the surest means for Pompey of attaining this objective. Thus he may have been swayed by far more compelling reasons for leaving Domitius to his fate than the ones he professed. Corfinium not only bought him the time to concentrate his troops near Brundisium, but it also promised to rid him of one of his most persistent opponents and rivals.

.#noted #tags #2020-07-25

Kurt von Fritz: *Pompey's Policy before and after the Outbreak of the Civil War of 49 B.C.* <https://www-jstor-org.libproxy.berkeley.edu/stable/pdf/283545.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A6a56c9089151bf1b346c1067efb4555a>: 'This paper tries to prove the following points: Pompey's decision to evacuate Italy in case of an open conflict with Caesar was taken half a year before the outbreak of the Civil War; the indignation of the Senate... prevented Pompey from revealing his decision until the necessity of evacuating Italy had become apparent to everybody; the loss of a large army at Corfinium was the fault not so much of its commander Domitius as of Pompey, who failed to inform Domitius of his decision before it was too late...

...We have then the following incontestable facts. Up to and including February 16 Pompey had not informed Domitius of his definite decision to evacuate Italy but on the contrary had again and again hinted at the probability that they would fight Caesar in Italy as soon as all the troops were assembled. Yet he affirms in a letter to the consuls that in a message undoubtedly sent before February 16 he had made it clear that Italy was to be evacuated and had indicated what part was to be played by Domitius in this evacuation.

The conclusion is inevitable that Pompey either kept Domitius deliberately in the dark concerning his intentions and decisions, or lied in his letter to the consuls, or both.

In order to find out which of these three explanations is correct we have to examine Pompey's letters to the consuls and Cicero's reactions when he received copies of these letters.... The consuls had stayed in the western part of Southern Italy since January 17... collecting troops in Campania and the neighboring regions.... [Recall] Pompey's earlier letter to the consuls. Cicero, on receiving a copy... seems to have been convinced that it revealed Pompey's intention to fight Caesar in Italy and that this was the reason why he urged the consuls to join him in Apulia. He further affirms that all persons to whom he talked about it were of the same opinion.... The prevailing opinion seems to be: 1. that Cicero, however mistaken, was sincere in his interpretation of the letter; 2. that some other persons with whom he discussed it may have been equally mistaken, but that the words eadem opinione fui qua reliqui omnes probably represent a gross exaggeration of the facts; that the letter actually meant that the consuls must take part in the impending evacuation of Italy; 4. that the consuls themselves understood this perfectly at once. That acceptance of these four points leads to some rather striking conclusions is less universally realized....

The first message by which Pompey made it absolutely clear that Italy was to be abandoned was the letter to the consuls Att. 8.12A. This letter was preceded by a period in which Pompey... was... determined to follow this plan but kept his associates in the dark.... His letters in this period, while very clear and definite in the special military directions given, are obscure and deliberately evasive as far as the grand strategy.... First they suggest strongly that an attempt will or may be made to defend Italy. Then stronger and stronger hints are given that Italy will be abandoned.... But only when... the hopelessness of resistance must have become clear to everybody did Pompey come out openly and definitely with his plan. His correspondents, on the other hand, obviously wished Italy to be defended, and they show various degrees of reluctance to understand the necessity of evacuating the peninsula....

We have still to answer the question whether in the interval between Jan. 24 and Feb. 13 Pompey had actually hoped or intended to fight Caesar in Italy, as one of his letters to Cicero, if we can trust the latter, indicated.... Even Caesar admits that in the first phase of the battle for Corfinium Domitius acted with much more energy than Thermus, Lentulus Spinther, Hirrus, and the others.... He not only took all the measures necessary for the defense of the city but also tried to win the adherence of his soldiers by great personal sacrifices.... We now know a point which is much more important for a just evaluation of Domitius: he had not been informed of Pompey's definite decision to abandon Italy. He may have thought that he knew better than the generalissimo. But if he did, he thought that he knew better how to fight in Italy, taking for granted that to do this was still the general plan....

On Feb. 10 Pompey received information through Fabius that Domitius, when Fabius left him, had prepared to leave Corfinium early on Feb. 9.... Domitius'... decision to abandon Corfinium must have been taken on the order or suggestion of Pompey... dispatched by Pompey later than Feb. 5.... He gave this order almost immediately after having received the news that Caesar was on the march again.... There can be hardly any doubt that withdrawal from Corfinium was ordered in preparation for the evacuation of Italy, though Pompey did not admit this at the time.

Pompey's letter to Cicero, on the other hand, in which he boasts that soon he will have a reliable army and then will advance into Picenum, was written at the time of the negotiations, when Caesar had halted his advance for a short time and when it was doubtful whether there would be a military conflict. If Pompey, as his later attitude -seems to indicate, for some reason or other was afraid to reveal his decision to evacuate Italy to his associates before the necessity for doing so had become apparent to everybody; these reasons must have been strongest at the time when there was a possibility that they would not have to fight at all. It is therefore difficult to take Pompey's letter to Cicero at its face value.

[Pompey] did not hurry to his troops immediately after the war broke out. Instead he tarried between Rome and Campania for a whole week after the evacuation of Rome so as to arouse the anger even of Cicero; and when, after having taken leave of the consuls and the Senate, he could no longer be held up by councils of state he still proceeded in a very leisurely fashion.111 He made no effort to concentrate his troops.... When the two veteran legions were actually put to the test in the battle at Pharsalus, according to Caesar's own account, they did not betray Pompey, but fought on valiantly after having been attacked simultaneously in the front and rear.... All these... indicate... that Pompey at no time had any intention of resisting Caesar in Italy.... The slowness of his movements in the first phase... exaggerating the unreliability of the legions... keeping his associates in the dark... [made] it impossible for his equals in command to impose on him a plan of resistance. He seems to have done so even at the risk of diminishing greatly the size of the army which might have been recruited from Italy for the final struggle against Caesar....

We must not forget that it was Pompey's own boasting, his display of unlimited confidence and pretence of easy superiority 133 which made the necessity of evacuating Italy come as such a blow to his associates and made them unable to under- stand the situation fully before it was too late. Nor should we forget that, after the outbreak of hostilities, it was again Pompey's duplicity and his lack of steadfastness in openly adhering to his plan in the face of the first opposition which made his associates take the false steps which led to the loss of so many valuable troops. We are then still left with the question whether Cicero was right when he later accused Pompey of having planned the evacuation of Italy long before the outbreak of the war and of having intended to use the reconquest of Italy after the fashion of Sulla for his own aggrandizement....

If Pompey planned the evacuation of Italy before the outbreak of the war he must have dissembled this plan very carefully. He may then have done so because he thought it necessary for the preservation of the Republic to resist Caesar, and yet was afraid that he would not find the necessary support for such resistance if it became known what risks a policy of intransigence implied. But this interpretation of his attitude would be possible only if he began to foresee an armed conflict only a very short time before its actual outbreak. For otherwise we must assume that he would have done everything in his power to make resistance possible at a smaller sacrifice-unless he had special political reasons for acting otherwise. This consideration leads to a further criterion for the solution of our problem. The evidence that Cicero's later suspicions were not unfounded becomes very strong if the following points can be proved: 1. that Pompey must have reckoned with an armed conflict a very considerable time before it actually broke out, 2. that he nevertheless made no attempt to avoid an evacuation of Italy... by... compromise... action against Caesar at a time when the latter could not have fought... or by strengthening the military power available... to make a successful defense of the peninsula possible, 3. that he actually tried to prevent all such measures and so deliberately made the evacuation of Italy inevitable....

In examining the evidence for the early existence of Pompey's plan we have to distinguish... the last months of the year 50... [from] the period from Pompey's third consulate to the spring of this year.... When Cicero came back from his governorship in Cilicia in December 50 he met Pompey twice.... On both occasions Cicero received the impression that Pompey not only considered an armed conflict with Caesar imminent but even desired it and was so far from seeking a peaceful solution that he was actually afraid a peaceful settlement might be brought about.... But when, a few days before this conversation with Cicero, the consul Marcellus, together with the consuls designate of the following year, had handed him a sword and entrusted him with the defense of the Republic he had answered in a rather non-committal way that... tried to conceal his desire for a decision by force and to create the impression that he viewed this possibility with utter reluctance. At the same time... the two legions taken over from Caesar... he transferred... to... Apulia.... If, therefore, in his letters of the middle of February 142 he suddenly writes that they are not ready and that he finds them utterly unreliable we inevitably reach the conclusion that Pompey either in December failed to take the most elementary precautions or in February did not speak the truth when he wrote about the condition and attitude of these legions....

Pompey's policy from his third consulate to the spring of the year 50 is much more complicated... the seeming inconsistency with which he made repeated attempts to deprive Caesar of privileges which had been granted to him previously with his own approval or connivance, and yet deliberately made it impossible for the leaders of the optimate party to crush Caesar at a time when such an attempt would probably have been much less dangerous than it was in January 49.... The evidence previously analysed seems to show that Pompey was not driven into the conflict either by his republican allies or-in the last weeks-by Caesar's surprisingly bold and quick action. It suggests, on the contrary, that in the last years before the outbreak of the conflict there presented itself to Pompey's mind the possibility of a new and different policy.... He must save the state from a danger so great that no one would ever in the future challenge the extraordinary position of the savior. This is exactly what Octavian accomplished later. But at the time when Augustus attained supreme power the state had been through so terrible a period of internal strife and disorder that almost everybody welcomed the restoration of peace and order by the strong hand of the Princeps. Pompey had at first to make sure that the danger was sufficiently great and not too easily removed.... A policy of this kind was of course a dangerous gamble requiring almost superhuman subtlety and skill-more skill in fact than Caesar's policy, which, though extremely bold, was much more straightforward...

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