Caesar's Legion: Roman Legacy in a World that Forgot Rome

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ABSTRACT

Often in fiction, bad guys are simple, and often they make illusions to the great big baddies of our real historical past, Nazis, Romans, and other such easily identifiable foes. The 2011 game Fallout: New Vegas goes a step further, however, and creates a faction that has a deep and involved history, and fascinating connections to the real Roman Empire of our time. This faction is Caesar's Legion, a brutal totalitarian slave state built around the personality of one man and in-world illusions to ancient Rome. This would not be the first time a murderous regime has tried to copy the Romans, but in this case, what does imitating Rome mean in a world that forgot Rome? The world of Fallout is a post-apocalyptic one, and the ways in which the faction of Caesar's Legion copies Roman legacy, the ways in which they don't, and why they do either is deeply interesting. How does Caesar's Legion exhibit the themes of Roman Legacy, Diversity, and Gender and Sexuality in empire? This faction can serve as a fantastic glimpse into media history regarding empires, the historical empires themselves, and what the Game has to say about the nature of empire and fascism as a whole.

When making the antagonists in a piece of media, most role-playing games and other media usually just take a bunch of guys, dress them up as Nazis, make them genocidal, and call it a day, but *New Vegas* chose a different path. The writers crafted an intricate faction with deep ideological convictions and a fascinating in-world history. Caesar's Legion is the primary 'evil' faction in the game *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010). The legion is a brutal totalitarian slave state built around the personality of one man and with allusions to ancient Rome. This is a common trope, but the world of *Fallout* is a post-apocalyptic one with scant memory of history before the apocalypse. So, how does the fictional empire of Caesar's Legion compare to other relevant texts? How does Caesar's Legion exhibit the themes of Roman Legacy, Diversity, and Gender and Sexuality in an empire? And how do the ways the empire embodies these themes maintain it?

The story of Caesar's Legion, a faction in the game *Fallout: New Vegas,* and the way in which it expanded tells us a lot about the way historical and fictional empires engage with the Roman legacy and other themes. The 2011 game *Fallout: New Vegas* is a beloved role-playing game (RPG) that takes place

in a post-apocalyptic America hundreds of years after the world was devastated by nuclear warfare. The series is known for its clever commentary on American history and ideologies, inventing a world where the culture of the 1940s and 50s never dissipated. Caesar, the leader of the faction, was born as Edward Sallow. He grew up in the Followers of the Apocalypse, a group of philanthropic academics, doctors, and educators whose mission was to bring helpful knowledge to tribes across the wasteland.[1] Sallow was generally uninterested in medicine or education, but took a liking to military history, particularly *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon and *Commentarii* by the historical Julius Caesar. Sallow and a Follower's doctor were eventually sent on a mission to one of these post-apocalyptic tribes the Followers sought to help, far to the east in Arizona. His small group, now including a Mormon missionary named Joshua Graham, was captured by the Blackfoot tribe. The Blackfoot were beset by military enemies and were ill-prepared to defend themselves. Caesar chose to break Followers law and teach this tribe in the ways of war, including military tactics and the concept of 'total war' to the group. The Blackfoot were able to defeat their weakest neighbor, the Ridgers, and Sallow had every member of the group killed. Emissaries from other rivals of the Blackfeet were taken to see the bodies of the Ridgers, and many groups surrendered to him. It is at this point that Sallow renamed himself Caesar and introduced the concept of Rome to these tribal groups via his personal leadership and lessons taught to the groups. Caesar (Sallow) concluded that cultural and political divisions prevented the tribes under him from becoming a united, effective group, and he needed to form them into something new. He based this new culture on Roman history and exterminated any remaining cultural identity. Caesar's Legion soon expanded, taking in one tribe after another, and slowly absorbing bigger and more powerful groups in the wasteland that he would break and assimilate. By the year the game *New Vegas* takes place (2281), the Legion spans much of Utah and Colorado, and all of Arizona and New Mexico, having conquered 87 separate tribes and larger civilizations, assimilating them into the Legion.

Caesar rules with an iron fist. Citizens are either soldiers, producers, or slaves. Individuals have no value outside their dedication to the Legion. All men owe their loyalty to Caesar, and all women are slaves. Social and political elevation can only be achieved by the domination of others. The Legion follows the monotheistic Cult of Mars, which holds Caesar as a holy representative of Mars, the god of power. The law in Legion lands is brutally enforced, with extremely little room for crime. Most crimes are punishable by death, or worse, with punishments like crucifixion being very common. Technology, especially medical technology, is strictly forbidden. Homosexuality is punishable by death. Caesar's Legion has infused ancient Latin into normal speech, and some within

[1] Note on use of the word tribe: In the *Fallout* universe, the word tribe is applied to any group of people that rely on basic agriculture and social associations, and have not grown past one or two towns, regardless of culture. Unfortunately, the depiction of these tribes is at times problematic as archaic comparisons are often made to real-life indigenous groups. Nonetheless, as this terminology has a different meaning in the world of *Fallout*, I will continue to use it here.

the nation speak strictly in Latin. While normal settlers can wear whatever they like, slaves are made to wear rags and are marked with a red X, and soldiers all wear red combat uniforms based on historical Roman armor constructed from various other faction armors. The economy is entirely built around production for the military and maintaining trade with other groups. Although The Legion demands tribute, it does not levy taxes on commerce. That being said, there is no private industry, as all things are in the benefit of the military state. The Legion is poorly populated, as most conquered people are either killed or sold into slavery. Women are maintained as breeders and homemakers to try to shore up the population of the Nation.[2] There is no question that Caesar's Legion fits the definitions of a fascist empire. With this background established, we can explore how this empire engages with the themes of Roman legacy, diversity in empire, and gender and sexuality.

Caesar's Legion is clearly based on Rome, but the post-apocalyptic setting of the game poses an interesting complication to the trend of empires appealing to the Roman Legacy; very few people remember what Rome was at all. Roman Legacy, as referenced by this paper, is the lasting cultural and sociopolitical impact left by the Roman Empire on nations that came after, and referenced Rome in its institutions and propaganda. As evidence to this, most people in the world of *Fallout* refer to the language of Latin not as Latin, or the language of ancient Rome, but instead as "the tongue of Caesar."[3] Many see Caesar's Legion as its own separate entity, and not connected to any historical empire. But if most people, especially the tribes the Legion interacts with most often, do not remember Rome, why use it as a political and ideological framework? To quote Caesar directly:

> "I used imperial Rome as the model for my Legion precisely because it was so foreign… Rome was a highly militarized autocracy that effectively integrated the foreign cultures it conquered. It dedicated its citizens to something higher than themselves - to the idea of Rome itself. In Rome, I found a template for a society equal to the challenges of the post-apocalyptic world - a society that could and would survive."[4]

This gets to the crux of why Caesar used the Roman legacy as a basis for his empire: the world did not remember Rome, and Caesar was not attempting to appeal to the Roman legacy in the same way as other powers in the real world have. Empires tried to capture the Roman legacy not because their systems were derived from Roman law, but because it lent them significant legitimacy.[5] Instead of copying Rome and Roman themes to gain historical legitimacy in a wasteland

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[2] *Fallout: New Vegas*, Obsidian Entertainment. (2010; Irvine, CA: Bethesda Softworks), Video game.

[3] *Fallout: New Vegas*

[4] *Fallout: New Vegas*

[5] Marshall Poe, "*Moscow, the Third Rome: The Origins and Transformations of a 'Pivotal Moment.',*" Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas 49, No. 3 (2001): 414.

that had forgotten Rome, Caesar instead adopted these ideas because he believed Rome to be a genuinely good basis for a post-apocalyptic society.

One of the main problems faced by Caesar was cultural resilience, and by forcing tribes and other conquered groups to conform to a new, legendary unity, he was able to better extinguish this cultural and ideological diversity to make a more stable whole. This theme is also present in the 2000 film *Gladiator*. In *Gladiator,* the idea that serving Rome is a greater ideal than any personal ambition is a very important theme throughout the film. Characters like Maximus extoll Roman brotherhood by exclaiming that they serve the interests of the Roman people as opposed to the main villain, Commodus, who only serves himself.[6] Caesar recognizes the ability of a uniting idea, like that of Rome, to bring people together, not for egalitarian purposes, but for the sake of national stability. Caesar contends that his main geopolitical rival, the New Californian Republic, is a loose conglomerate of people only serving themselves, while the Legion is united, full of men serving Caesar, and therefore a far stronger nation. In this way Caesar uses the Roman legacy in a world that has forgotten Rome, by using Rome as a framing device, a fiction to unite, he can create a much stronger state, at least in his ideological framework.

Diversity is a very important element in any empire, and the way that any empire encounters and accommodates that diversity is a necessary part of what defines it. Caesar's Legion is no different, being the home of 87 different tribes, all having had unique cultures and, in many cases, languages. As previously established, the Legion has made the eradication of cultural differences its top priority. No tribe within the Legion had been allowed to maintain its identity. Exceptions seemed to be made when cultural differences were useful to Caesar, but they never lasted. Joshua Graham, Caesar's right-hand man, was allowed to maintain his Mormon faith as long as he was a successful conqueror. The moment he failed Caesar and lost the first battle for the Hoover Dam, he was covered with pitch, burned alive, and thrown into the Grand Canyon. As another example of this phenomenon, one of the more powerful groups conquered by the Legion was the Twisted Hairs. This tribe was composed of strong warriors, diplomats, and scouts. They swiftly became vital to Caesar's operation while maintaining their culture and language system. However, when a Twisted Hairs agent failed to aid in the capture of New Canaan, the Mormon capital, they were replaced with Caesar's spies, the Frumentarii, and all those who refused to abandon their cultural ties to the Twisted Hairs were crucified along the roads of the Legion. Tribes with cultural practices that remained useful to the Legion would still be assimilated, even if their cultural practices were reshaped. A different group, the Hangdogs, maintained a deep connection with dogs and built their religion around this connection. When they were eradicated, the dogs were burnt alive. However, Caesar realized the tactical utility of war-dogs and maintained some animal husbandry practices used by the Hangdogs and rebranded them under Caesarian religion and ideological practice. Similarly, the medicinal practices of the Twin

[6] *Gladiator*, directed by Ridley Scott. (2000; Los Angeles, CA: Universal Pictures, 2000), Film.

Mothers were copied and maintained, even though all members of the matriarchal society were tortured to death.[7] Caesar takes what is useful from certain groups while still exterminating them. Stripping the parts while still removing any relationship to where these practices originated.

The way in which Caesar tolerates cultural differences speaks to the very unique ideology the Legion holds. Caesar maintains an ideological blend based on the theories presented in Gibbon's *Fall of Rome,* Hegelian Dialectics, and Social Darwinism. Caesar seems to have learnt the wrong lessons from Gibbon. Gibbon, a highly elitist historian, blames the fall of Rome on decadence and the failures of bureaucracy. Gibbon states that weakness, anarchy, and barbarity are all that follow the fall of the undisputed power of the Roman executive.[8] Caesar took this and interpreted it to mean that the failures of Rome were the weakness of the executive, and therefore decided to be even more totalitarian. This ties in with his unique combination of Hegelian Dialectics and Social Darwinism. Like Hegel, Caesar believes that all things, thesis, inherently has its opposite, antithesis, and these two opposing theses, when put in inevitable conflict, result in a new third thing that is better than the parts that created it, called synthesis.[9] This understanding of dialectics is remedial at best, but it ties well with Social Darwinism. Social Darwinism is the belief that the principles of 'survival of the fittest' also apply to human social relations. Those with the most wealth and power have that power because they had the strength to take it. The Legion truly believes that all suffering, murder, strife, and struggle are ultimately good for the Legion, the idea being that you can become stronger if the weak die out. This is why the Legion is so brutal: it wishes to produce the very best men via the elimination of all weak elements of society. Modern medicine is banned as it would help the weak survive when they shouldn't have, and all weapons and armor must be earned, creating more effective warriors, at least in theory. This deeply fascist ideology is why Caesar has no issue with incorporating the useful elements of cultures it destroyed. Racially, Caesar's Legion is far more egalitarian than its counterparts. It does not matter what race you are, or what tribe you come from, as long as the people are an effective tool of Caesar, you will have your place. Even ghouls, the rotting former-people who are hated throughout the wasteland, face little prejudice from the Legion. This creates a unique dynamic within the empire where racial and ethnic background matter very little, but any semblance of cultural independence is punishable by death.[10] This unique approach to governance sets Caesar's Legion apart as a particularly brutal and

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[7] *Fallout: New Vegas*

[8] Edward Gibbon, "*Chapter LXXI: Prospect of the Ruins of Rome in the Fifteenth Century. Part I*," in The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire - Complete (New York, CA: Project Gutenberg, 2013)

[9] Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hegel's Dialectic: Five Hermeneutical Studies (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982)

[10] *Fallout: New Vegas*

powerful organization in the world of *Fallout*. More than a band of slavers, this is an empire built on a wheel of suffering.

This pure Social Darwinism leads to an approach to diversity very rarely seen in real-life empires and other media. In *Star Wars,* for example, the fascism of the Galactic Empire is highlighted by its population being entirely composed of posh white men, conveying to the audience the fascist tendencies of that Empire.[11] Conversely, Caesar's Legion eschews ethnic purity in exchange for a purity of strength, an entirely different way of conveying fascism. A close parallel is found in the case of the Ottoman Empire, with its system of Janissaries. As the Ottoman Empire conquered the Balkans, it engaged in a practice of enslaving, converting, and ultimately employing Christian children as the most elite soldiers in the Ottoman military. That being said, the cultural domination of the Balkans was never complete or even intended to be so. This practice of creating elite soldiers was not rooted in meritocratic reasons, but instead as a method of controlling the Balkan population.[12] This unique quality of almost pure Darwinist meritocracy sets Caesar's Legion apart from its imperial peers both in history and in media, and creates a very interesting picture of diversity within the empire. This meritocracy does not extend to all, however, as one of the most notable things about Caesar's Legion is its approach to gender and sexuality.

When it comes to women and sexual deviants, meritocracy in the Legion comes to a swift end. In the legion, women are used as either breeders or manual laborers, and are always slaves. To the Legion, women are less than human; they are a commodity. There is not a single free woman in the entirety of the faction, and even the player is not allowed full entry into the Legion if they play as a female character. In fact, a lot of dialogue and even whole quests are completely unavailable to a female player character. Similarly, homosexuality is explicitly banned, and if caught, an act punishable by torture and death.[13] The Legion has based its ethos on the idea that if you are strong enough, you can rule, no matter who you are. Why does this not apply to women or homosexuals within the empire? Totalitarian states are always afraid of women and LGBTQ people. It is extremely useful in totalitarian states to construct masculinity as a willingness to die for the state and little else. There is a utility in constructing the feminine as antithetical to the masculine. By having a diagonal opposite, the Legion (and other fascist states) can enforce loyalty and a dedication to the state by punishing anything that is against that, which is usually femininity. Moreover, the Legion is notably underpopulated and needs to subjugate women to ensure the long-term success of the state. But it goes far beyond the immediate benefits of this sexism. Nothing erodes the stranglehold over sadistic young men willing to die for a fascist cause quite like love. Love disconnects the soldier from his nation and

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[11] *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*, directed by George Lucas. (1977; San Francisco, CA: Twentieth Century-Fox, 1982), Film.

[12] Suraiya Faroqhi, "*2: The Emergence of an Empire,*" in Subjects of the Sultan: Culture and Daily Life in the Ottoman Empire (London, CA: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 34,

[13] *Fallout: New Vegas*

prevents him from wanting to die. Homosexuality presents the same issue; if the men of the Legion can love each other, they are no longer solely devoted to Caesar. Therefore, the state must criminalize any opportunity to find love and eradicate any possibility of seeing women as human beings. Totalitarianism can only keep people dedicated if it keeps them lonely, fearful, and angry. A large part of what makes the Legion the Legion is this striving for strength and battle and suffering in the name of national improvement and in the name of Caesar. Anything that prevents that from being the primary focus is destructive to the ideological backing and personal dedication that are required to keep the faction afloat.

This seldom works in real life on a national scale, as you cannot really stop people from falling in love. We have seen it used to create elements of the modern-day far right, such as the incel movement. But in historical societies, even ones that did their very best to subjugate women, like in ancient Greece, one cannot simply legislate and propagandize women out of society. Extremely warhawkish nations, like Sparta, which based itself in many of the same dedications to the state as Caesar had, were forced to concede that women were a vital part of society and were forced to value them for the sake of the continued stability of the city-state.[14] Women will always end up being a vital and influential part of any nation, and Caesar cannot prevent that from eventually weakening his control over his subjects. Any expression of gender and sexuality in Caesar's Legion that does not abide by a suicidal masculine loyalty to the state is corrosive to the ideological body of the empire, and Caesar has gone to extreme measures to ensure that this status quo is maintained. History, however, has proved this conviction to be a fool's errand.

Caesar's Legion is a satire of totalitarianism. The Legion is so repugnant that it cannot help but be humorous. Sure, the roads are crime-free, but the idea that a low crime rate can justify any of this is a deeply dark joke within itself. Everyone in the Legion is constantly suffering and is encouraged to make everyone they could even think of caring about suffer too. Caesar has constructed a recursive wheel of agony and pain that cannot be stopped if it can just keep rolling, utilizing the ideology of Caesar to motivate the soldiers of the empire to continue that chain of suffering. What makes the faction so brilliant is that the writers of *Fallout: New Vegas* have created an evil faction that feels like it could make sense. One could hypothetically see how this system might be appealing or even functional in the wastelands of post-apocalyptic America. This satire of empire is fascinating; it engages with so many of the themes common in the discussion of empires and takes them to an extreme where the audience is all but forced to laugh at how unsustainable these ideas that have founded many real-life empires really are. Caesars legion distills so many elements about empire into one undesirable package, and via that package we can examine how the empires of our own time lean on these vile mechanics.

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[14] Aristotle. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vol. 21, translated by H. Rackham. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1944.

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