Twitter Thread by Michael Gerber

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This is Lucius Cornelius Sulla, Roman general and dictator. Right-wing strongman of the 90s-70s BCE.

I've been thinking a lot about Sulla this past week, and people like him.

Ever heard of him? I bet not. 1/

> Sulla\u2019s March on his own capital #Rome in 88BC and his destruction, chaos and terror led directly to the destruction of the Republic by Pompey and Julius Caesar half a century later. pic.twitter.com/voJSciVSw3
>
> — Paul Harrison (@PaulHar77393852) January 7, 2021

You've certainly heard of Julius Caesar who (the story goes) ended the Roman Republic, and was slaughtered by freedom-loving patriots.

But everything Caesar did--marching on Rome, setting up one-man rule, remaking the Senate--had been done by Sulla 40 years before. 2/

So what's the difference? Both men were fantastically wealthy oligarchs--but within that spectrum, Caesar was considered a liberalizer, and Sulla a conservative.

Caesar said he was going to change things; Sulla said he was re-establishing the old ways. 3/

Rome didn't have a written Constitution. Instead they had a set of customs called the "mos maiorum," or "way things are done." We'd call them "norms."

If you asked Sulla and his supporters what they were fighting for, they would've said the mos maiorum.

Which was a lie. 4/

And we KNOW it was a lie, because invading the pomerium (sacred boundary) of Rome was overturning the heaviest norm there was.

Sulla did that in 88 BC, over a personal slight. He was mad he didn't get a generalship.

Is now where I make a modern equivalence? No, I'll wait. 5/

Why did Sulla think he could get away with it? How could he break THE biggest rule, then claim he was defending the rules? Because conservatives--the Romans called them "optimates" or "best men"--had been doing it for 50 years.

By 88 BC, it was "okay if you're an Optimate." 6/

It started with them hiring mobs to kill reformers. In 133 BC, the Tribune Tiberius Gracchus was threatening their profits. So the conservatives hired a mob, whipped a bunch more people into a frenzy, and said, "Go get 'em!"

(While they were safe at home.) 7/

Short of warring on Rome, killing a Tribune was the WORST thing you could do, according to the mos maiorum.

But they got away with it in 133.

So they did it again in 121. And 100. And 91.

By the time Sulla came along, it was clear he could break any rule. IOKIYAOptimate. 8/

So Sulla marched on Rome. And slaughtered his enemies. And took their property. And remade the Senate.

Yet whether you ask Cato or Shakespeare or Mr Radford my long-suffering 7th grade Latin prof, Julius Caesar is the tyrant who strangled liberty.

"Why" speaks volumes.

9/

For better and worse, US politics is Roman cosplay. Be it Booth shouting "sic semper tyrannis," or Wednesday, when a rabble likely seeded with mercenaries was whipped up by Trump and pointed at our classical Capitol, we're haunted by the Republic. 10/

So it is ESSENTIAL that we not fall for the one thing that really killed the Republic. Which was a new norm, something guaranteed to generate more and more disorder until one-man rule was the only alternative. This norm is:

"Rightwing violence isn't *really* violence." 11/

Violence on behalf of the powerful, the landowners, was overlooked. Its exercise became a perk, and attracted thugs into government.

Landlord Trump doesn't want to govern; he wants to profit & punish. The moment he saw Republicans could use violence, he switched parties. 12/

This week, right-wing violence was met with:

"If it's actual violence, then it must've been Antifa."

Which changed to: "It was false-flag!"

And THAT will change to: "It was provoked!"

And will finally rest upon our version of this terrible new norm: "IOKIYAR." 13/

T. Gracchus was killed by a right-wing mob "after gesturing like he wanted a crown."

G. Gracchus? Mob. Saturninus? Mob. Drusus? Stabbed by someone who got away.

Caesar was killed because he was arrogant, and wore fancy boots.

But Sulla? Died at home, retired, in bed. 14/

The Roman Republic fell because elites refused to recognize right-wing violence as violence. If they did, they'd have to reform society, rather than squeezing out ONE more generation of privilege. Killing reformers and blaming BLM--sorry, "the rabble"--worked until it didn't. 15/

I do not know whether the Empire was an improvement for the average Roman--it depended on the Emperor?--but I think we do ourselves no favors by inheriting the Roman oligarchy's willful, self-serving, ultimately fatal blindspot.

IOW?
FUCK Lucius Cornelius Sulla. 16/