The Augustan Principate was the product of crisis – a response to the challenges that precipitated the fall of the Republic. The Principate worked because it met the political needs of its day. There is no doubt that it saved the Roman state and the Roman Empire: it was a lifebelt. But it was not perfect. In its turn it precipitated more challenges that had to be responded to – more crises – in particular that known as the ‘third century Crisis’. In the long run it was a problem as much as a solution: a millstone as much as a lifebelt. In the end, it had to go. I will briefly deal with the Principate as a problem, and then suggest a new way of discerning the strains that brought about its demise.

The Principate was created by Augustus and continued by the Julio-Claudians. However, there is a case for arguing that the Principate had still to establish itself as ‘the office of emperor’ as late as the death of Nero. The continuing challenges and responses that created and developed the Principate sometimes also broke it open to show its workings, and what contemporaries made of it. Thus Plutarch reports that in A.D. 68, Galba, on his way from Spain to take up power in Rome, entertained a group of senators in southern Gaul. Though he could have used the imperial furniture and servants sent to him by the Praetorian Prefect, Nymphidius Sabinus, initially he chose not to, which was remarked upon favourably by his guests.\(^1\) Galba’s modesty is explicable in various ways but, following Wiedemann’s appreciation of Galba’s family pride, I believe that he rejected this ‘family silver’ basically because it was the silver of an alien family.\(^2\)

Galba, born in 3 B.C., had lived under all the Julio-Claudian rulers. His view of the Principate is therefore likely to have been shaped by how it was seen by the high Roman aristocracy at its inception: not as

\(^1\) Plutarch, *Galba* 11.1: *katakeuē kai therapeia basilikē*.  
a monarchy, but as the Republic continuing under the patronage and direction of a great man and his domus. In June 68, this first domus and its current leader had perished in disgrace and destruction. But the Republic continued, and needed protection, and it was as the head of the next protective domus that Galba at first projected himself. This explains why he revolted in the name of the Senate and People of Rome, and why he initially refused the ‘imperial’ titles – especially, of course, that of ‘Caesar’, which, as a family name, would have stuck in his aristocratic throat. In 69 Vitellius, too, revolted in the name of the Senate and People of Rome, did not claim the title of Augustus until it was granted to him by the Senate, and initially rejected that of ‘Caesar’.

In the end, both were forced to call themselves ‘Augustus’ and ‘Caesar’ if only to lay their hands on the massive wealth of the domus Caesaris. However, their actions demonstrate that by the middle of the first century A.D. Rome hardly possessed an established imperial monarchy. And, though rulers of successive dynasties acquired ever greater practical power, this potentially dangerous internal contradiction – Wallace Hadrill’s ‘pose of denial’ – persisted within the system. Extremely illuminating in this respect is the remark attributed to Trajan when appointing Sextus Attius Suburanus as his Praetorian Prefect: “Take this sword and use it for me if I rule well, and against me if I rule badly.” This instruction is reported favourably by Pliny the Younger, Dio and Aurelius Victor, and without disapproval by Millar. However, in terms of fostering political stability it is a disastrous precept. It urges

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3 Cf. Cassius Dio 54.12.4: prostasia; 55.6.1, 55.12.3: hēgemonia. (I owe these references, and the following, to Wolf Liebeschuetz.)

4 As Tacitus has Galba say (Historiae 1.16): Sub Tiberio et Gaiō et Claudiō unius familiae quasi hereditatis fuimus (“Under Tiberius, Gaius and Claudius we Romans were the heritage, so to speak, of one family” [trans. C.H. Moore, Loeb ed.]).

5 Tacitus, Historiae 1.16 (again by Galba, as rector of the Empire): et finita Iuliorum Claudiorumque domo optimum quemquem adoptio invenit (“since the houses of the Julii and the Claudii are ended, adoption will select only the best” [trans. C.H. Moore, Loeb ed.]).


10 Pliny, Panegyricus 67.8; Dio 68.16.1; Aurelius Victor, Caesares 13.9; F.G.B. Millar, The Emperor in the Roman World (London 1977), 123.