

Julius Caesar

Historic World Leaders, 1994

- **Born:** July 12, 100 BC in Rome, Italy
- **Died:** March 15, 44 BC in Rome, Italy
- **Nationality:** Roman
- **Occupation:** Emperor

Julius Caesar

"I came, I saw, I conquered." GAIUS JULIUS CAESAR

Military and political leader of Rome, who brought about the end of the Roman Republic and laid the foundations for the Roman Empire.

- 102 b.c. Caesar born
- 73 b.c. Co-opted Pontifex
- 69 b.c. Made quaestor under the governor of Farther Spain
- 65 b.c. Elected Curule Aedile
- 63 b.c. Chosen Pontifex Maximus
- 62 b.c. Chosen praetor
- 61 b.c. Chosen propraetor of Farther Spain
- 59 b.c. Made consul; proconsular governor of Cisalpine Gaul (with Illyricum) and Transalpine Gaul
- 55 b.c. Invasion of Britain
- 53 b.c. Battle of Carrhae in Mesopotamia; Crassus died
- 52 b.c. Revolt of Vercingetorix
- 49 b.c. Crossed the Rubicon; elected dictator
- 48 b.c. Victorious over Pompey at Pharsalus
- 47 b.c. Victorious in Egypt; Cleopatra installed as ruler; Caesar defeated Pharnaces in Asia Minor
- 45 b.c. Dictator for life
- 44 b.c. Refused diadem offered by Mark Antony; murdered

Name variations: Gaius Julius Caesar. Born on July 13, 102 b.c.; murdered on March 15, 44 b.c.; married: Cornelia (daughter of Cinna), 84 b.c.; married: Pompeia (granddaughter of Sulla), 67 b.c. (divorced 62 b.c.). Descendant: Augustus, first emperor of the Roman Empire.

Contributed by Peter L. Viscusi, Professor of History, Central Missouri State University, Warrensburg, Missouri

Gaius Julius Caesar was born into one of the original patrician (upper-class) families of Rome. Although aristocratic, the family was of modest means and relatively undistinguished in political and military accomplishment. Detailed information about Julius Caesar's early life is lacking, but it appears he received an excellent education from the tutor-freedman Marcus Antonius Gniphos,

a master of Greek and Latin rhetoric. While a sound grounding in rhetorical training was vital to any Roman hoping to participate in the political life of Rome, it was the marriage of Caesar's aunt Julia to Dictator Gaius Marius that propelled the young Caesar into politics. As a result of Julia's efforts, Marius planned to name her nephew Caesar the flamen Dialis (priest of Jupiter). Despite Caesar's previous plans to marry the daughter of a wealthy equestrian (business-class) family, he married Cornelia, daughter of the consul Lucius Cornelius Cinna, to fulfill the requirement that the flamen marry a patrician. Because of Marius's changing political fortunes, however, Caesar was never appointed flamen.

When Marius, Cinna, and the populares (an alliance of liberal senatorials and equestrians) were finally driven from power in 82 b.c., Rome fell under the control of the dictator Sulla and the optimates (conservative landowning senatorials). To force Caesar's disassociation from the previous regime, Sulla insisted he divorce Cornelia. Others, similarly ordered, had obeyed. Caesar refused, however, and chose to avoid arrest by hiding in the Sabine country. During this period, Caesar contracted malaria. In his absence, his mother's family interceded with Sulla, gaining a pardon for him, after which he returned to Rome and became a soldier.

As the son of a senator, Caesar immediately became an officer and was assigned to the staff of Marcus Minucius Thermus, the propraetor (governor) of the Roman province of Asia. In 80 b.c., Thermus honored Caesar with the corona civica (oak wreath) for his conspicuous bravery in the taking of the Greek city Mytilene. Caesar continued his military service in 78 b.c. with the proconsul (provincial governor) Publius Servilius Vatia in the war against the Cilician pirates.

With news of Sulla's death, Caesar returned to Rome to prepare himself for a political career. In 77 b.c., he prosecuted a leading Sullan associate, Gnaeus Cornelius Dolabella (consul in 81 b.c.), for extortion; although Dolabella was acquitted, Caesar had enhanced his own reputation as an orator. In an effort to further improve his oratorical skills, he traveled to Rhodes to attend the lectures of rhetorician Apollonius Molon but was captured south of Miletus and held for ransom by pirates. Upon his release, Caesar led troops against his former captors and defeated them.

Returning to Rhodes, Caesar's daring was tested again when Mithridates, king of Pontus, invaded the province of Asia in 74 b.c. On his own initiative and without orders, Caesar crossed from Rhodes to Asia Minor, took command of local troops, and expelled the enemy. While serving in Rhodes, he received word that he had been co-opted in 73 b.c. into the college of pontifices (priests) in Rome--a particularly significant honor and a clear indication that Rome's aristocracy recognized Caesar as having important political connections. With the standard prerequisites to power in place--good birth, excellent oratorical skills, and bravery and success in war--Caesar turned full attention to his political career.

Roman politics of the first century b.c. was polarized between the optimate and populares factions. The city-state of Rome had been undergoing tremendous administrative stress since 189 b.c. when she gained de facto control of the Mediterranean. Roman politics evolved into a series of violent political and military struggles for control of the state. Political advancement depended on military gloria (fame) and on large sums of money which the rising politician could use to alternately threaten or bribe the electorate. Politicians borrowed heavily to participate in the party strife and hoped to repay their debts by obtaining important governorships and preying upon the

provincials. The depredations and extortion practiced by Roman governors were, therefore, a direct result of the Roman political system.

Given the parameters of Roman politics, Caesar was not only well suited but also well prepared to be an important participant. Frequently described by writers of the time as "fond of elegance and luxury," he was known for an extravagant lifestyle which Roman historian Suetonius tells us included a collection of "gems, carvings, statues, and pictures by early artists," despite the tremendous debt required to finance his political activity. Caesar commissioned the building of an expensive villa on Lake Nemi only to have it torn down upon completion because it did not suit him. Known for his generosity, he gave expensive gifts to friends. With such freespending ways, Caesar did not shrink from bribing officials and the voters of Rome.

In 73 b.c., the Romans elected Caesar one of the 24 military tribunes, his first elected office. Elected quaestor (junior magistrate) in 69 b.c., he gave public funeral orations honoring his recently deceased aunt Julia and his wife Cornelia. According to Suetonius, Caesar took the opportunity in his oration to glorify his family:

The family of my aunt Julia is descended by her mother from the kings, and on her father's side is akin to the immortal Gods. . . . Our stock therefore has at once the sanctity of kings, and the claim to reverence which attaches to the Gods.

Seeing the tide of politics change, Caesar allied himself with Marcus Licinius Crassus, reputed to be the wealthiest man in Rome, and married Pompeia, the granddaughter of Sulla. In 65 b.c., Caesar was elected Curule Aedile along with the optimate Marcus Calpurnius Bibulus. Although both men spent large sums to present the public games, Caesar could not be outspent; he sponsored gladiatorial games of unprecedented proportion to honor his father who had died 20 years earlier. When popular election was restored in 63 b.c. for the position of Pontifex Maximus (head of the college of priests), Caesar was elected after heavy bribery. In the following year, when the women's religious ritual honoring the Bona Dea (goddess of chastity and fertility) was held at Caesar's home, Publius Clodius Pulcher committed sacrilege by witnessing the ceremonies disguised as a woman. As a result of this scandal, Caesar divorced Pompeia saying, according to Suetonius, "I maintain that the members of my family should be free from suspicion as well as from accusation."

Following his election to the position of praetor (senior magistrate), Caesar went to the province of Farther Spain as governor. According to the historian Appian, he was 25 million denarii in debt when he left for his province but returned with enough money to pay his creditors and to stand for and be elected consul for 59 b.c. Bibulus was once again Caesar's colleague in this office. When Bibulus tried to stop Caesar's populare-supported legislative program by the announcement of "ill-omens," Caesar ignored him and forced his legislation through the assembly. According to Suetonius, people began to joke that things were now being done "in the consulship of Julius and Caesar, instead of Bibulus and Caesar."

The First Triumvirate Is Formed

When Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (Pompey) returned from the East and his war against Mithridates, Caesar formed an informal alliance with Pompey and the wealthy Crassus to control the Roman state. This alliance, formed in 60 b.c. and known as the First Triumvirate, was no small accomplishment as Pompey and Crassus viewed each other with suspicion. As consul, Caesar provided the legislative support both Pompey and Crassus needed. In exchange, they helped Caesar obtain Cisalpine Gaul (with Illyricum) and Transalpine Gaul as his proconsular provinces. Anxious to take up proconsular duties with the possibility for military fame, Caesar left for Gaul even before his term as consul was completed.

A cause for war with the Gallic tribes was not long in coming. The Helvetii wanted to migrate to Aquitaine and so asked Caesar for permission to cross a small portion of Roman provincial territory. Caesar, realizing that the Helvetii intended to cross the Roman frontier with or without his permission, saw this as an opportunity to enhance his military reputation. He not only repelled the Helvetii but aided the Aedui and the Sequani in defeating the Helvetii. Soon various Gallic tribes appealed to Caesar for military aid against the German Ariovistus, the leader of the Suebi. By defeating Ariovistus and his allies, the Roman legions then controlled all of central and northern Gaul. To prevent the Gauls from receiving aid from the Britons, Caesar invaded Britain in 55 b.c. and again in 54 b.c. Although Caesar's occupation of southern Britain was brief, it marked the beginning of Roman interest in the island. Because of increasing resentment toward the Romans in Gaul, the Belgae rose in revolt under their leader Ambiorix and other Gallic tribes rose under Vercingetorix. After several hard-fought campaigns, Caesar and his troops had quelled the rebellion by 51 b.c.

During Caesar's Gallic campaigns, Pompey and Crassus reverted to their bickering in Rome. In 56 b.c., Crassus, Pompey, and 120 senators went to meet with Caesar to reach a new understanding at Luca, a town just inside the province of Cisalpine Gaul. There, the three political leaders decided that Crassus and Pompey would be consuls for 55 b.c. and that their proconsular commands were to be for five years. Caesar's proconsular command was extended for an additional four years. This renewed alliance, however, proved short-lived. Pompey distanced himself from Caesar after Pompey's wife Julia (Caesar's daughter) died in 54 b.c. Anxious to take up his proconsular command in Syria and to participate in an expected war with Parthia, Crassus left Rome soon after his election as consul. Not as able a military commander as Caesar, Crassus died in 53 b.c. shortly after the Roman defeat at the Battle of Carrhae.

With Crassus removed from Roman politics, the optimates turned to Pompey for leadership, hoping to see Caesar superseded in his command. When Caesar was once again a private citizen, they planned to prosecute him for illegal acts committed during his consulship with Bibulus. Caesar countered these moves by paying huge bribes to buy the support of the consul Lucius Aemilius Paullus and the tribune Gaius Scribonius Curio. According to Appian, Caesar "bought the neutrality of Paullus for 1500 talents and the assistance of Curio with a still larger sum because he knew that the latter was heavily burdened with debt."

Caesar Crosses the Rubicon

Despite calls for mutual disarmament, Rome was clearly moving toward civil war. Realizing the optimates would never compromise with him, Caesar began the civil war on January 10, 49 b.c.,

when he crossed the Rubicon into Italy, a small shallow river that separated Italy from Cisalpine Gaul. In an attempt to reach the East where Rome had most of her troops stationed, Caesar and his men hastened to the port of Brundisium on the southeast coast of Italy. Pompey, however, reached the seaport first and rallied Roman forces in the eastern provinces to come to his aid against Caesar.

In a relatively short period of time, Caesar defeated his optimate enemies. While Caesarian forces defeated Pompey's troops in Spain, Caesar defeated Pompey himself in Greece at the Battle of Pharsalus. Before he could be captured, however, Pompey fled to Egypt where he was taken captive and beheaded by Ptolemy XII, a claimant to the Egyptian throne. Arriving in Egypt, Caesar claimed the right to judge who was Egypt's rightful ruler--Ptolemy or Cleopatra. Ptolemy, resentful of such interference, led an armed uprising against Caesar's Roman troops. Caesar, however, defeated Ptolemy and placed Cleopatra on the Egyptian throne.

Taking advantage of the Roman preoccupation with Egyptian politics, Pharnaces (son of Mithridates) attempted to conquer Pontus. But Caesar swiftly responded to the threat, totally defeating Pharnaces within five days of his arrival in Asia Minor. This short, decisive campaign prompted Caesar to write a brief but succinct description of events to a friend in Rome: "I came, I saw, I conquered."

As the victor in the civil war, Caesar instituted a number of reforms. His economic reforms included a reduction in the number of people eligible for free grain from 320,000 to 150,000, the discontinuation of old equestrian-controlled system of tax-farming in the Roman province of Asia, and, in an effort to relieve the extreme unemployment among the Roman poor, the mandate that Romans had to employ one free man for every two slaves who worked the great estates of Italy. As an important first step toward political reform, the membership of the senate was increased from its traditional number of 300 members to 900 with the admission of Gallic chieftains and various other supporters of Caesar. Caesar had succeeded in making himself simultaneously consul, proconsul, perpetual dictator, and pontifex maximus, while possessing the powers of a censor and a tribune. This was a tremendous and unprecedented concentration of political and military power in the hands of one individual.

Now without a rival, Caesar enhanced his position to such a degree that he began to flirt with assuming godlike attributes: the Roman month of Quintilis was renamed July and a temple dedicated to Venus, the divine ancestor of the Julians, was erected. In addition, Caesar's portrait appeared on the obverse of coins, an honor previously reserved for the gods. Finally, he wore a purple toga at all times which some scholars have said resembled the kind used to clothe the statues of the gods.

Caesar held such an exalted position in the state that he sat rather than stood in the presence of the senate, and witnesses in court were required to swear by his genius (guardian spirit). Many in Rome had reason to believe that he wanted to establish a Hellenistic-style monarchy. Marcus Antonius (Mark Antony), Caesar's consular colleague, even tried to place a diadem (Greek crown) on Caesar's head--perhaps in an attempt to test public opinion. In any case, Caesar was wise enough to refuse the offered crown.

Regardless of their political persuasion, everyone in Rome recognized Caesar's impressive character. A multitalented man of great daring, he was courageous and self-confident. Suetonius describes Caesar in his later years:

He is said to have been tall of stature, with a fair complexion, shapely limbs, a somewhat full face, and keen black eyes; sound of health, except that towards the end he was subject to sudden fainting fits and to nightmare as well. He was twice attacked by the falling sickness during his campaigns. He was somewhat overnice in the care of his person, being not only carefully trimmed and shaved, but even having superfluous hair plucked out, as some have charged; while his baldness was a disfigurement which troubled him greatly, since he found that it was often the subject of the gibes of his detractors. Because of it he used to comb forward his scanty locks from the crown of his head, and of all the honours voted him by the senate and people there was none which he received or made use of more gladly than the privilege of wearing a laurel wreath at all times.

The overwhelming control Caesar exercised over virtually every aspect of Roman life drove approximately 60 of his aristocratic opponents to participate in an assassination plot. Although many of these men were former followers of Pompey, a majority of them were of Caesar's own faction. Even Decimus Brutus, a man named in Caesar's will as an alternate heir, was among the plotters. Caesar, having completed preparations for a war with Parthia to avenge the Roman defeat under Crassus, planned to bid a formal farewell to the senate on the Ides (the 15th) of March. Upon his entrance into the senate, the conspirators set upon him with daggers, stabbing him 23 times. After Caesar's death, all in the senate, conspirators and nonconspirators alike, fled to their homes.

A short time later, the senators reconvened to discuss their course of action. If the senate sided with the conspirators, declaring Caesar a tyrant, such a position would mean that all of his acts would be declared illegal, for which the senate would have to face the anger of Caesar's soldiers. If, however, the senate sided with Caesar's faction, it would mean declaring that Caesar had been a legal magistrate all along, making the assassins enemies of Rome. In the end, despite the inconsistency, the senators ratified Caesar's acts, voted him a public funeral, and declared an amnesty for the conspirators.

While successful in eliminating Caesar, his enemies would prove unable to reverse the constitutional course he had set for Rome. The Roman Republic would not be a republic much longer. Although few realized it, Rome had already begun the process of transforming itself into the Roman Empire.

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