

Julius Caesar: Hero or Hated?

Reforms

In 60 BCE, Caesar joined with two other popular generals, **POMPEY** and **CRASSUS** to form a political alliance known as the **FIRST TRIUMVIRATE**. Triumvirate means rules of “three.” With the support of Pompey and Crassus, Caesar became consul in 59 BCE.

Julius Caesar wanted more power so he left for **Gaul** (present day France) to obtain their army. Over the next 10 years he was able to bring all of Gaul under Roman rule. While he was away, Crassus died in battle in 53 BCE. Pompey was made sole consul in 52 BCE. Out of jealousy towards Pompey’s new title, Caesar marched across the **Rubicon River** with his troops into Italy and declared war on the Republic. Pompey and his followers fled to Greece, where Caesar eventually defeated them.

Caesar was back in Rome, fresh from military victory, the darling of the mob, and no viable political opposition. What would he do next? All Romans knew what Marius had done in this position, and what Sulla had done. Caesar was, if anything, held a stronger hand than either of those two.

The first, most remarkable thing was what he did not do. Upon his return there were no reprisals, no proscription lists, no bloodbath. Caesar asked only that his enemies agree to oppose him no longer. The few who refused he did indeed prosecute, but to any who would simply agree not to be his enemy, he left them in peace. He even pardoned **Cicero**, his most ardent enemy.

Such clemency was unheard of, and it went far toward ending the rancor that accompanies civil war. He gave his veterans a generous settlement, founding many colonies, so that the army was not a source of unrest.

He revamped the administration of Rome itself, for corruption in the Senate had nearly ruined it. With his wealth, Caesar began a number of public works, thereby giving work to the unemployed and an alternative to the political gangs.

He won the favor of the provinces by reducing taxes there. Generations of senators, acting as provincial governors, had bled the provinces for every sheaf of wheat and ounce of gold. Caesar gave them some relief. In addition, Caesar granted Roman citizenship to certain cities, extending the franchise north of the Alps for the first time.

Most of these reforms were implemented to the detriment of the interest of the Senatorial class. Where were the Senators? Dead, many of them. Or in exile. Many of the rest were simply silent, powerless against the great man. But all Caesar's acts were approved by the Senate, including the decree that made him, like **Sulla**, dictator for life. With so many Senators gone, Caesar simply created new senators, doubling the size of the senate. So, even when some dared to speak against one of his proposals and to vote against it, Caesar could always be sure of a majority in his favor.

He also instituted a reform in the Roman calendar. The traditional calendar was flawed and by his day the months did not agree with the seasons at all. Everyone knew it was flawed, but no one had the authority to change it. Caesar did. The result was what is called the **Julian calendar**, and it served as the calendar of the West until the 16th century. Even then, the adjustment was minor; our calendar is essentially the one given us by the Romans.

Conspiracy

Despite his clemency, Caesar had many enemies, especially among the younger members of the nobility. Because he was dictator, he appointed officials without bothering with elections. This meant that the only possibility for advancement was by being one of Caesar's men. He had effectively shut down the traditional courses of political activity, and this was deeply resented among the young men who saw their futures closed. Caesar was dictator and there was no hint that he intended to do as Sulla had and resign.

He made matters worse by his autocratic behavior. Thoroughly disgusted with the corruption and pettiness among the senators, Caesar did not bother to consult them and behaved badly towards them. He rode over their objections and hesitations and while few dared speak openly, many resented this and feared where it would lead.

He did not bother to tell people his plans, either, leaving everyone free to assume the best or the worst. He also assumed a number of public offices himself - key positions in the state that would never fall to anyone else. Among these was the position of consul.

The last straw came in February 44, when he was made dictator for life. Would Caesar become king? At a public event, **Marc Antony** offered him a golden crown -- the mark of a king -- but he refused it. Some say the gesture was genuine, but others suspected it was but another instance of Caesarian politics, a carefully orchestrated event between he and Antony to reassure the mob that Caesar would not be king.

Also in February, Caesar dismissed his personal bodyguard. He appears to have believed either that he was in no personal danger, or that it was politically necessary to make such a gesture, to show confidence.

Caesar increased the Senate to 900 members but reduced its power. Many senators, fearing Caesar's ambition and popularity, formed a conspiracy against him.

All these factors precipitated the events of March 18th 44 BCE. His enemies had new reasons to fear and hate him. They had to strike before March 18 because once he left for Parthia (part of the Persian army) he would be safe in his army and would return even stronger (none doubted that he would be victorious, not even his enemies). And, by dismissing his bodyguard, he had given them an opportunity.

There would never be a better chance to eliminate the tyrant.

The Ides of March

Both **Marcus Brutus** and **Gaius Cassius** were young Roman noblemen who had received a thorough Greek education. They had been raised on edifying tales of Greek **tyrannies** that always ended in the liberation of the city. They both were powerfully moved by the idea that their ancient Republic was on the verge of collapse at the hands of the dictator.

So they formed a conspiracy, consisting of themselves and a number of other senators, each agreeing to strike so that no one man could be blamed for the murder. They struck on the 15th of March, attacking Caesar when he was alone and unarmed. He received over 20 stab wounds and died on the spot.

The conspirators, by pre-arrangement, went immediately to the forum to proclaim the death of the tyrant and the restoration of liberty. Their announcement met with scattered applause and a few cheers. The Senate, upon hearing the news, immediately fled. The day did not develop at all as Brutus and Cassius had expected; not at all like in the stories.