

Gaius Julius Caesar was a Roman aristocrat, politician and general who used his military success to gain political dominance during the closing years of the Roman Republic. His **Gallic Wars** represent one of the largest acquisitions of territory by a single Roman general and brought Caesar the wealth, prestige and veteran army that allowed him to establish himself through force as dictator in Rome. Far-reaching political and social reforms followed, until on the eve of leaving Rome for a campaign against the Parthians, Caesar was assassinated by a conspiracy of former enemies and allies.

Caesar was born in 100 BCE to the aristocratic Julian family that claimed ancestry back to the Trojan hero Aeneas and the gods. The Julii were one of oldest families in Rome and this gave Caesar an advantage in the intensely competitive political world of the late Roman Republic, though its members had not been particularly successful politically for several generations. The family had received a welcome financial boost through the marriage of Caesar's aunt to the political newcomer Marius, one of Rome's leading generals of the late second century BCE, but this brought with it dangers. His relationship with Marius led to Caesar's life being endangered during the political upheavals during Sulla's dominance in the 80s BCE and he was lucky to escape unscathed. He sensibly withdrew from Italy and undertook military service in the eastern Mediterranean, first on the staff of Minucius Thermus, the governor of Asia, and subsequently with Servilius Isauricus in a campaign against pirates. Whilst on Thermus' staff, Caesar gained renown for two actions: his relationship with the king of Bithynia, Nicomedes, to whose court Caesar had been sent to acquire ships for Thermus' campaign; and for his courage in battle. The former incident led to suggestions of improper behaviour that dogged Caesar for the rest of his life, even his soldiers including it in the bawdy songs that accompanied his triumphal procession in Rome following the conquest of Gaul (the song also referred to the conquest of Caesar by Nicomedes). However, more positive publicity came in the form of a Civic Crown (*corona civica*), one of Rome's highest decorations for valour, awarded for saving the life of one or more fellow citizens in the siege of Miletus. After a brief return to Rome to launch a career in oratory, the precursor to a public career, Caesar headed back to the east to study rhetoric, on the way being captured by pirates, and famously, after being ransomed, returning at the head of a small force he had raised without authority, to capture them in turn and execute them, also without authority. Despite still being a private citizen, he also raised a force of local militia to repel incursions by a detachment from the army of Mithridates, the king of Pontus, who was raiding Roman territories in western Turkey. His actions illustrate a willingness to throw himself into military action almost regardless of the odds and any official position, but allowed him to return to Rome a war hero ready to begin his public career.

The early stages of Caesar's political career were conventional in one sense – he held the various magistracies in the proper order and at the correct age; his first position that of Quaestor in 69, serving as an official on the staff of the governor of Baetica in Spain – but he was from the start clearly an intensely ambitious individual, pushing the boundaries of legality to promote himself, staging lavish funeral games in memory of his father when holding the city magistracy of Aedile in 65 despite the fact that his father had died twenty years previously, but the extravagance and generosity of the games ensured votes in future elections. In 63, through generous bribery, Caesar was elected to the position of Pontifex Maximus, chief priest of the Roman state, a position which brought considerable influence. He was also elected to the Praetorship of 62, a magistracy that would end with appointment to governorship of a province and command of an army. His career was not without hints of scandal though: during this period he was loosely associated with the revolutionary politician Catiline, though had detached himself before Catiline's conspiracy turned to open revolt; his

household was involved in scandal when a young aristocrat, Pubius Clodius, was discovered in his house during a women-only festival. This episode conveniently allowed Caesar to divorce his wife on the grounds that his entire household must be above suspicion, and seek a more politically advantageous marriage. His massive debts also threatened to end his career as his creditors attempted to close in on him. He was saved by a loan from Crassus, Rome's wealthiest politician, and was able to take up his governorship in Further Spain.

Caesar did not waste time in Spain; throughout his governorship he concentrated on carrying out a series of raids on independent tribes with two aims: to acquire booty to repay his creditors and obtain enough money to run for Consul, and to achieve sufficient military success to qualify for a triumph when he returned to Rome. He did both, and returned to the capital in 60 to hold his triumph and stand for office. However, the timing of his arrival meant he could not do both, and with the Senate refusing to bend the rules on his behalf, he was forced to forgo his triumph in order to announce his candidacy for the consulship. It was at this stage that Caesar joined an informal political alliance with the more senior politicians Crassus and Pompey. They supported him in his bid for the consulship, and once elected, Caesar ensured legislation was passed that was favourable to them. Through his alliances and force of personality, Caesar was able to ride rough-shod over his fellow consul and force through legislation relating to tax collection, land-grants and the ratification of new provinces in the eastern Mediterranean. In turn, Caesar's original provincial allocation of the Italian forestry was switched to the governorship of northern Italy, the province of Illyricum on the Adriatic coast, and subsequently southern France. In 58 he took over his new province and when the Helvetii provided him with a pretext by migrating from their homelands in Switzerland towards the Roman province in southern Gaul, he launched a decade long subjection of France, Belgium and Germany to the west of the Rhine in his **Gallic Wars**.

Fully aware of the need for publicity in Rome during his absence, Caesar wrote a series of commentaries on his campaigns which, at least for the first few years of his governorship, were probably published in Rome annually. These reports were eagerly awaited by an excited audience in the capital, and a fine example of Caesar's awareness of keeping his name and exploits in the public eye was his brilliant propaganda coup of 55 BCE. In this year his allies Pompey and Crassus held the consulship together in Rome and would have expected to have held the political limelight all year. Instead, in two extraordinarily bold expeditions, Caesar became the first Roman general to lead an army across the Rhine into Germany, and to cross the Ocean, the boundary of the known world, to the island of Britain. Neither campaign was particularly successful militarily, but that was not the point of them. Caesar's narratives provide an eloquent – and highly partisan – account of his conquests; they emphasise the difficulty of the campaigns and his own brilliance, they frequently downplay the contributions of others and his own set-backs. They do not mention the growing opposition in Rome to his influence and obvious desire to return to Rome and hold another consulship in order to avoid prosecution by his political enemies for his actions during his governorship, including accusations of war crimes following his massacre of unarmed Germans. His private alliance with Crassus and Pompey had fallen apart after the death of Crassus in Parthia in 53 and Pompey's move towards the more conservative elements of the Senate. With the conservative elements in the Senate supported by Pompey and once again refusing to allow Caesar to stand for office *in absentia* (and thus remaining immune from prosecution), Caesar saw no choice but to march on Rome and precipitate a civil war.

Caesar gained the initiative immediately by crossing the Rubicon and overrunning Italy, initially with only one legion, but there was no reliable opposition, and many of the soldiers

stationed in the peninsula defected to him from their Pompeian commanders. Pompey was forced to vacate the country and withdraw to Greece to regroup and recruit new allies; Caesar never really lost the initiative throughout the campaign. After entering Rome, he headed for Spain where he swiftly defeated the generals who had been holding the peninsula on behalf of Pompey, a strategically astute move that denied Pompey the opportunity of confining Caesar to an Italy encircled by his supporters and reducing him from a distance. Following the fall of the important city of Marseilles, Caesar headed back through Italy and crossed a stormy Adriatic, then under Pompeian control, to besiege his rival at Dyrrachium. Supply problems, which dogged Caesar throughout his Greek campaign, and a reverse, forced him to abandon the siege, but again Pompey lost the advantage, withdrawing into Thessaly where, under pressure from his senatorial allies, he offered pitched battle at Pharsalus.

With both sides anchoring one wing on the river Enipeus, the crux of the battle occurred on the unanchored wings where Pompey had concentrated his cavalry with the intention of outflanking the right wing of Caesar's smaller army. To counter this, Caesar strengthened his right wing with infantry taken from the reserve rear cohorts of his legions, ordering them to lie in ambush. He took command of the cavalry himself and gave his soldiers orders to target the faces of the less experienced Pompeian horsemen. Pompey's line of heavy infantry unusually did not charge into battle to face the oncoming legions, instead holding their battle line. This was probably because the Pompeian legions were generally less experienced than Caesar's with their decade of Gallic campaigning behind them, but Pompey had also expected Caesar's men to be wearied from a longer than usual charge when the battle came to hand-to-hand combat. However, the experience of Caesar's troops showed. On their own initiative his legionaries stopped their charge when they realised the enemy had not moved, paused to regain their breath and steady their lines, then renewed the charge. As the two lines of heavy infantry engaged, the battle was won by Caesar's right wing where his overstrength right repulsed Pompey's cavalry and turned his left. Pompey's lines crumbled and Caesar's victory was total. Pompey fled to Egypt where he was assassinated on arrival.

Following his rival to Egypt, Caesar intervened in the civil war between Cleopatra and her brother, establishing Cleopatra as queen of Egypt and his lover, before campaigns in Syria and Asia Minor, defeating Pharnaces, the king of Pontus, at Zela so swiftly and simply that he was able to claim *veni, vidi, vici* (I came, I saw, I conquered). Further Pompeian resistance in Africa and later Spain was mopped up, resulting in the deaths of many of the republican leaders, providing no obstruction to Caesar establishing himself as dictator on his return to Rome. Various reforms to the Roman state followed, including the introduction of the Julian calendar, a policy of colonisation and veteran settlement, and wide-ranging administrative reforms. Caesar himself accepted extraordinary personal honours from the senate that stretched almost to divinity, and presented himself in a regal manner although he seems not to have intended to take the title of king. However, his honours and powers, in particular his appointment as dictator for life and the regal trappings he had adopted, and his disdainful treatment of his fellow senators, led to his alienation not just from former enemies to whom he had shown clemency, but from his former allies too. He was assassinated in a widely supported conspiracy on 15<sup>th</sup> March 44 BCE, just days before he was due to take command of a campaign against the Parthians.

As a commander, Caesar engendered intense loyalty amongst his soldiers. He achieved a successful balance between discipline and laxness, allowing his men to wear fine armour and highly decorated equipment, to loot and run riot amongst the defeated when it suited him, but for the most part to obey orders and retain their discipline when he needed them to. He

experienced some mutinous gatherings during the Civil War, but handled them firmly and effectively, his task made easier because ultimately his soldiers loved him. He raised military pay by 50%, recognising both the vital importance of military pay to political stability and the professional status that the Roman legions had acquired. As a general, Caesar was renowned for his speed and his risk-taking, seizing the initiative and stretching his supply lines and his luck to the limits in pursuit of his military goals. The setbacks he experienced, at Gergovia, Dyrrachium and his limited success in Britain, were because he pushed too far with too few resources. Like a traditional Roman general, Caesar would lead from the front when necessary, and whilst this occasionally meant he had to rely on a subordinate to respond to tactical changes and send in reserves, it could provide the impetus in turning the tide of battle.

**See also:**

Gallic Wars

Caesar, *Gallic War and Civil War*

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