

# 'the roman dictator' – julius caesar essay



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The Roman republic was beginning to break down in the years after Marius's victories over the German barbarians. A saviour of the country (Marius) was driven into exile, a consul (Sulla) led an army into Rome itself to restore order, and a successful general; s (Lucullus's) own troops mutinied against him at the height of his campaigns in foreign fields. Law and order could not be maintained without the help of an army. Corruption ran riot through Rome in high places, and governors of foreign provinces seemed anxious only to line their own pockets with wealth. Clearly, this state of affairs could not continue if the Roman empire, which was already enormous, was to grow or even to survive.

Kingship had been tried and discarded. An aristocratic republic had not worked, nor had a democratic one. Dictatorship seemed the only answer. In Julius Caesar, Rome found a ruler more than capable of the task. Gaius Julius Caesar, born around 100 B. C.

, was tall, with a fair complexion and dark eyes. From quite an early age in life he began to lose the hair on his head and, in later life, he combed it forward to try and cover his baldness. He was a remarkable horseman, and was said to have had the ability of riding bareback at great speeds with his hands tied behind his back. He had extraordinary powers of endurance, would sleep in the open and share the worst dangers and bitterest weathers with the hardiest of his troops; he was braver than any man in his armies and his troops adored him for it so they followed him everywhere. This unique man, whom Shakespeare called ' the noblest man that ever lived in the tide of times', excelled in everything that he did.

He was extremely versatile and talented. He had been a general, a statesman, a lawgiver, a jurist, an orator, a poet, a historian, a mathematician, and an architect. He would have surpassed any other man in a subject to which he devoted his time. He was also kind and munificent, and more generous to defeated enemies and to wrong-doers than any ruler of ancient history. The career of Caesar amply testifies to this seemingly exaggerated combination of virtues and characteristics. In about 70 B.

C. , Caesar had begun to make his name in Rome. Born from a patrician family, one side of which claimed direct descent from the Gods themselves, he was also the nephew of Marius, the popular plebeian general. All his life Caesar's sympathies rested with the plebeians rather than with his own class, which he despised for its weakness.

Until the time of his dictatorship he was one of the leaders of the democratic party. In 68 B. C. he won special affection from the mob when at the funeral of his aunt Julia, widow of Marius, he displayed busts and relics of the great man. Despite his failure as a politician, Marius had always been loved by the people for his splendid martial career.

A few years later Caesar was elected aedile and in that office, on the road to consulship he spent huge sums of money (most of which he borrowed from rich men who believed in his destiny) on entertainments for the public. Once he gave a banquet for ten thousand people. Caesar joined forces with Pompey, the popular general who had defeated Mithradates of Pontus, and with Crassus, one of the richest men in Rome - who would have given most of his wealth to have enjoyed some real affection from the populace. Caesar

realised that if all three worked together they could achieve their individual aims: Pompey would get his veterans settled in the lands he had promised them; Crassus would get elected consul and so win popularity as well as be given an army with which to attack Parthia; Caesar would get the consulship, and finally a province in which to prove his worth as a general. Caesar, Pompey and Crassus were very powerful and their combined rule of the state was called the First Triumvirate, that is, rule by three men.

In 60 B. C. Caesar was elected consul whereupon he immediately introduced legislation to ratify Pompey's requests of land for his veterans. He also arranged for himself to be allotted Gaul as his province for military conquest. This provided him with an army which would later stand him in good stead for use in enforcing his aims which were directed towards two ends; the establishment of permanent order in Rome and the empire, and the reconciliation of the classes. Caesar spent nine years in Gaul and Britain where he proved himself the equal of any general in history.

On many occasions, he demonstrated his personal bravery. Sometimes if the front line seemed ready to break before a Gallic charge, he would go up to the front, seize one of the standards, and crying out " Follow me", rush into the thick of the fray. This rallied the men and brought about their eventual triumph. At the same time he found enough hours in the busy days to write the story of the war and the eight volumes of ' The Gallic War' are among the most famous books of ancient history. When at last, in 49 B. C.

Caesar was ready to return to Rome to receive the honours and thanks that his generalship had merited, and to get the rewards for his troops ratified by

the Senate, he found that the Senate wanted to brand him as a public enemy and to put him on trial. What had happened? In his absence, his friend Pompey, who had married his daughter Julia - (she had died in 54 B. C. ) - had been gradually turned against him by the conservative members of the Senate.

They feared that Caesar was aiming to bring the republic, ineffectual as it was, to an end. Against his better judgement, Pompey no longer tied by his marriage to Caesar's daughter, threw in his lot with the conservatives. It was to cost him his life. The Senate ordered Caesar to disband his victorious army and return to Rome alone, otherwise he would be declared a public enemy.

This was a crucial moment of decision for Caesar. He stood on the cross-roads of his career. Should he obey the Senate and so end his distinguished career? Or should he, like Sulla, march on Rome and exert his will, which he did not wish to do? Standing on the northern bank of the River Rubicon, which separated Italy from Gaul, he hesitated for a moment and then, exclaiming " The die is cast", ordered his advance troops to cross. When they heard that Caesar was marching against Rome, Pompey and the conservative senators hastily fled from the city for Brundisium where they took ship to Greece. There, other Roman armies were stationed and Pompey assumed command of them. Caesar reached Rome and entered it in peace.

There was no proscriptions. No one was punished, no one's possessions were confiscated. Even those conservative senators who had not managed to get away in time were given leave to pack up and go, if they wanted to, and

Caesar guaranteed their safe conduct. Such was the clemency of the man. Caesar followed Pompey to Greece and after many adventures he and his erst- while friend and former son-in-law met in battle at Pharsalus.

Pompey was defeated and fled to Egypt where he was treacherously murdered by one of the king's officers. It was a crime for which Caesar later made Egypt pay, for he had loved Pompey. Pompey's supporters continued the struggle and it took all Caesar's resources, skill and leadership to defeat the in battles in Egypt, North Africa, and Spain. When he finally arrived in Rome in 45 B. C. He was master of the entire Roman world, which stretched from the British Isles to the borders of Parthia and from Gibraltar to Palestine.

He was appointed dictator for life by those members of the Senate who had not fled with Pompey. It was the end of the republic. Now Caesar set out to introduce his programme of reform. He planned to maintain order, improve trade, reduce warfare with neighbours, and bring the benefits of Roman civilization to the wildest possible number of people. He founded colonies in Italy and elsewhere for the unemployed citizens of Rome who still hung about the streets looking for free food and stirring up disorder. He regulated the supply of free corn so that only the needy received it.

To supervise his revisions of the law in the provinces, and in Rome itself, he enlarged the Senate by making distinguished non-Roman members. Roman citizenship was extended to all inhabitants of Italy. He also established local authorities in all parts of the empire and thus may have said to have been

the founder of municipal government. Caesar also revised the calendar, and it lasted in western Europe, at all events, right into the eighteenth century.

He started the construction of many grand buildings in Rome, among them the Julian Forum (named after his family), remains of which are standing today. He planned to drain the Pontine marshes and thus liberate much-needed arable land near the city. He arranged road building programmes in the provinces. He discussed the possibility of cutting through the Isthmus of Corinth and he even contemplated building a new city in Greece that would vie with Rome in size, splendour and importance. Once these plans were under way Caesar gave some thought as to how the government should continue after him. Elected representatives had failed to govern Rome or the empire satisfactorily for a long time, but the people would not tolerate the idea of kingship.

What the empire needed, he felt, was one ruler with absolute power, including the right to hand that power on to a worthy successor from the same family. There was a young member of his family to which Caesar felt such power could be passed, provided the boy was properly trained and given the opportunity to obtain the necessary experience. That was his great nephew, Octavianus (Octavian), who later became the first emperor of Rome, Augustus. He had many of his great-uncle's outstanding qualities, though not, regrettably, his bravery or clemency. Caesar's ambitious reform programme did not proceed very far in its own time for in March 44 B.

C. there occurred what Germany's greatest poet Goethe was later to call the most senseless crime in history. Caesar was murdered in the theatre of

Pompeius, in temporary use as a Senate House at the time, by a band of jealous senators, many of whom had already been pardoned by him for having joined his enemies. They thought he wanted to be king and they did not like the radical changes he was making in the order of society. So in their crass folly they cut him down.

This was indeed the most senseless blunder in history. Rome was thereafter rent by a fearful civil war that affected almost every part of the empire. At the end of it, one man stood alone, head of the state and victor over his enemies, and that man was Octavian. As Julius had hoped, his great-nephew succeeded to power.

What the murderers feared in Julius, their successors had to accept in Octavian. Julius's murder ensured the continuance of his work, and so he had not died entirely in vain, although it was the most costly sacrifice in the story of Rome.