

Caesar: A New Kind of Leader

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Julius Caesar (100-44 BC.) represented a new kind of Roman leader who played a tremendous role in Roman history, as a general, politician, and leader. Caesar shaped himself into a ruler that Rome had never seen before, using his extraordinary talents to succeed in implementing his own agenda and consolidating Roman power for himself. First, Caesar was a new kind of politician. A popularis who advocated for the masses of Rome, winning people over with his charm and compassion. As a popularis, Caesar differentiated himself from other Roman leaders of his time, such as Sulla(138-78 Bc.) and Pompey(106-48 Bc.), who sided with the wealthy class and the senate, not giving any importance to the plebeians. Next, Caesar's dictatorship of Rome made him the most powerful Roman ruler out of anyone of his time or before him. Caesar had no checks and balances from the Senate and was made the first permanent Roman dictator, something that no leader in Rome had achieved before Caesar. While Caesar was an excellent politician and leader, some would argue that he was an even better military commander. Caesar's military achievements in Gaul and beyond made him the strongest and most unique military general that Rome had ever seen. Overall, Caesar was a one-of-a-kind leader molding all the talents and characteristics of past Roman leaders into one of the greatest and most influential leaders of all time.

Caesar was a popular, striving to help the masses of the Roman people and set out to create personal connections and mutual trust with his citizens and soldiers, separating him from other Roman leaders. Plutarch, a Greek philosopher and historian writes about how Caesar advocated to the masses. “At Rome, moreover, Caesar won a great and brilliant popularity by his eloquence as an advocate, and much good will from the common people”.¹ Caesar was popular with the common people advocating for their rights at a time when plebeians had very little political power. Caesar’s goal to help all of Rome was something that very few of his predecessors believed in. Many past leaders did not focus on helping the common people and focused only on keeping the wealthy powerful. Phillip Barlag, an author on Roman history writes, “He genuinely cared about the well-being of ordinary Romans, and he sought to be a strong voice for them in a system that ignored them. Empathy was a cornerstone of his policies. Caesar’s populism wasn’t a tactic to curry favor for votes.”² Caesar’s authentic care of the common Romans helped him gain support from the majority of the Roman population. While many Roman leaders before Caesar were optimates and only wanted the best for the Senate. Caesar advocated for all, giving the plebeians a much-needed voice in the government. Contrary to Caesar, Sulla had no intention of helping the common people of Rome. Plutarch writes, “But Sulla had used his good fortune moderately, at first, and like a statesman, and had led men to expect in him a leader who was attached to the aristocracy, and at the same time helpful to the common people. Furthermore, from his youth up he had been of a merry temper, and easily moved to tears of pity. Naturally, therefore, his conduct fixed a stigma upon offices of great power, which were thought to work a change in men's previous characters, and render them

¹ Loeb Classical Library, The Life of Julius Caesar, last modified April 5, 2019, accessed January 5, 2023, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Caesar*.html.

² Phillip Barlag, *The Leadership Genius of Julius Caesar* (Oakland, Cal: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2016), 63, PDF.

capricious, vain, and cruel.”³ This quote exhibits how Sulla wanted people to believe he wanted to help both the aristocracy and the common people. However, as he became more powerful, his behavior changed, becoming more cruel and brutal, and not showing support for the common people of Rome. This differed from how Caesar ruled over the Roman people, even after becoming dictator. Caesar appealed to the masses and supported the common people all throughout his rule, separating him from past leaders, such as Sulla. Adrian Goldsworthy, a historian and author who specializes in Roman history writes about Caesar’s relationship with his troops. “When Caesar addressed his troops it was always as ‘comrades’ (commilitones), never ‘men’ or ‘soldiers’. He and they were all good Romans, serving the Republic by fighting against its enemies, and also winning glory and plunder along the way, which he took care to share with them most generously.”⁴ Caesar calling his troops ‘comrades’ signifies that Caesar did not want to be an overpowering force leading his men. Caesar was just a fellow member of the republic, doing his duty. That personal relationship that Caesar had built with his soldiers was uncommon in Rome, separating himself from past military commanders, who wanted nothing to do with their men, except train them. Goldsworthy writes, “Caesar was not a martinet in the old Roman tradition of stern commanders who flogged and executed their men to instil rigid discipline. He seems rarely to have employed either punishment, considering only desertion and mutiny as serious crimes.”⁵ Caesar’s care for his troops was a quality new to Roman generals. Caesar represented a new kind of Roman leader by expressing genuine care for his men, despite previous Roman leaders who were very stern and mistreated their soldiers with harsh

³ Plutarch, "The Parallel Lives: The Life of Sulla," trans. Bill Thayer, Penelope UChicago, last modified 1916, accessed May 2, 2023, https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Sulla*.html.

⁴ Adrian Goldsworthy, *Caesar: Life of a Colossus* (Yale University Press, 2006), 235, PDF.

⁵ Adrian Goldsworthy, *Caesar: Life of a Colossus* (Yale University Press, 2006), 234, PDF.

punishments as a form of discipline. Those past leaders saw their soldiers as simply war machines and never truly cared for them as Caesar did his men.

Caesar was the most powerful dictator in Roman history with his absolute power and no real checks from the Senate or the assemblies. Barlag states, “Caesar stood alone at the top of the political heap, at the apogee of his power. Though still resentful of his power and prestige, the Senate voted to appoint him dictator for life.”⁶ After defeating Pompey and returning to Rome, Caesar was named the first permanent dictator in Roman history, giving him the most power that Rome has seen before. Prior to Caesar, the only other dictators were temporary dictators during times of crisis such as Cincinnatus, and dictators for an indefinite period of time such as Sulla. Contrastly, Caesar was a permanent dictator and ruled Rome on his own until he was assassinated. Alex Nice, a historian who specializes in Roman history writes, “Caesar had now become the undisputed master of the Roman world. He pardoned the followers of Pompey, and the people honored Caesar for his leadership and triumphs. At the start of 44 B.C., he was made dictator for life and given honors normally given only to gods”.⁷ Caesar being appointed dictator, gave him absolute power in a society that honored and supported him. Past Roman leaders always had checks and balances from the senate and assemblies. Now, with the senate powerless, Caesar had full control of Rome. Plutarch states, “So, having been made dictator by the senate, he brought home exiles, restored to civic rights the children of those who had suffered in the time of Sulla, relieved the burdens of the debtor-class by a certain adjustment of interest,

⁶ Phillip Barlag, *The Leadership Genius of Julius Caesar* (Oakland, Cal: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2016), 130, PDF.

⁷ Alex Nice, "Caesar, Julius," *World Book Advanced*, last modified 2022, <https://www.worldbookonline.com/advanced/article?id=ar086860&st=julius+caesar#tab=homepage>.

took in hand a few other public measures of like character.”⁸ With Caesar’s newfound power, he was given the opportunity to better the Roman Republic. And Caesar did so wielding his power to create much-needed government reforms and help all Roman citizens who had been oppressed by the past leaders of Rome. Sulla, an optimate, pursued policies that favored the senatorial class of Rome, not giving importance to the greater population of Rome. When Caesar claimed power, he was able to remove the harsh burdens placed by Sulla and focused on helping the common people. Caesar’s newfound power mixed with his agenda to support the masses, was a type of leader new to Rome. Goldsworthy writes about Caesar’s capabilities as dictator compared to Sulla’s.

*Yet, although he spent little time in the city, the period of Caesar’s rule profoundly and permanently changed the nature of Roman political life. Caesar is supposed to have declared frequently that Sulla showed his political illiteracy when he resigned his dictatorship. Evidently, Caesar did not plan to withdraw from politics and so the Republic would inevitably be dominated by a single all-powerful individual on a permanent basis, the very thing Rome’s constitution was supposed to avoid.*⁹

The only other Roman leader before Caesar that had come close to Caesar’s power as dictator was Sulla. Caesar frequently displayed his differences from Sulla, declaring that Sulla was never as powerful as Caesar because Sulla resigned from his dictatorship, setting aside his ultimate authority. Conversely, Caesar planned to never give his power away, keeping his position as dictator until he was killed. Caesar’s permanent dictatorship was never seen before in Rome and paved the way for future Roman leaders.

Caesar was an incredibly diligent and brilliant military leader, displaying different characteristics and tactics for Rome to succeed on the battlefield. After Caesar’s 8 year campaign

⁸ Loeb Classical Library, The Life of Julius Caesar, last modified April 5, 2019, accessed January 5, 2023, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Caesar*.html.

⁹ Adrian Goldsworthy, *Caesar's Civil War 49-44 BC* (Osprey Publishing, 2002), 50, PDF.

of Gaul and various other military endeavors preceding and following, he became one of the most successful military leaders of all time. Caesar showed his leadership skills along with his military prowess in the Battle of Munda. Caesar and his army had marched relentlessly, chasing the enemy. Caesar ordered his army to charge again but his men were exhausted, defying his commands.

A typical Roman response would have been to make an example out of a few malcontents, to order the beating or death of a few to send a message to the many. Caesar's contemporaries would have deemed such a course of action justified, if not expected. But Caesar was different... After shedding his helmet and making sure that they saw him clearly, Caesar questioned the bravery of his soldiers. He then turned around and charged headlong uphill toward the enemy army. Alone. One Roman general, sword in hand, running unprotected to take on an entire army...The men advanced hard on the heels of their general, and they quickly overtook him, engaging the enemy and allowing Caesar the cover of his soldiers. But Caesar didn't fade to the safety of the rear. He continued to fight, hand to hand, wielding his sword in the thick of the bloody fighting.¹⁰

This evidence shows Caesar's leadership on the battlefield and the distinction between how Caesar led his men and how other Roman generals led their armies. The generals of Caesar's time led with fear, threatening the men to obey them. But Caesar was different, leading by example, knowing that his men would follow. But once Caesar's men caught up to him, Caesar did not drop back to safety, as many other Roman generals presumably did. Caesar ran on, actually helping his men defeat the enemy. This type of leadership is how Caesar differentiated himself from other Roman leaders of his time and before him. He was willing to help his men in the time of battle, instead of other Roman generals, who just made their soldiers fight while they stood back. Barlag states, "Caesar conquered the whole of Gaul, imposing Roman rule that would endure for half a millennium and leave an indelible mark on the subsequent history of

¹⁰ Phillip Barlag, *The Leadership Genius of Julius Caesar* (Oakland, Cal: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2016), 22-23, PDF.

France, and so of Europe. He made history and what he created endured.”¹¹ Caesar’s victory in Gaul paved the way for Rome far after him. That conquest brought immense land and wealth to Rome for a long time after. Caesar’s extraordinary military achievements separated him from other Roman commanders, such as Pompey, and Scipio who were excellent commanders, but never near as successful as Caesar on the battlefield. Plutarch discusses Caesar’s military achievements compared to other notable Roman generals.

*But the period of the wars which he afterwards fought, and of the campaigns by which he subjugated Gaul, as if he had made another beginning and entered upon a different path of life and one of new achievements, proved him to be inferior as soldier and commander to no one soever of those who have won most admiration for leadership and shown themselves greatest therein. Nay, if one compare him with such men as Fabius and Scipio and Metellus, and with the men of his own time or a little before him, like Sulla, Marius, the two Luculli, or even Pompey himself, whose fame for every sort of military excellence was at this time flowering out and reaching to the skies, Caesar will be found to surpass them all in his achievements.*¹²

This evidence highlights how Caesar’s military achievements in Gaul made him the strongest military commander that Rome had seen. Caesar differentiated himself from the other strongest military leaders of his time and before him, exceeding all of them with his significant military accomplishments. Even Pompey, Caesar’s longtime partner, and rival who is widely renowned for his achievements on the battlefield, couldn't defeat Caesar in their civil war and was never able to achieve Caesar’s military greatness.

However, Caesar was more than just an excellent military general. He outshone all Roman leaders of his time as a politician and statesman. Caesar challenged the traditional ways of ruling and brought significant change to Rome. Caesar’s time as leader of Rome left a

¹¹ John Sadler and Rosie Serdiville, *Caesar's Greatest Victory : The Battle of Alesia, Gaul 52 BC* (Oxford, UK: Casemate Publishers, 2016), 51, PDF.

¹² Loeb Classical Library, *The Life of Julius Caesar*, last modified April 5, 2019, accessed January 5, 2023, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Caesar*.html.

profound impact on Rome and shaped the way that Rome would rule for centuries after him.

Caesar's leadership style and achievements have set him apart from his predecessors and earned him a place in history as one of the most influential and outstanding leaders of all time.

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