

Julius Caesar and the Rubicon¹

In ancient times, Rome was governed by kings. Some of these kings were good men who ruled well. Some were bad men who treated the Romans poorly. One of the kings was so bad he convinced the Romans that they should get rid of kings altogether. His name was Tarquin. The Romans called him Tarquin the Proud. Tarquin was a tyrant. He was a cruel ruler who treated the people badly. In the end, the people got so angry with Tarquin that they joined together and drove him out. Once King Tarquin had been driven out, the Romans set up a different sort of government. They set up a republic—a kind of government with no kings.

One of the most important parts of the Roman republic was the Senate. The Senate was a group of older men who met to make decisions and pass laws. Many of the senators were from old, wealthy families. Almost all of them had fought in the army and earned the trust of their fellow Romans. Each year, the people would elect two men to serve as consuls. To be chosen as a consul was a great honour. It was the most powerful position in the Roman republic. Rome was a republic, but it was not a democracy where everyone chooses their rules by voting. Some people played a role in the government of Rome, but many more played no role at all.

After the Punic Wars (264-146B.C.) when Rome fought against Carthage, military generals started to play a big part in Roman history. Roman generals went all around the Mediterranean, fighting battles and conquering new lands. Some of these generals became heroes. Some of them became so famous and so popular that they threatened to take over the republic. That is what happened with Julius Caesar.

Julius Caesar came from an old Roman family. He was proud and ambitious, with a high opinion of himself. When he was a young man, Caesar was captured by pirates. The pirates told him they would kill him unless he could pay a ransom of twenty talents. Caesar laughed at them. He told them they clearly didn't know what sort of man they had captured. He was Julius Caesar. He was not a man to be ransomed for just twenty talents! Caesar told the pirates he would not allow himself to be ransomed for less than fifty talents!

Caesar told the pirates he was worth a larger ransom. Caesar told his friends to raise the money. He stayed with the pirates, writing poems. He read some of his poems to the pirates. They shrugged. They didn't care much for poetry. They were pirates, not poets. They just wanted to collect the ransom money. Caesar got angry with the pirates. He scolded them for not liking his poems. He told them they had no taste. He told them they were barbarians. He told them someday he would come back and punish them for their bad taste. The pirates thought Caesar was joking. Maybe they

¹ This work is based on an original work of the Core Knowledge® Foundation made available through licensing under a Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License. This does not in any way imply that the Core Knowledge Foundation endorses this work.

thought he was mad. At any rate, as soon as they got the ransom money, they quickly forgot about him.

But Caesar did not forget about them. He went back to Rome, got some ships, and hired some good fighters. Then, he tracked down the pirates and killed them. Caesar quickly established himself as a man who knew what to do with his sword and also with his pen. Once, he was sent to Asia. The people there were in revolt. Caesar led a Roman army there and put down the revolt. Then, he got out his pen to write his report. The normal thing would have been to write a long report, filling several pages, but that was not Caesar's style. Caesar quickly became known as a brave and determined soldier. This is the report Caesar sent back to Rome: *Veni, vidi, vici*. That's the whole report. Those three words— written in Latin, the language of ancient Rome— mean, "I came, I saw, I conquered." What else was there to say?

Caesar led an army into the land the Romans called Gaul. Today, we call it France. Gaul was not part of the Roman civilization when Caesar marched in, but it was when he marched out a few years later. Caesar conquered it. Then, he wrote a book about how he did it. The first sentence in his book is famous. It is written in Latin. In English, the words mean, "The whole of Gaul is divided into three parts." If you ever study Latin, you may have a chance to read Caesar's book on the Gallic Wars. It's so clear and so well-written that teachers all around the world still use it to teach Latin to students.

After he conquered Gaul, Caesar started marching back to Rome. By this time, the Roman senators were very nervous about Caesar. They thought he might march into Rome and take over. The senators sent Caesar a message. They told him to stop and send his soldiers home. They ordered him not to cross the Rubicon River. If he did, they said he would not be treated as a hero. Instead, he would be treated as a traitor and an invader.

On **10th January** in the year 49 BC, Caesar crossed the Rubicon. He is said to have remarked in Latin, "The die is cast." That was his way of saying he knew he was taking a big risk. Crossing the Rubicon meant there was no turning back. Caesar's actions led to a civil war—a war in which Romans fought against Romans. Caesar was the leader on one side. Pompey, another famous Roman general, was the leader on the other side. Caesar defeated Pompey and chased him to Egypt, where Pompey was killed. When Caesar got to Egypt, he found another country tangled up in a civil war. The princess Cleopatra was trying to take power from her brother. Caesar sided with Cleopatra. He helped her become Queen of Egypt. Caesar had big plans. He didn't think Rome was run the way it should be. He wanted to change a lot of things. He got the Senate to pass new laws. He replaced the old calendar with the one we still use today. (Did you know that the month of July is named after Julius Caesar?)

Caesar wanted to do more, but he felt he needed more power. He got himself appointed dictator. At first, he was appointed dictator for only one year. That was not

so unusual. The Romans had chosen dictators in the past. A dictator could be put in power during times of trouble. But the dictator was only supposed to rule for a little while, until the troubles passed. That was not what Caesar had in mind. He had himself appointed dictator for ten years. That upset a lot of people. How do you think those people felt a little later, when Caesar had himself appointed dictator for life? That was really too much for some people. For hundreds of years, Rome had been a republic. Now, Caesar was setting himself up as a dictator. Perhaps, he even wanted to be a king. That was even more upsetting. The Romans had driven out the kings hundreds of years earlier.

A group of Romans agreed that Caesar was a threat to the republic. They stabbed him to death in the Senate. Some of the men who stabbed Julius Caesar were men he considered friends. One of them, Brutus, was a man Caesar had treated almost like a son. How could these men kill Caesar? Brutus explained that it was not that he loved Caesar less, but that he loved Rome—and the Roman republic—more. Brutus and the other conspirators killed Caesar to save Rome. At least, that was the plan.

The men who killed Julius Caesar were trying to save the republic. They did not succeed. After Caesar was killed, another civil war broke out. The man who came out on top at the end of the war was a man known as Augustus Caesar, or just Augustus. Augustus was an adopted son of Caesar and he agreed with Caesar that Rome needed to change. But he was clever. He knew that the Romans cared about their history. They would not be happy if he came to power and changed everything all at once. What he did instead was very clever. He made himself emperor and he made it clear that he intended to serve until he died. That meant Rome was no longer a republic. But Augustus did not sweep away all of the old traditions. He let the Romans keep the Senate and consuls. Still, everybody knew that it was Augustus who was really in charge: Rome was no longer a republic.