Caesar, Master of Rome, 48–44 BC

Between 48–44 BC Caesar's ambitious plans began to bear fruit. During his Gallic campaign he had achieved many victories and through astute management of his interests in the city he had kept men of influence on his side. He was not trusted by the traditional patrician elements in the Senate, but even they could not dispute his consummate skill in creating a myth about himself and his wars on the frontiers of the empire. Through victory after victory and conquest after conquest this man was beloved of his soldiers and had managed to keep senatorial interference in his campaigns to a minimum. Caesar offered the people of Rome a possibility of stability and peace.

Caesar began the period of the First Civil War as a proconsul. He remained under threat from the Senate for his alleged illegal activities in Gaul, although in reality it was because they feared his ambition. Caesar would confront anyone who stood against him. When he crossed the Rubicon he had been courting danger, but within five years he obtained far more personal power than any Roman leader before him. He was showered with honours, given titles, decorations and adulation and regarded as a living god. He treated the Senate with disdain. What he was not given in the way of power he took.

But, how had this happened in such a short period of time?
While his feats in battlefields from Gaul to Egypt, Spain to Greece and Numidia to Germany were sensational, how had Caesar managed to grasp so much political power in the city? During the time he spent on the campaigns to destroy the last vestiges of Pompey's armies, Caesar had left Rome under the rule of his proxies. In a city that was becoming almost ungovernable this could have created more problems than it solved. 

Lepidus (see panel) was master of the few troops in the city and Mark Antony was too weak to prevent discord breaking out. It would take a wise, subtle man or a strong, ruthless one to bring the city back to heel. For a time Caesar played wise and subtle, appearing to abide by the old Republican rules and systems.

Caesar was powerful enough though to ride through all the constitution and with Pompey defeated and Crassus dead, he could dictate his terms. Some in the Senate suspected that Caesar had huge ambitions, but he was now too well placed to be stopped. From 49 BC, the Senate allowed him to be elected consul for five years in succession. He was given control of issues of war and peace, and had the ability to nominate all officers of state except the plebeian positions. In short he was in virtually complete control of Roman political activity.

In 46 BC, Rome held a Triumph in honour of Caesar’s victories. He marched into the city at the head of the chariots and carts laden with the spoils of his victories – his soldiers called out mockingly that he had made himself the king. Members of the Senate may not have liked this, but there was nothing they could do except heap more honours on Caesar. The same year he was elected dictator for life. A statue was placed in the Capitol and with it his “divinity” was recognized. He was given sole command of the Roman army for life. Caesar delegated power to his own officials, bypassing the elected magistrates. With his savage victory over the last of Pompey's supporters at Munda, the Senate became almost servile to him. But was this supreme display of submission actually a means of making Caesar unpopular with the people? The centralization of power into his hands signalled the end of the Republic. He was even offered the crown by Mark Antony, although he refused the offer, as he realized that the position of king was repugnant to most Romans. But the offer was noted by those in the Senate who were implacably opposed to the idea of a dictatorship or one-man rule. Caesar misjudged the political climate when it became clear that he no longer deferred to the Senate in any way. Soon voices were whispering that the only solution to the threat Caesar posed was the assassin’s dagger.

Caesar’s Reforms

Rome was going through a period of financial problems and moneylenders were squeezing the people dry. Romans were being charged outrageous sums of interest on debts and trouble-makers used this capacity of the wealthy moneylenders to create trouble. Caesar decided to act with vigour and legislated against the money-lenders who were imposing cruel debts on their victim. Interest rates were lowered and controlled by law.

Caesar forbade the hoarding of money and anyone with more than 15,000 denarii was likely to lose it if it was discovered. Caesar also ordered that creditors should be bound to take the property of debtors at its value before the Civil War. Later he lowered the rent of tenements by a quarter and required that money be invested in land.

In the past he had used the disorders in Rome to his advantage but now he cracked down hard on rioters and on the mob. Caesar was determined that law and order should return to the city. He cut down the numbers of people flooding into the city for free corn. Those who wished to take advantage of this now had to provide officers with proof of their poverty and the ration was cut so that the number of recipients was halved from 300,000 to 150,000. He made land available to his war veterans, settling them in existing communities so that they integrated with the people and did not prove a focus for discontent.

Caesar was determined to initiate great public building schemes. The Pontine Marshes close to the city were drained to reclaim what were once marshy areas and provide fertile land for farmers. Roads were enlarged and improved, with the work being done not only by slaves but also by freemen.

The infrastructure of local government changed so that towns and municipalities became independent of Roman magistrates. These were popular decisions amongst the plebeian supporters and had far-reaching effects on finance and controls of labour and taxes beyond Rome.

There was more to citizenship than being able to claim to be Roman. Caesar wanted Italy and the citizens beyond to be equal and he was determined that the franchise should be extended to any country, city or area that was ready. He controlled the depredations of provincial governors by cutting short their period in power and he also ensured that all their powers came under central control. They were not going to be allowed to amass power or money and thus become a threat to the state as he had been.

The borders of the empire were to be pushed forward in order to occupy the army. Caesar knew the dangers of allowing soldiers to sit in barracks idly waiting for action. They could become eager listeners to anyone trying to make trouble. By pushing out the frontiers he not only protected the provinces from the threat of barbarian invasions, but he also ensured that Rome was protected from the threat within.

These policies were guaranteed to make enemies of the people who already distrusted him. They were afraid that he would take over their power bases and marginalize them and it is true to say that they had good reason to believe it.

Here was a man who had clawed his way to his present position from a difficult beginning. He knew how ruthless men needed to be as a result of his early confrontation with Sulla and his secret police. He understood how the politics worked by watching the way his uncle Marius was ignored by the power-brokers in the Senate. No one was going to stand in his way now. He had taken the power and he intended to use it. Who could stop him? He had neutralized the Senate and had no intention of returning Rome to its previous system. Caesar was not necessarily eager to be made king, as some claimed, but he was an
CRASSUS AT CARRHAE

He had taken command of the Roman army in the province of Syria. During his previous campaigns, he had established a reputation as a formidable opponent and had been known to take calculated risks. However, in this particular campaign, he faced a new adversary—Pharnaces, king of the Parthians. Pharnaces was a strong and capable leader who had successfully repelled several Roman advances. The Parthians were known for their mobility and ability to adapt to changing circumstances, which made them a formidable foe.

To counter this threat, Crassus assembled a large force, consisting of numerous infantry units and a well-equipped cavalry. The Roman legions were renowned for their discipline and training, and the presence of the cavalry added an element of speed and flexibility to Crassus's strategy. However, he also faced significant challenges, including the logistical difficulties of supplying such a large army and the potential for unexpected engagements.

The Roman strategy was to lure Pharnaces into a decisive battle, hoping to leverage the advantages of their larger force and the superior training of their soldiers. Pharnaces, on the other hand, was known for his skill in field tactics and his ability to withstand pressure.

The Battle of Carrhae

In October of 53 BC, the anticipated battle began. Despite the Roman advantages in numbers and training, the battle was a resounding victory for Pharnaces and the Parthians. The Roman army was caught off guard, and the Parthians' superior tactics and mobility allowed them to gain the upper hand.

Crassus was killed in the battle, along with a significant portion of the Roman legions. The defeat was a significant blow to Roman pride and the reputation of the Roman army. The consequences of the battle were far-reaching, leading to increased tensions between the Roman Republic and its neighbors and setting the stage for future conflicts.

The Aftermath

The defeat at Carrhae had profound implications for Rome's political landscape. It was a significant setback for the ambitious Crassus, who was seen as a potential contender for power. The loss of life and resources was a severe blow to the Roman economy and military capabilities.

The battle's outcome also reinforced the Parthian's reputation as a formidable adversary, and it signaled a shift in the balance of power in the region. The Roman Republic would have to reevaluate its strategies and seek alliances to counter the growing threat from the Parthian Empire.

This event marked a turning point in the region's history, leading to decades of conflict and the eventual decline of the Roman Republic. The battle at Carrhae is a testament to the complexities of military strategy and the challenges faced by leaders in ancient times.