

CHAPTER
6

Section 2

HISTORYMAKERS

Julius Caesar

General, Writer, Politician, Dictator-King?

"Caesar could no longer endure a superior, nor Pompey an equal."—Lucan, a Roman poet, on the cause of the Roman civil war

Driven by ambition and a thirst for power, Julius Caesar became a great and controversial leader of the Roman Republic. He had a tremendous impact on a growing power at a crucial point in its rise. He was also a man of extraordinary abilities—skills in war, politics, writing, and leadership. Caesar was born to an old Roman family, part of the group of families that founded the Roman Republic. He had the standard education of someone in his social position and became known as a charming, cultured, and well-read person. In addition, he gained experience in the military in Asia Minor and experience in government in Spain. Gradually, he won election to important public offices. In 63 B.C., he was voted *pontifex maximus*, the chief priest of the Republic. He also served in Spain, where he won fame by winning battles. He returned to Rome and was elected consul, the most important political office in the Republic.

Caesar joined with two other leading Romans in an alliance. One was Crassus, a wealthy political leader whose money could be used to advance the plans of the three. The other was Pompey, another brilliant general. To cement the alliance, Pompey married Julia, Caesar's only daughter.

As consul, Caesar worked for some new laws that eased the overcrowding in Rome and other cities. He was rewarded by being made governor of Gaul, located in modern France. He took command of the Roman armies there, determined to extend Roman control of the area. It took several years, but he eventually conquered all of Gaul and part of Britain.

The victories brought Caesar riches, which he used to fund building projects in Rome—thus winning popularity in the city. He also made sure to create some effective propaganda in his own favor. He wrote *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars*, a history of his campaigns in Gaul. Throughout the book, he referred to himself as "Caesar" and not as "I." This made the history seem objective. He also made sure that "Caesar" got credit for all victories.

The situation in Rome, however, had changed. Julia had died, which removed one link between

Pompey and Caesar. Crassus had died as well. The two generals now became bitter rivals for power. The senate, controlled by Pompey, gave Caesar a difficult choice. It ordered him to give his armies to another general, and return to Rome if he wanted to stand for election to consul again. He decided to ignore the senate and lead his army into Italy. Years of civil war followed. Pompey was backed by many major political leaders. Caesar, however, had another resource: an experienced, tough army. Pompey fled Italy for the east, where Caesar won a major victory. Pompey then retreated further to Egypt. There he was treacherously killed by a one-time supporter, Ptolemy XIII (the pharaoh of Egypt and brother to Cleopatra). In 46 B.C., Caesar defeated another army in Africa, and the following year he won victory over the sons of Pompey in Spain. Caesar was named dictator for life. As supreme ruler of Rome, he passed many reforms. However, many senators opposed him. Some simply disliked him and resented his power. Others feared that he planned to make himself king. In February, 44 B.C., he presided over a festival. By plan, Mark Antony, a close ally, offered him a king's crown. The watching crowd stirred restlessly. When Caesar refused it, they cheered. Antony again offered it, Caesar again refused it, and the crowd cheered. Still, Caesar moved behind the scenes to try to have himself made king. He also prepared to lead an army east for more conquests. On his last day in Rome, one month after the festival, his planning came to an end. As he entered the senate, a group of senators fell on him. They stabbed him 23 times. He died, ironically, at the foot of a statue of Pompey.

Questions

- Clarifying** How did Caesar show he was a brilliant general?
- Drawing Conclusions** How did Caesar use his success in Gaul to improve his political position in Rome?
- Determining Main Ideas** Why did the senators oppose Caesar?