The Gallic Wars and Julius Caesar's Rise to Power

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Throughout the span of history, conflict has played in integral role in changing powers, empires, and eras. From the decisive victory of the Allied Forces at D-Day, to

the marvelous underdog victory of the Attic Greeks at Marathon, conflict and its results are often determinate of the events to follow. However, war is often historically simplified into winners and losers: the victor of one specific battle takes control from its respective loser. For example, the victory of Julius Caesar over Pompey the Great at the 48 BC Battle of Pharsalus, though critical in Caesar's acquisition of power, is by no means singular. A focus on the broader life and career of Julius Caesar leading up to this victory demonstrates that the 50-58 BC period of the Gallic Wars were fundamental in setting up Caesar for his later acquisition of dictatorial paper. Specifically, the tryptic development of Julius Caesar's military ability, ideological values, and public popularity throughout the Gallic Wars were necessary prerequisites for his successful ascent to autocratic power as the first Roman Emperor.

Caesar's grand political ambitions and their execution via his command in the Gallic Wars began in Rome, where Caesar's political alliances and official appointments initialized his quest for ultimate power. Following Caesar's election to the consulship in 59 BC, he quickly chose to informally ally himself with two of the most powerful individuals in Rome, Pompey the Great and Crassus. This informal alliance of the "First Triumvirate," while cultivating a public image of cooperation and political collaboration, ultimately served as a means of self-advancement. Since, "the backing of men who carried so much weight and authority, possessing widespread connections...was incalculably valuable" (Companion), Caesar set himself up politically to enact policy on a scale larger than he could by himself, while also establishing support in a section of the Senatorial class of Rome. This support would be crucial in the extensive military

campaigns of his proconsulship, where his self-assured confidence in military success would make him "a great, perhaps the greatest, public servant of the Republic" (Colossus). These developments prior to Caesar's excursions of the Gallic War set him up with the prerequisite political clout and support necessary for his critical Gallic campaigns to take place and be so effective in augmenting Caesar's power.

Although Caesar was a skilled diplomat, he was unrivaled in military prowess, confidence, and ideological leadership. These qualities were most exemplified in his extensive war campaigns against the tribes of Gaul, known as the Gallic Wars. In this period from 50-58 BC, Caesar had received a proconsulship in the two regions of Gaul, Cisalpine and Transalpine Gaul, wherein, according to Appian, thirty of his (50) career military engagements occurred. The Gallic Wars consisted of three major campaigns, as well as some other minor military expeditions. The First Gallic War began in 58 BC against the Helvetii, Swiss Gauls whose massive cross-country migration Caesar defensively halted. The Second and Third Gallic Wars began around 58 and 57 BC, fought against the Suebi (German) and Belgae (Belgian), respectively, in an effort to cease their excessive provisionary and military demands. Finally, Caesar's other endeavors in the period of the Gallic Wars included an exploratory expedition of Britannia (England), as well as a final consolidation of power against Germanic Tribes and Gallic rebels. Through these extensive military campaigns, Caesar's military skill, ideological leadership, and popular support developed, all of which were later critical to achieving Caesar's ultimate goal of autocratic authority.

The extensive military strategy and prowess of Caesar in the Gallic campaigns illustrate his unparalleled adaptability and strategic brilliance. One example of Caesar's prowess was his ability to adapt and use environments to his militaristic advantage. When the Helvetii migrants asked Caesar for passage through Roman territory, Caesar refused. While this was done as a purely defensive measure, Caesar also strategically redirected the Helvetii to "one (path) through the Sequani, narrow and difficult...so that a very few might easily intercept them" (Comentarii). This redirection demonstrates Caesar's ability to take advantage of environmental surroundings in conflict. Furthermore, in addition to redirecting the Helvetii, he stalled their diplomats for 15 days to "(carry) along for nineteen miles a wall… and a trench which flows into the river Rhone" (Comentarii). The combination of Caesar's environmental advantage and the creation of an advantageous position made his eventual conflict with the Helvetii a quick victory. Such decisive adaptability as illustrated above is one of Caesar's many unparalleled military skills, emblematic of the cunning that would continue to benefit him throughout his career.

In addition to environmental adaptability, Caesar's legion formations and battle strategy were the basis of an unrivaled military machine. One example of Caesar's tactical brilliance is demonstrated in the aforementioned battle with the Helvetians. In it, Caesar ordered his men, "hurling their javelins from the higher ground, easily breaking the enemy's phalanx...and after dispersing the phalanx, they made a charge on the Helvetii with swords" (Caesar 1.25). This charge led to an easy victory, with Caesar employing new strategies to take down one of the most prominent military formations of his time, the phalanx. The aforementioned adaptability of Caesar is not only seen in

defense, but also in his offensive endeavours. In his beachhead assault on the Britons, Caesar was able to adapt despite the foreign and unfamiliar terrain. He initially used the shock of their arrival to his advantage, where "he ordered...the enemy to be beaten off with slings, arrows, and engines...having been startled by the form of our ships" (4.25 Caesar). Then, after his men struggled to grab a foothold on the unfamiliar beachhead, "he ordered the boats of the ships of war… and sent them up to...those whom he had observed in distress" (4.26 Caesar). Following this cunning act of reinforcement, the beachhead was secured and the battle was won. These examples further illustrate Caesar's traits of militaristic confidence and adaptability to scenarios of difficulty.

Caesar's extensive use of military technology and construction illustrates the extent of his logistic and cognitive efficiency. While many of the aforementioned conflicts were either in defense or in a non-metropolitan attack, Caesar's most extensive use of technology came in his sieges of *oppidia* and *castra*, or 'towns' and 'camps'. One of Caesar's brilliant tactics of military engineering involved the process of circumvallation, where "Caesar extends his fortifications around the town...a wrapping entrenchment… to add the threat of blockade to that of assault" (Levithan). While circumvallation had been used earlier antiquity as a means of defense for the attackers, it was Caesar who made use of them as a means of blockade threat, an additional psychological attack. In addition to reinterpretation of an antique engineering strategy, Caesar also used new assault constructions, namely the 'agger' and the 'turris', or the 'siege mound' and 'siege ramp'. "The 'agger' allowed the wall to be approached...elevating the 'turris' to the height of the wall". This increased elevation then

positioned the ‘turris’, such that “troops could assault the wall without exposure...providing a high firing platform...and sometimes carrying a battering ram on its lowest story” (Levithan). This technological combination was pioneered and made popular under the command of Caesar in the Gallic Wars. These examples of technical brilliance and strategic prowess paint Caesar as a man of cunning, quick thinking, and unparallelled adaptability.

While Caesar’s tactical diversity in conflict demonstrated his abilities of adaptability and cunning, his appealing ideological values are seen in his command and leadership of his soldiers. One such example is Caesar’s unparalleled courage, and its instillment in his men. For example, in a moment of Roman uneasiness about attacks from a fierce enemy named Aristovus, Caesar writes “why are (you) so scared...should you despair your own valor?...and their loyalty to him was beyond absolute suspicion” (Caesar 1.40). Such an emphasis on courage is not unusual for Caesar’s command. In addition to speeches, Caesar’s actions and preferences mirrored the emphasis he placed on the ideology of courage. It is said that Caesar was “classless” in terms of his focus for military recruitment. “Caesar did not care about his men’s lifestyle or wealth, but only their courage” (Colossus). Caesar’s painstaking emphasis on the Old-Roman sense of courage, in both his actions and his words, cultivated a bond of brotherhood between the men he led into battle. Such valor did not simply permeate the hearts of the men he commanded, but became synonymous in the public classification of Caesar’s character, much to his benefit.

In addition to his unmatched, infectious bravery, Caesar valued pragmatism and a willingness to get the job done at any cost. One instance of such values is seen in Caesar's inhuman speed. When the Helvetians posed a threat to one of his distant provinces, "Caesar could not afford failure of any kind, traveling with phenomenal speed that amazed his contemporaries...covering an average of 90 miles per day" (Colossus). In that same conflict, Caesar and his men were able to construct an entire fortification to fight off the Helvetians in just under 15 days. In both of these instances, Caesar's speed and urgency demonstrate his ability to accomplish what needs to be done, regardless of the circumstances. Another example saw Caesar rushing the aid of Cicero, his endangered comrade. Despite only having two legions and their likely interception by enemy forces, he "went into (enemy) territories by long marches...their arrival banning all hopelessness" (Caesar 5.48). This instance of providing necessary reinforcements despite unfavorable circumstances, in addition with his superhuman speed, demonstrate the extent Caesar was willing to go to ensure success. This ideology of pragmatism and ability to get the job done rubbed of not only on his mean, but slowly grew in popularity throughout the Roman domain.

While Caesar's stark bravery and pragmatism may paint him as a stone-cold, arrogant conqueror, many of his actions show his values of caution and human care when necessary. More generally, throughout his self presentation within the Commentaries, Caesar shows "care for his soldiers before and after battles...and for his troops emotions, particularly fear" (Companion). Such emotional and individual attention to his soldiers led to an unparalleled level of camridire and loyalty between Caesar and his men.

Caesar's duality, the valor and pragmatism of an elite general, combined with a sense of human care and connectivity, formed an ideological template that imbued undying loyalty in his soldiers. This dualist ideology saw increased propensity from equestrians and military officers of the Roman elite, it was Caesar's celebrity-like confidence and nationalism that eventually won the support of the Roman public.

One example of Caesar's nationalistic assertions can be seen in his unyielding defensiveness of purely Roman interests in all encounters. The aforementioned conflicts against the Helvetii and the Belgae, as well as the majority of his major Gallic campaigns, were out of defense of the Roman people. Caesar's campaign against the Helvetii was conducted in defense after the Helvetians planned a mass migration through Roman Gaul. The later campaigns against the Belgae and the Venetii were out of Roman economic interest, after the tribes failed to supply their required grain dole to the Roman state. In addition to physical defensiveness, Caesar's defense also extended to that of Roman values and principles from the threat of foreign ideology. Often portraying the enemy Gauls as savage, brutish, and untamed intruders on the valiant and proper Romans, Caesar "(put down his enemies), glorified his soldiers, and justified his actions to a wide readership at Rome" (Levithan). Through this defensiveness of all things Roman, Caesar greatly grew in popularity, serving as an ultimate guardian of Rome's interests, and a prime example of Roman values in a time of vast political and military turbulence.

While Caesar's defensive focus poised him as a favorable protector of Roman interests and values, his military offensives demonstrated Roman capabilities and

fostered grand nationalistic pride. In Caesar's campaign against the Germanic peoples, he and his men demonstrate the power and capability of Roman engineering: constructing a massive bridge to cross the Rhine into Germanic territory, and "within ten days the whole work was completed, and the whole army led over" (Commentaries). Once in Germanic territory, Caesar and his men "burned all their villages and houses, and cut down their corn...to strike fear into the Germans" (Commentaries). After this act of Roman destructive power, Caesar and his men returned to Gaul and destroyed the massive bridge they had constructed. In this instance, Caesar shows Roman might in their engineering and destructive capabilities, while the bridge's destruction is sheer Roman confidence, demonstrating that such a seemingly difficult task is no problem for Caesar and his men. Caesar's confidence is also seen in his expedition into Britannia, At the time, Britannia had been untamed and unknown region, often viewed as a land of mystery. Caesar's "raid" of the Britannia coast, although once again showing Caesar's adaptability in difficult situations, more importantly served as a propaganda piece of Roman capability. "Rome went wild when news of this adventure arrived, thrilled at the idea that its legions had now crossed to that strange and mysterious isle" (Colossus). In both of these examples, Caesar's emphasis Roman superiority and capabilities skyrocketed him to godlike status of popularity among the Roman people. The increasingly widespread popularity set Caesar up for his final acquisition of power.

Ultimately, the Gallic Wars allowed for the demonstration and development of characteristics necessary for Caesar's successful accession to power. His extensive combat adaptability, efficient tactics, and technological implementation all characterize

Caesar as cunning, quick thinking, and resourceful, all of which are personal necessities for any successful ruler. Additionally, Caesar's robust external ideology of pragmatic courage and care when necessary saw exceptional loyalty from his legions and from Roman equestrians and elites in Caesar's base. Caesar's "power prerequisites" were met in the popularity explosion following his acts of Roman superiority and capability. With the tryptic prerequisites having been met, Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 49 BC, and action which eventually saw Caesar ascend to *dictator perpetuo* (dictator in perpetuity), initiated an Empire greater that would last for half a millenia. The analysis of such success is not limited to the Gallic Wars, and the complexities of Caesar's appeal are not limited to his ability, ideology, and popularity. However, if there is one constant in the infinite variables one can account for in an analysis of Caesar's rise to power, it is his unparalleled self-confidence. His military and tactical skill stems from his confidence in obtaining victory. His unmatched tactical skill gave way to an ideology of courage, pragmatism, and efficiency, and the actions that made Caesar so popular are not merely acts of meticulous calculation and planning, but also a manifestation of Caesar's confidence in his abilities and in what he was able to achieve. As Caesar himself once said: "Without training, they lacked knowledge. Without knowledge, they lacked confidence. And without confidence, they lacked victory."

Works Cited

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