Civil War

“Whoever takes his way into a tyrant’s court
Becomes his slave, although he went there a free man”
— Sophocles, Greek dramatist

While Caesar had been conquering Gaul, Rome had not been quiet. As the empire’s borders had spread, the city itself had become a hotbed of social and political intrigue and of ill-disguised anger in the streets. The struggle between the various political interests caused great tension. Landowners wanted no change in their tenure to help the citizens without land; the Optimates (patricians) wished to retain control of the military to ensure their continued power; slave owners were at war with rebel slaves; and the privileged Roman citizens did not wish their advantages to be extended to other inhabitants of the empire.

The mob pursued their interests using violence, the patricians procured favours with bribes of money, food or the promise of advancement. The skilful way in which small concessions were granted meant that a full-blown revolution did not break out.
The pressure on the Optimates came from young patricians who were often tribunes of the people working for their own interests. They wanted to weaken the Senate and tried to push through laws while ignoring the patrician interests. The patrician conservatives were also opposed by the commercial interests of the equites, who had business and trading links across Rome's colonies. This last group contained many military commanders.

The power of the First Triumvirate lay in the combination of Pompey, a relatively popular soldier and politician; Crassus, who understood business; and Caesar whose interests, even from distant Gaul, were served initially by a tribune named Publius Clodius. Clodius has been referred to as "the perfect master of disorder". As the tool of Caesar he was a leader of the mob. In 58 BC, in a quest for popular support, Clodius demanded that corn distribution to the poor should be free. More dangerously, Clodius also made moves to rid the city of Cato and Cicero, the twin dangers to the First Triumvirate.

In a thirdly disguised banishment, the Senate sent Cato to annex Cyprus. Cicero, who had condemned the Cataline conspirators to death, was confronted with a charge that he had violated a law that stated that no one could be executed without the vote of the people. Knowing that he was in danger, Cicero left Rome for Greece without disputing the charge. His house was burned by a violent mob organized by Clodius. The Senate was appalled by these actions and called on all voters to come to the city to vote against this tribunal's activities. The vote was eventually passed in 56 BC, but Clodius was still a danger to ultra-conservative patricians although he backed off when Pompey asked Cicero to return to Rome. When he came back to the city in 57 BC, Cicero was careful not to attack the First Triumvirate or its power bases.

However, there was a growing feeling that Caesar, Crassus and Pompey were no longer close. With the Triumvirate apparently crumbling, Caesar left his army in Gaul and came to meet Pompey and Crassus at Lucae in northern Italy in an attempt to renew their alliance. Between them they carved up the power, Pompey and Crassus were to rule as consuls in 55 BC and were to govern the provinces of Spain and Syria for five years, while Caesar was allowed to keep his Gallic command for the same period.

However, by 54 BC Rome was descending into near anarchy. Titus Annius Milo, a rabble-rouser for the Optimates faction of the Senate confronted those who supported Caesar's ally Clodius. In 52 BC both Milo and Clodius stood for the position of consul. Before the elections were held street brawls broke out between the rival factions. Milo's supporters trapped Clodius on the Appian Way and murdered him. Fury broke out in Rome for the murdered man had been a tribune of the people. Clodius's body was brought into the city and cremated in the Senate, which was burned to the ground at the same time.

Pompey took over as sole consul and attempted to restore order in Rome. When Milo stood trial for murder, Pompey ensured that he was found not guilty by packing the court with soldiers loyal to him. Pompey then made an agreement with the Senate that would end the Triumvirate. His family ties to Caesar were loosened with the death of his wife, Julia. Pompey, while not an adept politician, saw which way the wind was blowing and switched his support to patrician interests. When Crassus died in 53 BC in a disastrous campaign against the Parthians at Carrhae the power of the First Triumvirate was at an end (see panel, page 66).

The Road to Civil War

In 50 BC the struggle began between Caesar and the ultra-conservative patrician families in the Senate. The patricians, as ever, wanted no changes that might erode their power. Caesar, with his rhetorical gifts, military skills and a huge number of supporters, was an obvious threat to their position. Although still in Gaul, Caesar was well aware of the dangers he faced in Rome. He bought the services of one Scribonius Curio, a young patrician tribune who was deeply in debt as a result of his debauchery. Curio, a very clever man, posed as an independent politician. He proposed to the Senate that both Caesar and Pompey should be obliged to give up their commands. Pompey refused to abandon his interests in Spain, as Curio knew he would. This allowed Caesar to refuse to give up his military command. Pompey forbade Caesar to stand as consul in 49 BC without giving up his military command and also refused to let him stand in absentia. He demanded that Caesar return to Rome, leaving his armies in place in Gaul. Caesar knew that if he returned to the city alone the Senate would charge him with irregularities during his command in Gaul. Pompey had clearly abandoned his old friend and father-in-law. Then a consul named Marcellus put forward a motion that Caesar should be declared a public enemy unless he agreed to surrender. When it was suggested that Caesar give up his command, Mark Antony (Marcus Antonio) and Quintus Longus Cassius supported their old friend and vetoed this motion. The Senate overrode the veto. In doing this they had violated the sacred constitution and Caesar now had a semblance of legality on his side.
Antony and Cassius fled Rome and joined Caesar. In open defiance of the Senate, Caesar and his army crossed the Rubicon and headed for Rome.

**War Breaks Out**

Rome became a city in turmoil with the news that Caesar had crossed the frontier with his soldiers. Caesar's force was small — he had only one legion available — and his men were lightly protected. But he knew he had support and that the army he had left behind in Gaul would join him if necessary. He had used some of the fortune he had amassed during the Gallic War to bribe men of ability and influence in Rome. Caesar was certain that he could remove Pompey, overcome the objections of the old patrician politicians and take sole power in the city.

Caesar split his forces. He advanced down the east coast of Italy while Antony occupied the western approach to Rome. Panic ensued. The Senate left Rome in the hands of the magistrates. Pompey, too slow to act, was driven south and sailed from Brundisium on March 17.

Caesar moved into Rome, where, much to their surprise, he treated his opponents mercifully. His first duty was to ensure stability in the city and at that end he arranged that Rome was fed. His lieutenants took control of Sicily and Sardinia, two islands that acted as granaries for Rome. He then turned to Spain, where he had to deal with Pompey's army. In a rapid and triumphant campaign he achieved this. Soldiers deserted to his side in vast numbers.

Throughout the year Caesar tried to pin Pompey down to fight. However, Pompey refused a pitched battle because he did not think his troops could defeat Caesar's smaller but more experienced army. Pompey moved the remnants of his force to Thessaly with the aim of extending Caesar's supply lines. Pompey had a problem with his aristocratic and precipitate lieutenants who were anxious to get back to Rome and to divide the spoils when Caesar was defeated. They were certain that he was about to be crushed. While Pompey wanted to keep Caesar at arm's length he knew he could not retain the support of these lieutenants if they did not have the opportunity to take on Caesar's army. Pompey brought the arguments to an end by confronting Caesar on the plain of Pharsalus (see panel). His army scattered. Pompey fled to Egypt to restore his shattered hopes. Caesar followed him there, where he discovered that Pompey had become a player in the war between King Ptolemy and his wife and sister Cleopatra, who were involved in a struggle for the throne of Egypt. Yet again, Pompey showed how inept he was as a politician. He offered to throw in his lot with Ptolemy and was murdered on an Egyptian beach (see panel, page 60).

**BATTLE OF PHARSALUS**

Above: A painting by Cassone on canvas depicting the Battle of Pharsalus in which Pompey was defeated by Caesar.

Caesar marched at great speed from his campaign in Spain, crossed the Adriatic and found the legions under the command of Pompey, his former son-in-law and friend, at Pharsalus in Thessaly on August 48 BC.

Caesar's small army was outnumbered by Pompey's force whose infantry were more than double in number and whose squadrons of cavalry were seven times larger. Pompey decided he could turn Caesar's right wing and then fall onto its rear. Caesar had guessed this would be Pompey's plan, and so he had strengthened his cavalry force by placing among it some of his best infantry men.

This mixture of infantry and cavalry was a tactic he had honed in his battles in Gaul. It is a measure of Caesar's skill as a general that he was willing to use alien tactics if he saw merit in them. Caesar kept six cohorts in reserve. Pompey's cavalry charged into the right of Caesar's position and found themselves bvailed by the infantry on that flank. Pompey's cavalry were not prepared and turned and raced in panic from the field. The panic spread and Pompey was left without an army. He was killed.

Caesar had foreign prisoners put to death but Roman citizens were pardoned. Two of those he pardoned were Marcus Brutus and Gaius Longinus Cassius who four years later plotted against Caesar and assassinated him.
Caesar in Egypt

Caesar stayed in Egypt, and became involved in the nation's political affairs. His forces were nearly defeated in Alexandria, the city founded by his hero, Alexander the Great. However, he called in reinforcements and destroyed Ptolemy's army, restoring Cleopatra, who became his mistress, to the throne. Before he left Egypt, accompanied by the Egyptian queen, he had time to father a son, Caesarion, with Cleopatra.

Caesar Returns to Rome

On his return to Rome Caesar restored order. Some of his Legions had been causing trouble so Caesar had them paraded in front of him and addressed them merely as “citizens” and not as “soldiers.” In doing this he was signalling their dismissal from the army, which shocked them deeply. They begged him to readmit them and he eventually agreed. They had learned their lesson.

In the city he was equally decisive, as there was no one left who dared to oppose him openly. This was the start of what has been described as “the hidden face of the new monarchy.” Caesar’s tough, radical and fair actions pulled Rome out of chaos. He dealt with problems caused by unfair taxation and appointed magistrates to oversee tax collection. He ensured the poor were fed and that the city and its institutions were in harmony. He knew that to ensure a lasting balance through the empire he had to confront those senators who had supported Pompey. Some had gone to North Africa where they were regrouping. In 46 BC Caesar followed with his Legions and moved to destroy the resurrected Republican army at Thapsus. His army slaughtered as many as 50,000 men in a ruthless and merciless act. Among Caesar’s opponents was Catilina, who committed suicide because he had no hope left that the Roman Republic would return.

Caesar returned to Rome in triumph, the victor over Gaul, Egypt, Syria and Numidia. However, danger threatened in Spain where the remnants of the Pompeian army had escaped from Africa. This army was even willing to take slaves into its ranks in its desperation to provide a force powerful enough to win the battle they knew was inevitable.

Caesar advanced into Spain in 45 BC and the final throw of the dice for the Pompeian party ended in a savage and bloody struggle at Munda where no quarter was asked or given. It was a terrible battle in which no prisoners were taken.

Caesar’s phase of civil war was finished, but the second phase was to come very soon and it would be crueler than the first. For now Caesar turned his attention to the governance of Rome.