Rome seemed to own the world. Her empire stretched from Scotland to the Sahara. Her army controlled three continents. Fifty million people lived under her laws. Rome’s empire was the greatest political prize the world had ever seen. This is the story of those who would do anything to win it.

1:00

It’s a warm spring night in 82 BC, and Rome is struggling to control one of its generals. Lucius Cornelius Sulla has camped 50,000 soldiers just outside the city to intimidate his opponents in Rome. Sulla is a cunning politician and a brilliant general. He’s returning from a successful four-year campaign in the east and is used to getting his way.

He meets with the Roman Senate and demands they give his soldiers land as a reward for their conquests. For the first time in Roman history, a general is bullying the government.

The senators refuse. At issue is the very future of the Roman state. Can Rome’s civilian government control the ambition of her generals? Or will brute force triumph over the rule of law?

That night Sulla posted his answer. Lists of his political enemies, with cash rewards next to their names. Sulla had tried to persuade his opponents. Now he promised to kill them.

It was a bloodbath. Thousands died.

Husbands were slaughtered in the embraces of their wives, sons in the arms of their mothers. Those who were killed in the passion of the moment was nothing compared with those who were just butchered for the sake of their property. – Plutarch

Sulla’s reign of terror only lasted four years, but a fatal precedent had been set. A general had returned from war and persuaded a Roman army to help him seize power in Rome.

Yet four hundred years earlier, Romans had dreamed of something very different. When Rome was nothing more than a village on the banks of the River Tiber, Romans made a revolutionary commitment that would change the course of history.

After years of tyranny under Etruscan kings, they dreamed of a government based on restraint, trust, and the rule of law. In 509 BC they created the Roman Republic, the world’s first representative government. SPQR – Senatus Populusque Romanus – the Senate and the People of Rome was its motto.

The Republic was a bold experiment in communal government. Wealthy and poor farmers agreed to share power. The rich served as Rome’s leaders, the poor as her soldiers. In return, everyone had a say in how the government was run.

Romans knew the key to the Republic’s success was responsible leadership, and in Gaius Quintus Cincinnatus they found a legendary role model. The Senate granted Cincinnatus, a Roman landowner, absolute power to defend Rome from an aggressive local tribe. He accepted the position and defeated the enemy. Fourteen days later, he voluntarily resigned and humbly went
back to work on his farm. His sense of duty, sacrifice, and loyalty to the state embodied everything the new Republic stood for.

The Roman Republic has served a model for Western democracies ever since. Everything from its public architecture to its political rituals is strangely familiar. Once a year the whole city would turn out to vote for its leaders. Competition for the consulship, the most important public office, was intense.

*The election of a consul in the Roman Republic is like the election of the American president. You call people friends who you would not ordinarily call friends. Then you shake hands, you kiss babies. And what you are trying to do is get a bandwagon going, to appear a winner. And very gradually, as in American presidential elections, people drop by the wayside. Something goes wrong with their campaigns.* – Jeremy Patterson

Remaining candidates then turned to their spin-doctors.

*If it can be managed at all, there should be scandalous talk of character, about the crimes, lusts, and brieries of your competitors.* – Quintus

It was up to the senators to ensure that politics didn’t get too frivolous. They were the guardians of Rome’s traditions.

*The Roman Senate and the American Senate are the two greatest senates of all time. Roman senators got no pay. They served for the honor of serving their state as a senator. The Senate was intended to be made up of old men. Not the swiftest of the swift, nor the strongest of the strong, but the wisest of the wise. Why were they wise? Why were they the wisest? Because they were old men. They had experience.* – Senator Robert Byrd

Under their watchful eye, the young Republic fostered a sense of civic pride, the foundation of Rome’s empire. Her volunteer army carried Roman power to unimaginable places. By the Second Century BC, Rome was Mistress of the Mediterranean.

Yet beneath the surface of Rome’s success lurked serious contradictions. Women had few rights, and it was never one man, one vote. Elections were always rigged in favor of the wealthy. Political equality was never a Roman ideal. They lived in a world of extremes. While the rich redefined the meaning of decadence, 95% of the people struggled below the poverty line.

This social imbalance would fuel the most disruptive tradition in Republic Rome: patronage. Every morning at dawn, the poor gathered in the courtyards of the rich. These wealthy patrons saw to the needs of their clients. Some needed work, others legal advice. In return, clients promised patrons their vote at election time.

But Rome’s great patrons were also great politicians, and obligations to their clients often clouded their duty to the state. Loyalty was divided, and the ideals of the Republic compromised. The conflict between patronage and politics was set to explode.

**10:30**

A small group of wealthy families ruled Rome. Notoriously conservative, they protected their own interests and quietly resisted reform, until one of their own broke the code of silence.
Tiberius Gracchus was born to privilege. Grandson of Scipio Africanus, conqueror of Hannibal, and son of Cornelia, an intelligent, ambitious woman, who poured her ideals into her two sons, Tiberius and Gaius. She told them she was tired of being called the daughter of her father, Scipio. She wanted to be known as the mother of her sons.

In 143BC, the young Tiberius left Rome to join the army in Spain. It was a very disturbing journey.

While Tiberius was traveling through Italy, he saw for himself how the country had been deserted by its native inhabitants, and how those who tilled the soil or tended the flocks were barbarian slaves introduced from abroad. But it was above all the people themselves who did the most to arouse Tiberius's energies and ambitions, calling upon him to recover the public land for the poor. – Plutarch

The ambitious aristocrat had found his cause. In the Third and Second Centuries BC, the Roman Empire had more than doubled in size. The conquering soldiers were still volunteers, poor Roman citizens who owned small farms. When the Roman Empire was small, this citizen’s militia had worked well. Men served for only part of each year, coming home regularly to work their farms. But getting home to harvest became impossible as the Empire grew and armies were conquering faraway lands in Africa or Asia or Northern Europe.

If you’re serving abroad for years and years in a long process of imperial conquest, the result is that when you put down your sword at the end of a campaign, there is no plowshare left, because your brother ‘nicked it’ ages ago. And it wasn’t just your brother – it’s the big landlord next door who has extended his estate. So you do have very large numbers of people who don’t have land to return to. – Professor Andrew Wallace-Hadrill

Their new estates netted the Roman aristocracy obscene profits, which they used to buy foreign slaves to work the land. So when veterans returned from war, they had lost their land to the wealthy and their jobs to slaves.

Tiberius Gracchus promised to change all that.

The wild beasts that roam over Italy have their dens and holes to lurk in. But the men who fight and die for our country enjoy the common air and light and nothing else. It is their lot to wander with their children, houseless and homeless, over the face of the earth. The truth is that our soldiers fight and die to protect the wealth and luxury of others. They are called the masters of the world, but they don’t possess a single clod of earth which is truly their own. – Tiberius Gracchus

Gracchus proposed something radical: the government should divide public land among Rome’s homeless. The senators were horrified. His plan threatened their own huge estates and also their political livelihood. If passed, it would make Tiberius Gracchus patron of Rome’s massive underclass. He would be the most powerful man in Rome.

The story of Tiberius Gracchus is the Roman aristocrat who treats. He does the thing that they’ve all got a little convention among themselves: there are some things you do, there some things you don’t do. And you don’t bust the system by going straight to the people and offering them things. You can see it as breaking the system of patronage – Professor Andrew Wallace-Hadrill
The Roman elite panicked. A group of senators confronted Gracchus as he was speaking to his supporters. In a fit of rage, they beat him to death with chairs they were sitting on. Rome’s boldest reformer was then dumped into the River Tiber.

Yet Gracchus had revolutionized Roman politics. By championing the needs of the poor, Gracchus had shown how an ambitious aristocrat could outmaneuver his conservative peers. But “People Power” would do more than divide Rome’s leaders. Ultimately, it would threaten the Republic.

17:00

By the beginning of the First Century BC, the Roman Republic was imploding. Roman values were under siege. Slave revolts stunned Sicily and Italy. Something had to give.

The collapsing Republic found an unlikely supporter. Born in a wool-dying shop in central Italy, in 106 BC, Marcus Tullius Cicero dedicated his life to opposing the greed and violence that threatened his world. He was a self-made man, earning a name for himself as an orator and lawyer in Rome and relying on his eloquence and intelligence, to outwit wealthier opponents.

Cicero believed the key to the Republic’s future was in her past. There Cicero saw the image of Cincinnatus and the ideals of restraint and self-sacrifice he embodied.

But there was another role model: Romulus, Rome’s legendary founder was reared by a savage wolf and killed his own brother in a struggle for power. In legend, greed and treachery were Roman’s founding virtues, and they threatened to be the most enduring.

* I would rather be the first man in a barbarian village than the second man in Rome. – Julius Caesar *

Rome’s most notorious citizen was born to wealthy parents in 100 BC. As with all young Roman aristocrats, Julius Caesar had a strong sense of destiny. As a child he dared to claim he was descended from the goddess Venus. Caesar’s first official post was as a military officer in Spain. There the 30-year-old Caesar stared at a statue of Alexander the Great. How had he achieved nothing, he wept, when at his age Alexander had conquered the world?

Roman politicians had always staged huge spectacles to impress the voters. In 63 BC, Caesar outdid them all. 640 gladiators fought to the death at his first public games. It was an unprecedented display of power.

* He was lavish in his spending. He purchased a short-lived fame at great expense. – Plutarch *

Caesar knew that there were two secrets to gaining power in Rome. One was playing to the people. Commanding a successful army was the other.

In 59 BC, Caesar became military commander over Gaul, modern-day France. Nine year later, a million Gauls were dead or enslaved. It was a flagrant act of genocide.

Caesar would now summon the ghost of Sulla, Rome’s first warlord. Like Sulla, Caesar was returning from war with an army loyal to him, not Rome. Like Sulla, Caesar wanted something the Republic could never allow.
In January 49 BC, Caesar committed the ultimate act of treachery. Following in Sulla’s footsteps, he persuaded a Roman army to cross the Rubicon and march into Rome.

*The monstrosity of Caesar’s character is concealed in his gay and friendly manner. No one knows what to do. If we resist, there will probably be bloodshed* – Cicero

The Senate quickly chose Pompey, conqueror of the East, to defend the Republic. But Caesar wanted absolute power, even at the price of civil war. Rome’s two greatest generals met in Greece.

*Brother against brother, eagle against eagle, flag against flag, citizens, what is this madness?* – Lucan

Pompey was no match for Caesar and his brutal fighting force. He fled to Egypt but was eventually captured by Caesar’s spies. The fate of the Republic hung in the balance.

Caesar had other things on his mind. In Egypt in 48 BC he met the young Queen of the Nile, Cleopatra. They fell in love and had a child. Cleopatra persuaded Caesar to help her overthrow her brother and gain the throne of Egypt. Then in 46 BC she accompanied Caesar back to Rome.

*Cleopatra represented for the Romans every threat you can imagine. She was African, a woman beautiful. She was powerful. You find her seducing Julius Caesar. Julius Caesar, who conquered the Gauls, who is this great soldier, who was this politician, who wanted to be the dictator in Rome. Cleopatra reminded them of their vulnerability, and that frightened them very, very much.* – Professor Shelley Haley

Vulnerability was not something Caesar understood. *Veni, Vidi, Vici* – I came, I saw, I conquered – was the motto of his dazzling return to the city.

That evening he threw a banquet for 22,000 of Rome’s poorest citizens. Hypnotized, the people did the unthinkable: they voluntarily voted Caesar the absolute powers of a dictator.

Caesar then shocked everyone. He used his total control not for revenge but social reform. Like Gracchus, Caesar gave the Roman poor what they wanted. He made sure no Roman citizen ever went hungry. He gave grain to the poor and land to his soldiers, paid for by himself.

Caesar, the benign dictator, was incredibly popular. Like Gracchus, he was a little too popular for some.

*Here was a man who was desperate to be king of the Roman people, master of the whole world. A man who believed such an ambition to be morally right must be insane* – Cicero

In February 44 BC he went too far. Caesar asked the people to elect him dictator for life. To accept absolute power forever was an open insult to his republican peers.

Cicero was disgusted and retired from political life in protest. The Senate wasn’t so meek. They invited Caesar to explain his actions. It was the Ides of March.

By mid-morning the crisis was over. At the foot of a statue of Pompey lay Caesar’s body, stabbed 35 times.
Rome’s poor were outraged. At Caesar’s funeral they lit torches from the pyre and set fire to the houses of the assassins. That night a comet blazed across the sky. It seemed an omen. Julius Caesar, the champion of the poor. The citizens of Rome declared him a god. That changed everything. For the poor had made it clear they valued the gifts of a dictator more than the empty promises of a republic.

_You could get rid of Caesar, but you couldn’t get rid of Caesarism. As Cicero says at one point, it’s a strange thing. We’ve killed the man and confirmed everything that he’s done. Because you couldn’t do away with it. And in fact those last years after Caesar’s murder are not about the destruction of the Republic – the Republic was destroyed by Caesar. It’s simply about who’s gonna replace Caesar?_ – Jeremy Patterson

Two rivals came forward to vie for the dead dictator’s absolute power. Octavian, Caesar’s 18-year-old-in–law and heir. And Mark Antony, Caesar’s closest friend and ally, no stranger to the politics of intimidation.

In 43 BC Antony raised an army and surrounded the Senate. The Republic was once again under siege. Cicero came out of retirement to attack Antony. He thought Octavian was the Republic’s last chance. Cicero confronted Antony in the Senate.

_Your ambition to rein is as fierce as Caesar’s I would gladly offer my own body, if my death could redeem the freedom of our nation._ – Cicero

Antony took Cicero at his word. Two months later his thugs murdered the Republic’s boldest defender. His hands were cut off and put on public display in Rome. Its conscience dead, the Roman Republic was in crisis.

29:30