Augustus Caesar As A Person Who Caused The Fall Of The Roman Republic

The Roman Republic was founded in 509 BCE after the overthrowing of the Roman Kingdom led by the Etrusco-Roman king Tarquin the Proud, which had been in control since 753 BCE. It then lasted until 27 BCE when the Roman Empire was formed with the styling of Octavian as Augustus, a title that would continue with later emperors. The Republic lasted 483 years, much longer than the Roman Kingdom did, with a political system which aimed to achieve a perfect synthesis between democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy. It was the most democratic government since the Greek city states, and ahead of its time.

In this dissertation I aim to present both viewpoints and form a conclusion on the main causes of the fall of the Roman Republic, and if it was inevitable or caused by the influence of Augustus Caesar.

Firstly, I will try to explain how the Roman Republic worked... In 133 BCE it was controlled by annually elected ‘magistrates’ who were concerned with all aspects of government. To become one, you had to be very rich, and by the end of the second century BCE rich aristocrats dominated politics. Even the voting system was weighted to give more influence and power to the wealthy, yet power still lay with the people. Mass assemblies elected the magistrates, made the laws and took major state decisions, and Rome prided itself on being a ‘free republic’. Centuries later its political model was even used by the founding fathers of the United States. However, just over a century later it was governed by an emperor, an embodiment of autocracy, and by 14 CE when the first emperor Augustus died popular elections had all but disappeared. Power was no longer located in the assembly place of the forum but in the imperial palace, and Augustus’ heirs would inherit his control over the Roman world. This was a revolution brought about by a century of civil strife and even open warfare, ending when Augustus defeated his last remaining rivals Mark Antony and Cleopatra in 31 BCE and established himself on the throne. Why did this revolution come about? Was it inevitable, and the system of the Republic inherently flawed?

The start of the decline of the Roman Republic is usually attributed to Julius Caesar. He was an extremely wealthy man; his net worth is approximated to have been around $4.6 trillion and his will left 300 sesterces to each male citizen which comes to about 450 million sesterces split between 1.5 million people. It is hard to approximate wealth in ancient times to modern day wealth, as there were many economic models throughout history, as the value of Roman currency changed a lot during its existence and the relative value of things, we could compare this amount to like wages or living costs were likely very different. but we do know that in comparison to other people at the time he was extremely wealthy. (Hower his wealth was nowhere near the amount his nephew Augustus would come to own, with Egypt as his own personal property). This meant he wielded a lot of power in the Roman Republic. In 60 BCE he made a pact with Pompey and Crassus, allowing him to be elected as consul in 59 BCE, and he stayed in Gaul for 8 years adding the lands of modern France and Belgium to the Roman Empire. He also made to expeditions to Britain in 55 and 54 BCE. His military success made him very wealthy and he was viewed as a hero by the public, possibly causing him to famously disregard the senate and cross the Rubicon river to Italy with his army, defeating the republican

forces in a civil war. Their leader Pompey fled to Egypt and was assassinated, and Julius made himself consul and dictator of Rome permanently, whereas it was always a temporary position in the Republic. His success and ambition alienated strongly republican senators, leading to his assassination on the 15 of March 44 BCE by a group of these senators led by Cassius and Brutus. Before this Julius had adopted Octavian as his nephew and made him his heir, and after the death of his uncle he took advantage of the unrest to wage a final round of civil wars that led to his elevation to Augustus, the first emperor.

However, was the Roman Republic already doomed before Octavian took up the mantle of his uncle and managed to defeat his republican rivals?