



2005 Shaping the World: Conversation on Democracy Thomas Jefferson Talks With George Washington

Marcus Tullius Cicero



"I know that your heart was always as heavy as mine. Not only did we foresee the destruction of one of the two armies and its leader, a vast disaster, but we realized that victory in civil war is the worst of all calamities. I dreaded the prospect, even if victory should fall to those we had joined...As for the present time, if our friends had gained the mastery, they would have used it very immoderately...We live, it may be said, in a state that has been turned upside down." Cicero, Letter to Varro (Rome, 46 BC).

"This man's works, so many and so fine, will last for ever and there is no need to comment on his great abilities and capacity for hard work...However, it is a pity that he could not have been more temperate when things went well and stronger in adversity." Asinius Pollio, as quoted in Seneca's *Suasoriae*.

Seldom has any man come down to posterity "warts and all," as has Marcus Tullius Cicero, with all his virtues and vices visibly intact. If Cicero's legendary position in western learning is largely due to his carefully-wrought speeches, many of which survived the fall of Rome and were primary teaching sources for rhetoric in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, so his personal letters also

show the man entire. He was the ultimate politician in an impossible historical position: as he sought accommodation with the harsh realities of the failing Republic, so he ranged from paltry to heroic, from the vanities of an insecure man to the clear vision of a great statesman. He is seen simultaneously as a pompous windbag, a flawed man struggling to find the courageous path, a status-conscious advocate changing sides as his interest dictated; what is undeniable is that no man, save perhaps Julius Caesar, brings to life the events of a turbulent period in history as well as he can.

THE YOUNG "CHICKPEA"

Cicero was born and raised in the Italian provincial town of Arpinum (Arpino), seventy miles east of Rome. The Arpinates had been citizens of Rome for nearly a century, but its residents were still viewed with careless disdain in Rome as "new men," without noble ancestors, breeding, or background. No single fact in Cicero's life is more important. Until his death, he labored under the political disability of his country heritage; although he was raised to the highest position in Rome, yet he always, often unattractively, bore wounding insecurities regarding the more established Roman establishment. His cognomen, it is said, meant "chickpea."

When Cicero was about ten, his father moved to Rome and the young man received the best education and training money could buy. He served briefly in the army in his teens (during the upheavals of the Social War against the Italian allies), serving on the staff of Cn. Pompeius Strabo. It was during this period that he became the client of Strabo's son, Gnaeus Pompeius, who rose to prominence as one of Sulla's best generals in his march on Rome and later dictatorship. The relationship of Pompey the Great and Cicero would remain uneasily in place until their deaths.

Cicero began the upward arc of his legal career in 80 BC, defending Sextus Roscius in a murder case; Roscius claimed he was persecuted by an influential freedman of Sulla the Dictator. Taking the case was politically sensitive, and involved attacking corruption within the Dictator's own administration. However, the ambitious young advocate scored a brilliant victory which brought him to the attention of all Rome. From 79 to 76 BC, Cicero traveled in Greece and Asia Minor, studying Greek philosophy and oratory; returning to Rome, he began the *cursus honorum*

[the standard rungs of political office] and climbed with confident ease. Quaestor, Plebian Aedile, and Praetorial offices followed one by one, each election at the earliest age allowable by law. Finally, and to his untold joy, Cicero was elected Consul for 63 BC. This highest Roman position was almost unobtainable for any man except an Optimate, a senator with previous consular ancestors; yet Cicero, the "new man," easily came in first.

CONSUL AND CATALINE

It was during his Consulship in 63 that an event occurred that defined Cicero for the rest of his life. Catiline, a patrician with a notorious reputation who claimed to represent the disenfranchised, was refused higher office. Cicero stumbled on information suggesting that Catiline was planning a coup d'etat; he promptly alerted the Senate and suppressed the plot. His speech against Catiline in the Senate was so withering that Catiline left Rome, later taking up arms against the state and dying in the attempt. Cicero also learned the identity of Catiline's fellow-conspirators, and five well-known Romans were arrested, promptly arraigned during a turbulent Senatorial meeting, and executed without formal trial.

The trial of Catiline's conspirators in 63 BC casts a blinding spotlight on three men who would carry the fate of Rome until their deaths; Julius Caesar, Marcus Cato and Marcus Cicero. Cicero was in his early 40's, a few years older than Caesar and Cato, and it was during the trial that Caesar's actions made Cicero take him seriously. Cicero spoke forcefully for immediate execution of all conspirators, as did Cato. Caesar spoke for banishment, rather than death (no Roman was allowed to be put to death without formal trial, a rule which Cicero in the danger of the moment was determined to ignore). Although Caesar almost swayed the crowd, Cato then spoke for Cicero's position, winning the argument. The men were executed immediately, with Rome in a state of the highest political tension. Cicero would be blamed for subverting the unwritten constitution (the *mos maiorum*) for the rest of his life. Caesar's condemnation of his actions wounded and infuriated him and his relationship with the Julian would thereafter be mixed amity and suspicion. Cato's defense led Cicero inevitably into Cato's political camp, the reactionary Senatorial party of Optimates known as the *Boni* ("just men.") The lines were drawn that would define the Civil War.

One of the least attractive sides of Cicero's character was revealed by the Catilinarian conspiracy. He was absolutely convinced that, single-handed, he had saved the Roman state. He sought the praise of his contemporaries as Rome's savior with impetuous greed; collecting all his speeches against Catiline for publication and inviting others to write of his actions in prose and verse. He was unwise to boast as loudly as he did; the ambiguity of his legal actions were kept firmly in the public eye. A political enemy, the tribune Publius Clodius, used Cicero's actions to attempt to destroy him politically in 58 BC. Although Caesar made overtures to Cicero, his help came at what Cicero viewed as the price of his political independence; thus he stood defenseless when Clodius moved a bill to reenact an old law that any Roman who had executed a citizen without trial should be banished. Cicero fled from Rome, and Clodius later secured an additional bill mandating Cicero's exile. His beautiful house on the Palatine Hill was razed and a shrine to Liberty was built on its site. Although Cicero, with Pompey's help, was recalled in 57, his political fortunes had peaked. Although he maintained a respected position in the Senate and continued his advocate's duties, his influence on the spiraling dissolution of the Republic was more and more frequently from the sidelines.

In April, 62, Cicero wrote Pompey the Great (who was returning from his eastern wars) sounding both the defensive and self-praising notes that occasionally grate on the modern ear:

"...let me speak plainly, as becomes my character and our friendly relations. My achievements have been such that I expected to find a word of congratulation upon them in your letter, both for friendship's sake and that of the commonwealth. I imagine you omitted anything of the sort for fear of giving offense in any quarter. But I must tell you that what I have done for the safety of the country stands approved in the judgment and testimony of the whole world." "

Cicero to Pompey, *Selected Letters*, 7.

Throughout the turbulent years of the '50's, as the triumvirate of Pompey, Crassus and Caesar maneuvered political

served under him with distinction in the Gallic Wars and the invasions of Britain in 55-54 BC. Pressured by the triumvirs, he began making speeches supporting Caesar's actions in the Senate, although his private correspondence revealed his resentment of having to curtsy to men he viewed as destroying the Republic. Cicero devoted himself to his writing (*De Oratore* and *De Republica*, two of his greatest works, were written during these anxious years). Forced to defend Pompey's creature, Milo, following the murder of Publius Clodius, Cicero signally failed in his defense, occurring derision for his fear of Pompey's soldiers who ringed the turbulent court. The decade brought him one final pleasure, when he was elected augur in 52 BC.

For most of the two years before Rubicon, Cicero served as proconsul of the province of Cilicia and was out of Rome. Military actions in Cilicia prompted him to hope for a modest triumph, which he pursued with typical, single-minded vanity. Instead, returning to Rome in the summer of 50, Cicero found Rome collapsing about him in Civil War.

"Troubled as I am by matters of the gravest and saddest consequence and lacking the opportunity of consulting with you in person, I still want the benefit of your advice. The whole question at issue is this: if Pompey leaves Italy, as I suspect he will, what do you think I ought to do?" Cicero, letter to Atticus, February 18-19, 49 BC.

THE CIVIL WAR

Cicero, like men throughout Italy, panicked in the weeks after Caesar crossed the Rubicon in January, 49. Pompey was arming legions to defend the Senatorial position in the Civil War; Caesar, moving quickly south, was accepting the surrender of town after Italian town. Caesar or Pompey? Which side would win? In his letters to his beloved friend, the financier Atticus, Cicero bares his frenzied doubts rather endearingly. In the end, he left his wife and beloved daughter, Tullia, safely in Italy and traveled east with Pompey's forces. Although Caesar himself visited him at Formiae in March, strongly urging Cicero join the rump Senate of Caesar's supporters, Cicero found the courage to refuse. Unhappily but firmly, he joined the senators at Pompey's camp in Greece, but was depressed with what he found there. Rather than statesmen, Cicero found complacency, greed, and a dismaying lack of idealism or commitment to the principles of the Republic in the senators clustering about his old patron, Pompeius. And in his private correspondence, Cicero found Pompey himself surprisingly slow and uncertain as to how to proceed against Caesar.

After Pompey's defeat at Pharsalus, Cicero refused further Republican command and, pardoned by Caesar, returned to Rome; he may have technically made peace with the dictator, but he was utterly unsympathetic to his regime. He kept a low profile, making only the significant *Pro Marcello* speech in the Senate in favor of Caesar's clemency in pardoning former enemies (46 BC). He had now so clouded his position with both sides by attempting to straddle the political fence, that he was not asked to join the conspiracy to murder Caesar in early 44. In fairness, it may also be urged that Cicero would probably have disapproved of assassination, no matter how distraught he was at Caesar's actions.

The last time the two old opponents met was in December, 45; Caesar and 2,000 troops stopped by Cicero's villa in Puteoli, staying the night over an excellent dinner and cordial talk, not of politics, but of literature (Cicero to Atticus, XIII.52). Three months later, the world turned upside down again.

DEATH OF A PATRIOT

After Caesar's assassination, Cicero moved back into the political forefront, instantly approving the action and the conspirators in undertaking it. He openly urged the Senate to destroy others, like Marc Antony, whose ambition represented continued threats to the restored Republic, thus incurring Antony's hatred. Cicero wrung his hands over the conspirators' lack of follow-through after Caesar's death. He had the prestige of a senior consular, but his judgment was imperfect; he apparently was willing to bet on the guarantees of Caesar's 19-year-old heir, Octavian, that he would be temperate moving against the "liberators." He supported him enthusiastically in his early moves against Antony and, indeed, until the very moment where the unclad young Caesar marched on Rome with seven legions, forced through his own election to the consulate at age 19, and reconciled with Antony.

From September, 44 to April, 43, Cicero made his last great cycle of speeches, the so-called "Phillipics" (based on

Demosthenes' speeches against Philip of Macedonia centuries before), supporting Octavian and urging the Senate to declare Antony a public enemy of the Roman state. In fourteen different orations, his temerity in savagely attacking Antony before his peers and eulogizing the dead Republic earned him undying admiration for undaunted courage. Antony, already his enemy, surely marked him mentally for death with the words Caesar spoke to a rapt Senate:

[To Antony] "But what frightens me more than such imputations is the possibility that you yourself may disregard the true path of glory, and instead consider it glorious to possess more power than all your fellow-citizens combined - preferring that they should fear you rather than like you. If that is what you think, your idea of where the road of glory lies is mistaken. For glory consists of being regarded with affection by one's country, earning praise and respect and love; whereas to be feared and disliked, on the other hand, is unpleasant and hateful and debilitating and precarious. This is clear enough from the play in which the man said, 'Let them hate provided that they fear.' He found to his cost that such a policy was his ruin." "

Cicero, *The First Philippic Against Marcus Antonius*.

When Antony and Octavian later reconciled, forming the Triumvirate with Lepidus, the young Caesar made no real effort to save Cicero when Antony immediately proscribed him. He had been informed, privately, of Cicero's quip to friends (when it appeared Octavian had served his purpose in hamstringing Antony) that the young man "must get praises, honors - and the push." (*Letters to His Friends*, 401 (XI 20)). In December, 43, almost two years to the day from his dinner with Caesar, Cicero was caught by Antony's soldiers in a halfhearted escape attempt. His brother Quintus and nephew had already been murdered. Cicero died bravely. His head and hands, cut off, were brought back and nailed to the Rostra from which he had so often moved the crowd. Fulvia, Antony's remarkable wife, drove pins through the golden tongue which had so often pierced other Romans.

In spite of vacillation and doubt, Cicero was staunch throughout his entire career in his determination to bring back the informal constitution of the Republic. The issue is whether that conviction was based on a *realpolitik* understanding of the viability of the Republic in the new age of empire. As Everitt writes, "His weakness as a politician was that his principles rested on a mistaken analysis. He failed to understand the reasons for the crisis that tore apart the Roman Republic. Julius Caesar, with the pitiless insight of genius, saw that the constitution with its endless checks and balances prevented effective government, but like so many of his contemporaries Cicero regarded politics in personal rather than structural terms. For Caesar the solution lay in a completely new system of government; for Cicero it lay in finding better men to run the government and better laws to keep them in order." Everitt, *Cicero*, 312.

Cicero's political career, poignantly, never brought him the intimacy or respect of his peers; he was too compromising for Cato's faction, too adamantly Republican for Caesar's. Of all his contemporaries, perhaps Caesar, with awful irony, actually liked and respected him best. Cicero's multifaceted personality also included warmth, tolerance, an urbane enjoyment of life, and a wit famous in its own time (to his detriment, he never could pass up a public witticism the minute it sprang into his head). Never really accepted by the Optimates, in the end Cicero stood alone as the last man, perhaps, who really believed the Republic could be saved. His judgment was not immaculate, but was exceptionally human. He comes down to us as a three-dimensional, admirable, flawed man who lived through and attempted to mold perhaps the most famous decades in the history of Rome. Ironically for a man so typical of his age in grasping after immortality, his longtime scribe and slave, Tiro, did much to immortalize Cicero than perhaps any man living by editing and publishing his speeches and works; similarly, Cicero's friend Atticus saved and published many of his letters. The human being was gone; the warmly wise, polished, impeccably elegant orator and thinker lived in to become the very model for the greatest of Roman patriots. Cicero would have loved that.

His epitaph may well be spoken, ironically, by Augustus Caesar:

"A long time afterwards, so I have been told, [Augustus] Caesar was visiting the son of one of his daughters. The boy had a book of Cicero's in his hands and, terrified of his grandfather, tried to hide it under his cloak. Caesar noticed this and, after taking the book from him, stood there and read a great part of it. He then handed

it back to the young man with the words: 'A learned man, my child, a learned man and a lover of his country.'"

Plutarch, *Life of Cicero* , 49.

[Suzanne Cross](#) © 2001-2005. All Rights Reserved.
No material may be used without the author's permission.