

Low Roads Lead To Rome

The most exalted of all Roman politicians was a master of dirty politics.

BY JEFF GREENFIELD

ON MARCH 4, 1841, ABOUT AN HOUR and a half into the longest inaugural address in American history, President William Henry Harrison turned from his clause-by-clause celebration of the Constitution to warn of the lessons posed to the American republic from ancient Rome: "[T]he senate continued to meet in the temple of liberty to talk of the sacredness and beauty of the Commonwealth and the people assembled in the forum, not as in the days of Camillus and the Scipios, to cast their free votes for annual magistrates or pass upon the acts of the senate, but to receive from the hands of the leaders of the respective parties their share of the spoils."

If the Roman history seems a bit much, consider that President Harrison's speech was about an hour shorter than intended, thanks to Daniel Webster, who dissuaded the new Chief Executive from submitting the citizenry to a legion-by-legion account of the Roman armies. What Harrison's inaugural nevertheless reveals is how intensely earlier generations of American politicians took to heart the lessons of the Roman Republic.

You can get a taste of what this fascination must

have been like if you follow the oratory of Sen. Robert Byrd (D-WVa.), for whom any amendment, procedural vote, appropriations debate, or quorum call is a dandy excuse to expound on ancient history. For example, during a 1999 House-Senate conference, Byrd instructed dazed listeners on the triumph of Scipio Africanus over Hannibal in 202 B.C., bolstering his case for loan guarantees for the steel industry with highlights from the life of Emperor Majorian. Sadly, neither the majority of today's politicians, nor the bulk of its journalists, has anything like the knowledge of Roman history that any educated citizen would have possessed a century ago. (My own knowledge comes in more

or less equal measure from *Gladiator*, *Spartacus*, *Ben-Hur*, and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.)

So it is that in our time, the name Cicero is more likely to evoke an Illinois community noted for its laid-back approach to matters of public probity than one of the most influential voices of the last 2,000 years. It is the goal of first-time author Anthony Everitt to rescue Marcus Tullius Cicero from his recent descent into obscurity, and to celebrate the great Roman politician and orator who has become "an unknowing architect of constitutions that still govern our lives," and whose oratorical style "can be heard in the speeches of Thomas Jefferson and William Pitt (not to mention Abraham Lincoln and, only half a century ago, Winston Churchill.)"



CICERO:
The Life and Times of Rome's
Greatest Politician
by Anthony Everitt
Random House, \$25.95

JEFF GREENFIELD is a CNN senior analyst. His books include *The People's Choice* and *Oh, Waiter! One Order of Crow! Inside the Strangest Presidential Election Finish in American History*.

Everitt has his work cut out for him. He seeks to encapsulate some 65 years of Roman history during which the Republic buckled and ultimately collapsed under the weight of economic crises, plots and counterplots, civil wars, and successive generations of military men who held the republican form of government in minimum high regard. He also aims to give as rich a glimpse as possible into the life and thinking of Cicero—a task considerably aided by the fact that Cicero's lifelong correspondence with his friend Atticus has survived the ages. Moreover, Everitt seeks to show “how unrecognizably different a world the Roman Republic was from ours,” but also that “the motives of human behavior do not change.”

He succeeds admirably on the latter mission; reading this book is a dispiriting lesson in the eternal power of pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed, and sloth. But this success comes at a price: Far from kindling an admiration for Cicero as the noblest Roman of them all, Everitt succeeds—unwittingly, I suspect—in painting a vivid portrait of a vain, temporizing figure of towering self-importance, whose hunger for flattery and position undermined his professed goals for the republic and ultimately cost him his life.

Politics of Personal Destruction

From his earliest days (he was born in 106 B.C.), Cicero was determined to make his mark as a public figure. For someone outside the Roman aristocracy who was by nature unsuited for a military career—he was, in fact, something of a physical coward—that meant a career as an advocate, a lawyer, where success in pleading the case of a litigant led to a measure of fame and a foothold on the ladder to political power. For Cicero, the “main chance” came in 80 B.C., when he defended Sextus Roscius on a charge of murdering his father—almost certainly a frame-up concocted by the real killers. His defense consisted in large measure of a sustained attack on the character of one of the complainants:

He comes down from his mansion on the Palatine Hill. For his enjoyment, he owns a delightful country place in the suburbs as well as some fine farms close to the city. His home is crammed with costly gold, silver and copper Corinthian and Delian dishes ... And just look at the man himself you see

how, with his elegantly styled hair, and reeking of perfume, he floats around the Forum you see how superior he feels himself to be to everything else, that he alone is wealthy and powerful.

Clearly, Cicero did not need Bob Novak or *The Wall Street Journal* editorial page to know a little something about class warfare.

Indeed, along with actual assassination, character assassination was part and parcel of Roman politics.

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Accusations of promiscuity, drunkenness, and homosexuality were commonplace (and, if the surviving rhetoric of the times is to be believed, “family values” had a very different meaning back then). When it came to such charges, Cicero was both accused and accuser. In one of his famous “Philippics” attacking Mark Antony, he said, “You assumed a man’s toga and at once turned it into a prostitute’s frock. At first you were a common rent boy; you charged a fixed fee, and a steep one at that.” So much for the lamentations bemoaning the loss of civility in our coarser times.

Beyond the personal assaults lay a far more serious matter, one that would drive Cicero’s entire public life: how to achieve a stable, just republic. In Cicero’s view, a harmonious state was much like a concert. “A state is made harmonious,” he argued, “by agreement among dissimilar elements. This is brought about by a fair and reasonable bleeding of the upper, middle, and lower classes, just as if they were musical tones.” It was this approach that made Cicero such an important figure so many centuries after his time. This notion echoes in the theories of John Locke and other Enlightenment figures, and also in the American Founding Fathers’ struggle to shape a government of checks and balances. But in his own time, as seen through Everitt’s capsule history, Cicero’s vision seems like the hopeless fantasy of an Esperanto enthusiast.

At root, there were no effective checks and balances in ancient Rome—not in reality. Theoretically, the competing interests of the upper and lower classes reached a kind of equilibrium through an

array of forces: the Senate and the assembly; tribune and praetor; consuls who governed for one year only. But in reality, Everitt tells us, mob rule was commonplace, and new rulers consistently cancelled the edicts of older ones, often bringing criminal indictments that reached back years, even decades. Ambitious politicians spent fortunes to win approval through gaudy theatrics and gladiatorial displays, while subsidizing grain to support the lower classes

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(the famous “bread and circuses” some of us may dimly remember from high school civics).

Indeed, much of Cicero’s public life appears to have been spent imitating King Canute, seeking to roll back the tide of disorder by preaching the virtues of Republican rule. He apparently succeeded, during his tenure as Consul in 63 B.C., in defeating a conspiracy to overthrow the republic. But when later challenges emerged in the form of Pompey and Caesar, Cicero found himself trapped between his hunger for approval and political influence and his principles. His ultimate refusal to join the First Tri-

umvirate forced him into exile. Fifteen years later, when Caesar’s adoptive son Octavian joined forces with Mark Antony to uproot the last vestiges of the republic, Cicero’s rhetorical attacks on Antony led to his state-sanctioned murder.

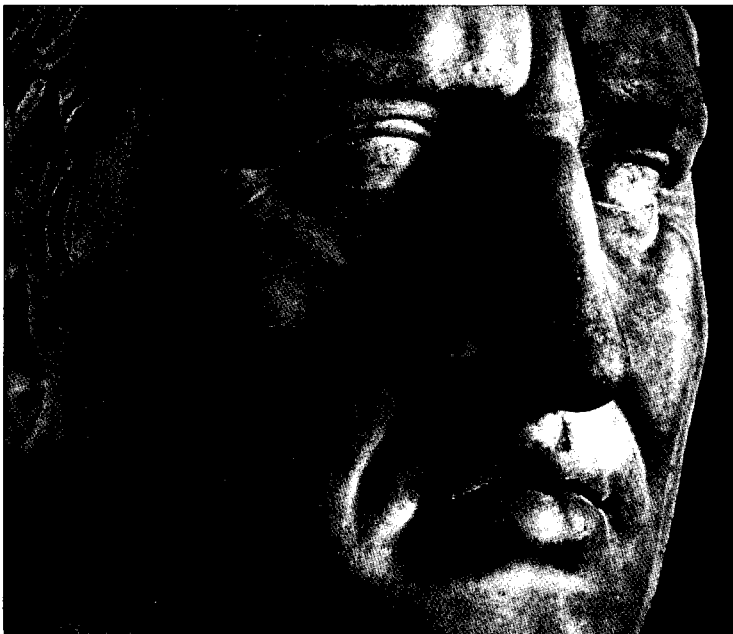
An Ancient Echo

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Everitt’s account is how unappealing a portrait Cicero paints of himself. He apparently wrote numerous accounts of how utterly splendid his one-year reign as Consul had been, driving his contemporaries to distraction. His letters to

Atticus and others reveal how dazzled he believed others to be by his wit and wisdom. “I recalled the weak and weary Senate to its old traditional vigor,” he once boasted. “That day, my energy and the course I took brought to the Roman people the first hope of recovering their freedom.” (Today, a “close aide” to Cicero would leak such a judgment to Bob Woodward.)

Moreover, Cicero could not control his mouth (or his pen). Again and again, he was unable to resist the clever jibe, aimed at foe or friend. His fate may, in fact, have been sealed when Octavian got wind of a nasty crack aimed at him by his supposed ally Cicero, thus making him less inclined to veto Mark Antony’s death sentence against him. Had C-SPAN and its ubiquitous boom mikes covered Roman politics, no doubt Cicero wouldn’t have lasted a week.

Cicero’s human failings point us to a greater failure of insight—and to his lasting achievement. Cicero believed that the republic could only be saved by better men, imbued with the virtues of prudence, restraint, and loyalty to Republican ways. The utter disaster of such wishful thinking prompted leaders, nearly 2,000 years later, to look to a different answer: to mechanisms that would recognize that “men are not angels” and restrain power despite human nature’s worst instincts. Taking Cicero’s words to heart, they forged a republic that, so far, has proved impossible for a Caesar to destroy. ●



Political Booknotes

Embarrassment of Riches

By Bruce Reed

IF KARL MARX HAD WANTED TO lay the groundwork for class uprising, he could hardly have done a better job than George W. Bush. First, take power in a disputed election, then move quickly to give the very rich a big tax cut. Raid the Social Security Trust Fund so multimillionaires can keep their trust funds. Look the other way while Enron executives make a bundle driving their company into the ground while swindling workers out of their jobs and pensions.

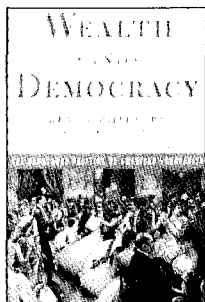
But a funny thing happened on the way to the class war: The rich won, and the rest of the country hardly noticed. If the masses are about to storm the gates, they forgot to tell their representatives in Congress. This month, the Senate will decide whether to make permanent the repeal of the estate tax, and Republicans are just a few votes short. The man for our times is Gatsby, not Marx. In the words of that great compassionate conservative, the Duchess of Windsor, "You can never be too rich or too thin."

Not every Republican likes the way the GOP is leaning. Back in 1969, a young Nixon strategist named Kevin Phillips wrote *The Emerging Republican Majority*, which presaged two decades of conservative dominance. Phillips has been trying to make Republicans class-conscious ever since. In 1990, he wrote *The Politics of Rich and Poor*, a populist call to arms that Democrats gleefully used to skewer the elder George Bush.

Twelve years later, Phillips still can't seem to follow the White House talking points. His new book, *Wealth and Democracy*, is a history of the silver spoon that predicts Republican greed will be America's downfall. When it

comes to doing the greatest good for the fewest number, he writes, "The world has no other political party with anything like the same record over the last century and a half."

Phillips is a big believer in political cycles, since he made his career predicting one. He sees American history as one long cycle of boom and reform, alternating between "the avid businessman's pursuit and the populist complaint." When the economy swells, the rich grab as much as they can; when it goes south, the little guys rise up to take something back. The rich get richer, and the poor get Democrats.



WEALTH AND DEMOCRACY:
A Political History of the
American Rich
by Kevin Phillips
Broadway Books, \$29.95

History does repeat itself in interesting ways. A century ago, when Senators were chosen by legislatures owned and operated by powerful interests, there were 25 millionaires in the Senate. Thanks to the 17th Amendment, our Constitution now provides for the direct election of millionaires, and today's Senate has 20.

In 1921, and again in 2001, Republicans put outspoken, wealthy Pittsburgh industrialists in charge of the Treasury and used budget surpluses as an excuse to slash taxes for the rich. Harding's Treasury Secretary, Andrew Mellon, said the estate tax must be cut or it would end the concept of private property within a couple of generations. Paul O'Neill, his modern counterpart, believes the Bush tax cuts haven't gone far enough, and he wants to abolish the corporate income tax next.

Phillips points out that the political debate between liberals and conservatives hasn't changed much in the last 100 years. He cites William Jennings Bryan's 1896 critique of supply-side economics: "There are those who believe that, if you will only legislate to make the well-to-do prosperous, their prosperity will leak through on those below. The Democratic idea, however, has been that if you legislate to make the masses prosperous, their prosperity will find its way up

through every class which rests above them."

Nor is the Bush crowd the first to dress up private greed as civic virtue. Every boom produces its own cheerleaders who defend the concentration of wealth as an inevitable force of human nature. Phillips finds a Reagan-era report crediting six of the seven deadly sins for producing the modern economy—and that's not counting all the television and fast-food fortunes that have sloth to thank. Phillips's most important insight is revealing the central flaw in conservative mythology: wealth is not a value.

Phillips loses his way at times in suggesting that, like the Spanish, Dutch, and British empires before it, the United States is poised on the brink of collapse, "purple-veined with years of high living, lips curled with the insolence of great wealth." But he is right that current Republican priorities are out of whack. When a president can promise a "new war on poverty" one day and a \$1.6 trillion tax cut for the wealthy the next, as Bush did last year, no wonder the rich will always be with us.

Phillips believes the United States is ripe for another historical correction. "As the 21st century gets under way, the imbalance of wealth and democracy in the U.S. is unsustainable," he writes. CEOs make 419 times as much as the average worker, and CEO pay is rising five times faster than profits. Payroll taxes mean working people don't take home much more than 20 years ago. Bill Gates's fortune is 14 million times larger than the median family income.

With so much wealth in so few hands, the question is: Why is Kevin Phillips the only one angry? He looks in vain for signs of a populist backlash in Ralph Nader's limp 2000 challenge and the globalization protests in Seattle. He insists that while populism became "passé" in the '90s, and scarcer still after September 11, the silent majority has always taken its time before erupting.

But the real reason most Americans don't share Phillips's seething anger is that we've long considered ourselves a classless society, in good times and bad. We don't resent the rich. We buy Powerball tickets, read *Fortune*, and thrill to celebrity gossip because we'd like to hit pay dirt ourselves someday. Phillips