

Words as Weapons:
Political Rhetoric as Violence in the Roman Republic and the Modern United States

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ABSTRACT

Marcus Tullius Cicero was one of Rome's most prolific orators and politicians. His speeches have stood the test of time for their rhetorical expertise and detailed insights into Roman politics. Cicero often employed aggressive rhetoric when speaking about his political opponents to better make his point. This violent rhetoric justified harm and demonized his opponents, turning politicians in different political parties into enemies of the state as a whole.

We will look at two speeches in which Cicero uses violent political rhetoric. First, his first oration against Catiline regarding the Catilinarian Conspiracy will show us how Cicero's words resulted in the exile of a supposed traitor, despite Catiline not receiving due process for this accusation. Second, we will analyze the *Pro Milone*, Cicero's defense of Titus Annius Milo. In this speech, we will see how Cicero justifies the murder of Publius Clodius Pulcher and characterizes him as an enemy of the state.

Using violent rhetoric to attack political opponents like Cicero did is a tactic that has been becoming more common in recent American politics. Over the last decade, violent political rhetoric has increased in usage between both Democrats and Republicans. In some cases, it has even incited physical violence against the government. We will analyze these parallels and the effect that violent rhetoric has on the functioning of democracy.

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INTRODUCTION

Few figures in the ancient world had a command over rhetoric the way Marcus Tullius Cicero did. As an orator and politician, Cicero set himself apart from his peers with his words and how he used them to shape Rome's legal and political landscape in the first century BC. In his speeches, Cicero used passionate and aggressive rhetoric to persuade his jury—rhetoric that in some places turned violent. This use of violent rhetoric, particularly against political opponents, was a cornerstone of some of Cicero's later speeches. How he demonized political enemies and the acceptance of this violent rhetoric contributed to the degrading Roman Republic and was a symptom of a state headed for collapse.

Cicero's Rhetorical Education

What made Cicero such a unique orator in the first century BC was in part due to the education he received as a boy. He was educated in Greek, which he preferred because the language "supplies a greater opportunity for stylistic ornamentation," and provided him with an innovative approach to rhetoric.¹ Using his Greek training in persuasion and blending it with the Roman tradition of using morality and emotion, Cicero created a personal, unique form of legal oratory.² This blend helped launch his career as a legal advocate and brought him into the public eye for his eventual political fame.

Speech Selections

This research project seeks to analyze the violent rhetoric that Cicero uses in two of his speeches and demonstrate parallel rhetoric in current American politics to better understand how

¹ A. Corbeill, 'Rhetorical Education in Cicero's Youth', in: J. M. May (ed.) Brill's Companion to Cicero: Oratory and Rhetoric (Leiden, 2002). p. 29

² A. Corbeill. p. 45

violent rhetoric can contribute to the dysfunction of a republic. Through the first oration against Catiline and the *Pro Milone*, we will see Cicero's response to the Catilinarian Conspiracy and the actions of his political opponents.

The first speech is a political diatribe against Catiline delivered before the senate about Catiline's supposed actions of treason against Cicero.³ We will focus on the specific aspects that demonize Catiline and how he uses rhetoric to ostracize him. The second speech is a legal defense of Cicero's colleague who was accused of murdering a political opponent.⁴ In both of these orations, Cicero uses rhetoric to classify his opponents as enemies of the state that the audience needs to protect themselves from. He doesn't leave room for civil disagreements.

Cicero's expert use of rhetoric classifies his political opponents as enemies of the state and urges his respective audiences to think the same. Scholars agree that "Cicero possesses legendary talent for launching invective assaults on his opponents," and that this use of rhetoric resulted in a reclassification of who his political opponents were to Rome and increased the severity of the threat they posed.⁵

Modern Parallels

Looking at the 21st century, we can see echoes of similar violent political rhetoric from our own politicians. Despite 70% of Americans agreeing that elected officials should avoid

³ Cicero, Archibald A. Maclardy, and LeaAnn A. Osburn. *Completely parsed Cicero: The first oration of Cicero against Catiline*. Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2004.

⁴ Cicero, Marcus Tullius., and D. H. Berry. *Defence Speeches*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

⁵ Gildenhard, Ingo. *Creative eloquence: The construction of reality in Cicero's speeches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

violent rhetoric, threats against politicians have increased substantially over the last five years.^{6,7} In some cases, this kind of rhetoric has resulted in actual violent attacks. We will look at the speech from former president Donald Trump that was delivered prior to the Capitol attack on January 6th, as well as some other of his inflammatory statements against political opponents. Then, we will look at patterns of aggression and incivility from Democratic politicians and how they communicate with their audience. Using Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's theories from *How Democracies Die*, we will see how increased political tensions fueled by violent rhetoric and the normalization of hostile disagreements are contributing to the degradation of our own democracy—and what we can do to save it.

⁶ Green, Ted Van. "Most Americans Say Elected Officials Should Avoid Heated or Aggressive Speech." Pew Research Center, January 31, 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/01/31/most-americans-say-elected-officials-should-avoid-heated-or-aggressive-speech/>.

⁷ Kuznia, Rob, Majlie de Puy Kamp, Alex Leeds Matthews, Kyung Lah, Anna-Maja Rappard, and Yahya Abou-Ghazala. "A Deluge of Violent Messages: How a Surge in Threats to Public Officials Could Disrupt American Democracy | CNN Politics." CNN, December 8, 2023. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/07/politics/threats-us-public-officials-democracy-invs/index.html>.

CHAPTER ONE: AGAINST CATILINE

Cicero's first speech against Lucius Sergius Catilina in 63 BC was a particularly volatile one. The public defamation roused an already apprehensive audience to genuine fear of Catiline. Cicero's words were just as good as weapons in forcing his political opponent from the senate and away from Rome. Before discussing how he accomplished this, we must first understand what caused such heated political tensions between the two men.

Much of what we know about Catiline comes from Cicero's aggressive orations against him, painting a particularly biased portrait of the Roman politician. However, a recounting of the war against Catiline by the Roman historian and politician Gaius Sallustius Crispus has also survived, which has allowed historians to consider another version of Catiline. Sallust's history provides a slightly more neutral account of what has become known as the Catilinarian Conspiracy, the events that led to Cicero's harsh words on the Senate floor. His monograph was likely written a little over a decade after the events and is believed to take some creative liberties with the timeline—although none too substantial to discount his version of the events.⁸ Scholars, like Ann Thomas Wilkins in her dissertation on Sallust's portrayal of Catiline, note that the author seems less concerned with historical accuracy than with illustrating the antitheses between Catiline and his opponents and making commentary on political morality.⁹ Furthermore, as it was written retrospectively, Sallust likely used Cicero's orations as inspiration for his own work, making it likely that it too is steeped in bias. However, Cicero does not play a major role in Sallust's telling of these events. What that says about the historian's opinions on the orator is up

⁸ Wilkins, Ann Thomas. 1990. "Sallust's Portrayal of Catiline." University of Pittsburgh. pp. 6-7

⁹ Wilkins. p. 29

for debate. Still, Sallust's account is an important piece of context for historians to better understand Cicero's words and how the public may have interpreted them.

Sallust tells us that Catiline was a political radical who was supported vehemently by the plebeian class.¹⁰ Catiline sought the consulship in 66 BC but was prevented from running due to a charge of extortion against him.¹¹ Although Sallust does mirror Cicero's characterization of Catiline as a dangerously power-hungry individual through his tangent about Catiline's participation in an early potential coup, the historian offers us a speech from Catiline himself regarding his political intentions.¹² Allegedly, Catiline delivered a speech about his grievances with the current political leadership in Rome, showing distaste for the opulent habits of consuls and arguing that each administration takes more from the lower classes.¹³ He bases his political platform on remedying these disparities and being an advocate for Rome's poorer citizens—sentiments that earned him popularity with the plebeians. In preparation for the next election, Catiline promised his supporters changes like debt removal and proscription of the wealthy, leading a campaign that distinctly opposed the prevailing tradition of leadership.

Catiline lost the election to Cicero and Gaius Antonius Hybrida, a blow that did not curb his fervor for political influence. As Sallust tells us, Catiline continued to promulgate his agenda and gain supporters who were sympathetic to his ideas on the Roman government. With Cicero in power, he became a natural target for Catiline's anger. Upon learning about Catiline's swelling opposition against him, Cicero opted to increase security on the Senate floor and caution the general public about growing political unrest.¹⁴ Sallust tells us that this caused Romans to be wary about the state and created a cloud of anxiety over the city.

¹⁰ Crispus, Sallustius Gaius, and J. T. Ramsey. *Sallust's Bellum Catilinae*. Second Editioned. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007. p. 35

¹¹ Crispus, Sallustius Gaius, and J. T. Ramsey. p. 33

¹² Crispus, Sallustius Gaius, and J. T. Ramsey. pp. 34-35

¹³ Crispus, Sallustius Gaius, and J. T. Ramsey. p. 34

¹⁴ Crispus, Sallustius Gaius, and J. T. Ramsey. pp. 37-38

Although suspicions were rising against Catiline, he was undeterred from making an appearance at the Senate. His arrival and lack of acknowledgment of the opinions against him set the stage for Cicero's first tirade against Catiline. Cicero used his platform to publicly characterize Catiline's political intentions as a violent conspiracy, swaying the narrative in his favor and using his words like weaponry against his opponent.

Cicero delivered his first oration against Catiline in early November, 63 BC. Cicero had summoned the senate to meet in the Temple of Jupiter Stator, a meeting which Catiline attended.¹⁵ His appearance came amid allegations of conspiracy against Cicero. A woman named Fulvia, mistress to one of Catiline's allies, had reported to the orator that Catiline had orchestrated a meeting to plan Cicero's murder just a night or two earlier. Despite this treasonous charge, Catiline joined the Senate meeting undeterred. This spurred Cicero's aggressive remarks toward Catiline, urging the man to enter into voluntary exile and cease his connections with the Roman state.

In his first oration against Catiline, Cicero's argument can be parsed into three separate sections. In the first, Cicero decries Catiline's audacity for making a public appearance and proclaims that he should have been executed already. The second section contains the majority of the speech, where Cicero lays out how Rome would benefit from Catiline's voluntary exile, and how if Catiline wants to find any allies, he would have to leave Rome to do so. In the final part, Cicero appeals to the rest of the Senate by classifying Catiline as unpatriotic and praying to

¹⁵ Cicero, Archibald A. Maclardy, and LeaAnn A. Osburn. *Completely parsed Cicero: The first oration of Cicero against Catiline*. Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2004. p. xi

Jupiter Stator for protection from Catiline and his conspirators. We will look at the language Cicero uses in each section one at a time.

In the introduction of the speech, Cicero poses a number of rhetorical questions to convey his outrage toward Catiline's appearance.¹⁶

Ō tempora, ō mōrēs! Senātus haec intellegit, cōnsul videt: hīc tamen vīvit. Vīvit? Immō vērō etiam in senātum venit, fit pūblicī cōnsiliī particeps, **notat et dēsīgnat oculis ad caedem ūnum quemque nostrum**. Nōs autem, fortēs viri, satis facere reī pūblicae vidēmur, sī istīus furōrem ac tēla vītēmus. **Ad mortem tē, Catilīna, dūcī iussū cōsulis iam prīdem oportēbat, in tē cōferrī pestem istam, quam tū in nōs māchināris.**¹⁷

O the times, O the customs! The Senate understands these things, the consul sees: Nevertheless, that man lives. Not only this,¹⁸ but he comes even into the senate, he takes part in the plans of public officers, **he observes and marks each one of us with his eyes for slaughter**. We, however, brave men think we do enough for the state if we avoid the madness and the weapons of that man. **To death, Catiline, it behooved you to have been led already by order of the consul some time ago, that ruin which you are contriving against us to be brought against you.**¹⁹

¹⁶ Maclardy p. 1

¹⁷ Maclardy, chapter I, lines 19-28

¹⁸ According to Maclardy, *immō* is an adverb used to correct and emphasize a previous remark.

¹⁹ Translation by Maclardy pp. 13-21, with some of my own modifications

Right at the beginning of this address, Cicero characterizes Catiline as a malicious figure. He questions why Catiline still lives, blaming current trends for why Catiline has not yet been prosecuted. The repetition of *vivīit* in line 19 highlights the orator's disbelief and further ostracizes Catiline from the senate affairs he is there to participate in. In this section of the speech, Cicero attempts to raise suspicions about Catiline's appearance to ostracize him. By claiming that he is actively "observing and marking" the men of the senate for "slaughter," Cicero is creating a stark separation between the senators and Catiline. This separation is also exemplified in his juxtaposition of "we" as "brave men," and Catiline as "that" man.²⁰ Cicero then tells his audience that Catiline should have been executed already. Because he is already plotting to kill Cicero and other senators, Cicero argues, it is fair in the eyes of the law for him to be executed.

In this beginning section, Cicero blends pathos and logos in an attempt to sway the other senate members of his opinions of Catiline early in the address. The emotional appeal comes from the incredulous realization that Catiline is still alive as well as the use of violent words like "slaughter" and "weapons" relating to Catiline. To break up the emotion, Cicero references previous decisions by the Senate where men were executed, implying that if the senators were to follow precedent, Catiline logically should also be killed.²¹ After citing these examples, Cicero says to him "By the authority of this decree, you, Catiline, might have been very properly put to death on the instant."²²

The start of this speech is intense—and purposefully so, as Cicero's real request comes in the second section and seems a bit more reasonable than the aforementioned executions. In the

²⁰ *Istīus* holds an implied negative connotation. "Here is used with its acquired forensic implication of scorn," (Maclardy p. 19)

²¹ "Before a single night passed, some suspicion of treasonable disaffection brought his death upon Gaius Gracchus...and Marcus Fulvius, an ex-consul, was killed, and his children with him." Maclardy, pp. 32-34

²² Translation by Maclardy, pp. 40-41

second section of Cicero's first oration against Catiline, Cicero urges the man to flee Rome and seek voluntary exile, arguing that he would never again have any support in the walls of Rome. By placing these demands after calling for Catiline's execution, Cicero makes exile seem like the more favorable option and what the senate has agreed upon.

Quae cum ita sint, Catilīna, dubitās, sī ēmorī aequō animō nōn potes, abīre in aliquās terrās et vītā istam multīs suppliciīs iūstīs dēbitīsque ēreptam fugae sōlitudinīque mandāre? "Refer" inquis "ad senātum"; id enim postulās et, sī hīc ōrdō sibi placēre dēcrēverit tē īre in exsilium, optemperātūrum tē esse dīcis. Nōn referam, id quod abhorret ā meīs moribus, et tamen faciam, ut intellegās, quid hī dē tē sentiant. **Ēgredere ex urbe, Catilīna, liberā rem pūblicam metū; in exsilium, sī hanc vōcem exspectās, proficīscere. Quid est, Catilīna? ecquid attendis, ecquid animadvertis hōrum silentium? Patiuntur, tacent.** Quid exspectās auctōritātem loquentium, quōrum voluntātem tacitōrum perspicias?²³

Since these things²⁴ are so, Catiline, if you are not able to die with a calm mind, do you hesitate to go away to other lands and commit [your] life, having been snatched from just and due punishments, to flight and solitude? "Refer it" you say "to the senate;" for that is what you demand, and, if this order²⁵ shall decree that it seems good that you should go into exile, you say you will comply. I will not refer it, as such a thing is adverse from my character, nevertheless, I will make do so that you may understand what these men feel about you. **Go out from the city, Catiline, free the state from fear; Depart into exile,**

²³ Maclardy, chapter VIII, lines 24-44

²⁴ Cicero has just explained how Catiline was conspiring against him.

²⁵ Order meaning the senate.

if this is the word you await. What is it, Catiline? Do you listen at all, do you observe at all the silence of these men? They permit [it], they are silent. Why do you wait for a command of speaking from whom you perceive their silent desire?²⁶

In this section, we see how Cicero frames exile as the alternative to execution. He continues his attempts to separate Catiline from the rest of the senate by characterizing their silence as agreement with Cicero. In this section, it seems that Catiline has previously indicated that he would leave if that is what was decreed. Cicero exploits this by saying that it does not need to be formally decreed—no senator has stood up for Catiline during this speech thus far, so it follows that no senator disagrees with Cicero. The transition between Cicero telling Catiline that he will interpret the opinions of the other senators into an imperative command for his exile is Cicero assuming the voice of the assembly. He takes on the persona of the entire senate to drive home his goal: convincing Catiline that he will find no allies in Rome.

Cicero ends his first oration against Catiline with a prayer to Jupiter Stator, protector of Rome, to oust Catiline and any of his lingering allies from the city. Cicero appeals to the higher power to signal that Catiline's intentions are dangerous enough to warrant divine intervention.

Tū, Iuppiter, quī īsdem quibus haec urbs auspiciīs ā Rōmulō es cōstitūtus, quem Statōrem hūius urbis atque imperī vērē nōmināmus, hunc et hūius sociōs ā tuīs [ārīs] cēterisque templīs, ā tēctīs urbis ac moenibus, ā vītā fortūnisque cīvium omnium arcēbis

²⁶ Translation by Maclardy pp. 157-165, with some of my own modifications

et hominēs bonōrum inimicōs, hostēs patriae, latrōnēs Ītaliae scelerum foedere intersē ac nefariā societāte coniūctōs aeternīs suppliciīs vīvōs mortuōsque mactābis.²⁷

Thou, Jupiter, who were established by Romulus with the same auspices of which established this city, whom we truly name the Protector of the city and this empire, will keep distant this man and his allies from thy own altars and all other temples, from the houses of the city and the walls, from the life and the fortunes of the people; **and these men, who are the enemies of loyal citizens, the foes of our fatherland, the robbers of Italy, who are leagued by a covenant of crimes and an abominable alliance amongst themselves, you will destroy, living and dead, with eternal punishments.**²⁸

The appeal to Jupiter provides a clear avenue for Cicero to summarize why he believes Catiline to be such a danger, how his actions will harm all of Rome, and allows Cicero to solidify his patriotism and piety all at once. By acknowledging Jupiter Stator as the protector of the city established by Romulus, Cicero is evoking a sense of deep history and duty. He is calling upon a divine authority in the matter, making Jupiter complicit in the demonization of Catiline. This speech takes place at the god's temple, making this evocation all the more relevant. Using the credibility established by the god, Cicero asks that Catiline and all those like him be expelled from the city for the betterment of Rome. Cicero groups Catiline in with robbers, conspirators, and generally bad men to make his point. This final characterization solidifies Cicero's separation of himself and the senate as the patriotic, pious good and Catiline and his allies as the nefarious villains.

²⁷ Maclardy, chapter XIII lines 44-55

²⁸ Translation assisted by Maclardy pp. 246-250

Before this address, Catiline's supposed conspiracy was only rumor and hearsay. By announcing to the senate these allegations, Cicero's story becomes the first account of the events, and his position of political authority makes him more credible. In this particular speech, Cicero continuously characterizes Catiline as an outsider—an outsider to the senate, an outsider to the city, and an outsider to Roman values. Leaning into this separation is an effective way to ruin his credibility. Senators likely will not want to be conflated with anti-Roman ideals which will make them not inclined to defend Catiline. Even if they aren't willing to execute him, Cicero's public address has made it suspicious to even confer with Catiline, effectively cutting him off from other Roman politicians.

This public ostracization of a political opponent takes Cicero and Catiline's rivalry to a new level. No longer is Catiline simply an opposing party, but rather this speech damns him as a traitor in the public eye and does indeed force him to flee the city. Appealing to fellow senators under the guise of patriotism by describing Catiline as an immediate danger to the city that needs to be purged leaves little room for Catiline to defend himself and his actions. It places Catiline in an impossible position; if he stays in the city, he risks retaliation from Cicero or other senators because of the allegations of treason, but if he flees, it could be interpreted as the actions of a guilty man. Whether or not Catiline *was* plotting to murder Cicero is no longer in question, Cicero's public address has all but taken Catiline's guilt out of contention. In this way, Cicero has used his platform as consul and his skills as an orator to damn his political opponent without a fair evaluation of whether or not Catiline was indeed a traitor.

CHAPTER TWO: PRO MILONE

Cicero uses his words to justify violence against political opponents notably in his defense of Milo in 52 BC. The murder of Publius Clodius Pulcher was fraught with political implications, which made the *Pro Milone* both a legal defense and a public platform for Cicero to promote his political beliefs. Cicero takes the opportunity to spin rhetoric in a way that aligns with how he believed the Roman state should be governed, while simultaneously attempting to protect one of his closest allies.

The context that surrounds the *Pro Milone* is a rich one that was the product of deep political rivalries. Titus Annius Milo and Publius Clodius Pulcher were staunch enemies, set at odds because of Milo's friendship with Cicero and Clodius' involvement in forcing Cicero into exile. In 58 BC, during his reign as Tribune of the Plebs, Clodius promoted a law that penalized any person who had executed a Roman citizen without due process, a rule that was to be applied retroactively.²⁹ This directly targeted Cicero, who, during his consulship in 69 BC, had pushed for the execution of several Romans believed to be conspiring against the government. The passage of Clodius' law resulted in Cicero leaving Rome for an eighteen-month voluntary exile.

Milo, who was a political ally and personal friend to Cicero, did not take Clodius' actions lightly. After being elected Tribune of the Plebs in the year following Clodius, Milo worked to undo Clodius' work and bring Cicero back from exile.³⁰ This pitted the two men against each other both personally and politically, with Milo being a staunch optimate and Clodius strongly supporting the Roman populists. It's important to note, however, that these differing political factions do not align with our modern understanding of political parties. The main disagreement

²⁹ Gordon, 226

³⁰ Cicero, Marcus Tullius., and D. H. Berry. p. 172

between optimates and populists were regarding how a man came to power, less so about what they did with their position once they were elected. However, this disagreement still fostered political opponents, like Clodius and Milo.

This rivalry came to a head in 52 BC when both men were on the Roman ballot. Milo was running for the consulship while Clodius sought to be praetor. Clodius was also campaigning against Milo as consul because if Milo were to win, he could override any decision Clodius made as praetor.³¹ The elections had been continuously drawn out, and tensions between the two men and their supporters were high—a combination with deadly consequences. In January, as it is recounted to us by the Roman historian Asconius, Milo was traveling from Rome when he encountered Clodius on his way back to the city. The two men were both accompanied by others, Clodius with “thirty slaves, unencumbered and armed with swords” and Milo with his wife and “a large column of slaves and also some gladiators.”³² As Asconius tells us, one of the gladiators that Milo was traveling with struck Clodius with a spear and wounded him.

Whether it was the result of that injury or the result of Milo seeing an opportunity to be rid of a political opponent, what happened next is what set the scene for Cicero’s speech to defend Milo. Asconius speculates that Milo knew that an injured Clodius could be detrimental to his campaign if he were to return to Rome—and he also knew that his path to power would be simpler with Clodius out of the picture.

This, he assumes, is what motivates Milo to order his men to kill Clodius.

When the wounded body was found on the road and returned to Rome, eyes turned to Milo. He defended himself initially by claiming that Clodius had laid a trap for him and his party

³¹ Cicero, Marcus Tullius., and D. H. Berry p. 172

³² Cicero, Marcus Tullius., and D. H. Berry p. 173

and that the killing was done in self-defense. Milo's trial was held in April, months after the killing and months after public opinion began to stew about Milo's role in the murder. It was tried in a special court that was equipped to handle the especially volatile fallout surrounding the death of Clodius. Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, who had been made sole consul during the proceedings, mandated that the witnesses and their cross-examinations come before the speeches and admissions regarding the character of each party were banned.³³ This forced advocates to rely on the small amount of tangible evidence available and made them adjust their arguments as testimony occurred in court and the audience responded to it.

Putting his nearly perfect defense record on the line, Cicero agreed to defend the man who brought him back from exile.³⁴ His argument was twofold, first capitalizing off the self-defense claims from Milo himself and spinning the story to fit the narrative of Milo as the victim. In the second argument, and the arguably more interesting approach to defense, Cicero appeals to the audience's negative feelings toward Clodius by arguing that even if Milo did set out to intentionally kill Clodius, he should not be prosecuted because the Roman state is better for not having to endure his leadership.

This trial was a losing battle. The public rivalry paired with the surmounting evidence against Milo's intentions painted a violent picture, which forced Cicero to be particularly crafty with his rhetoric in order to give Milo the best chance at public approval—or at least acceptance.

Cicero delivered his defense in early April of 52 BC. It's a lengthy diatribe on the valor of Milo defeating the dastardly intentions of Clodius, sprinkled with legal references and

³³ Sillett, Andrew. "Indefensible Oratory." *Cicero the Orator Lectures*, 22 February 2023, Ioannou Centre, Oxford University

³⁴ Melchior, Aislinn. "Twinned Fortunes and the Publication of Cicero's Pro Milone." *Classical Philology* 103, no. 3 (2008): 283. <https://doi.org/10.1086/596518>.

political allusions. The first two-thirds of the defense is dedicated to clarifying the legality of killing in self-defense. In line 9, Cicero reminds the jury that violence for self-defense's sake is sometimes necessary and justified.³⁵ He references a prior case of a soldier killing another in response to sexual assault, saying that the murder was necessary to protect himself. "...How could the killing of such a person not be justified?" Cicero asks his jury. "After all, what is the point of our bodyguards, our swords? If their use was forbidden in all circumstances, we would surely not be allowed to have them in the first place."³⁶ He sets up the acceptability of self-defense early in this speech to set the tone for the rest of his defense of Milo's actions.

At the heart of the case, as Cicero argues, guilt lies with the person who set the trap on the Appian Way.³⁷ It's the jury's burden to answer this question. By getting the jury on board with the idea of self-preservation, Cicero has an easier time laying out his version of the facts of the case, which boils down to the idea that Clodius set a trap to kill Milo, but Milo bested him in the end.³⁸

To prove his version of events, Cicero then attempts to discern Clodius's motive for attempting to kill Milo. He does this by comparing the two men directly, characterizing Milo as a loyal, selfless bystander who is the target of a violent conspirator. In this comparison in the middle of the speech, Cicero uses antithesis as a device to starkly distinguish the two men from each other, with Milo definitively falling in the good category and Clodius in the bad.

³⁵ Cicero, Marcus Tullius., and D. H. Berry. *Defence Speeches*. Oxford University Press, 2008. p. 186.

³⁶ Berry p. 186

³⁷ Berry p. 191

³⁸ Berry p. 193

Video adhuc constare, iudices, omnia:—Miloni etiam utile fuisse Clodium vivere, illi ad ea quae concupierat optatissimum interitum Milonis; odium fuisse illius in hunc acerbissimum, nullum huius in illum; **consuetudinem illius perpetuam in vi inferenda, huius tantum in repellenda;** mortem ab illo denuntiatam Miloni et praedicatam palam, nihil umquam auditum ex Milone.

“**Members of the jury, everything points in the same direction.** To Milo, it was even advantageous that Clodius should stay alive, but to Clodius, the death of Milo was highly desirable, since it would help him achieve his ambitions. Clodius had a burning hatred of Milo, but Milo had no hatred of Clodius. **Clodius was well used to initiating violence, but Milo was used only to repelling it.** Clodius had publically announced and proclaimed Milo’s imminent death, but nothing of the kind was ever heard from Milo.”³⁹

Clodius is the brute of the pair, Cicero argues, while Milo keeps to himself. Clodius was hateful, Milo was not. Clodius stood to gain from Milo’s death, but Milo would not benefit from Clodius’s. This use of antithesis is meant to strictly characterize the two men as opposites in an attempt to convince the jury that the only logical answer is that Clodius, the more violent man with a history of violent political ambition, was the one who set the trap. This one-to-one juxtaposition simultaneously uplifts Milo’s credibility to the jury while disparaging Clodius, convincing the audience that Milo is the person to root for in the story, despite admitting to being a murderer. In this antithetical comparison, Milo is the hero and Clodius is the enemy.

This section is an appropriate segue from the conversation on self-defense to one on the character of the two men. By characterizing Clodius as a more violent-tempered figure, it makes

³⁹ Translation from Berry p. 202

more sense as to why Milo would need to fight to preserve himself. If Clodius, who had supposedly been threatening Milo's death before this encounter, did set a trap for the politician, Milo would not have been wrong to retaliate. This is the core of Cicero's legal defense.

However, in the later parts of this speech, Cicero takes his defense of Milo a step further. The orator moves away from distinct comparisons of the two men and into a laundry list of ways in which Clodius was a bad man. He references past misdeeds of Clodius, including a charge of incest, murder, and dishonoring of temples.⁴⁰ He lays out Clodius's corrupt nature, calling him "A man who respected no statute, no law, and no property boundary."⁴¹ Here, Cicero is referencing two past scandals that Clodius may have been involved in, adultery with Julius Caesar's wife in 62 BC at the festival of Bona Dea and his sister's divorce caused by adultery.⁴² These two instances were speculation, and Cicero seems to be extrapolating and expanding on Clodius's poor character from these events. After this tirade, he turns to the members of the jury to make an argument that is more politically charged than legally relevant. He asks them to imagine a world in which Milo is acquitted, but Clodius comes back to life.

Quid voltu extimuiſtis? **quonam modo ille vos vivus adficeret, quos mortuus inani cogitatione percussit?** Quid! ſi ipſe Cn. Pompeius, qui ea virtute ac fortuna eſt ut ea potuerit ſemper quae nemo praeter illum, ſi is, inquam, potuiſſet aut quaestionem de morte P. Clodi ferre aut ipſum ab inferis excitare, atrum putatis potius facturum fuiſſe? Etiam ſi propter amicitiam vellet illum ab inferis evocare, **propter rem publicam**

⁴⁰ Berry p. 211

⁴¹ Berry p. 211

⁴² Berry p. 268

fecisset. Eius igitur mortis sedetis ultores, cuius vitam si putetis per vos restitui posse, nolitis;

“But why are you looking so terrified? **In death, the mere thought of him has severely shaken you—so what effect do you think he would have on you if he were still living?** Let me make another point. If Gnaeus Pompeius himself, whose ability and good fortune have always enabled him to achieve what no one else can, if Pompeius, I repeat, could have a choice between setting up an inquiry into Publius Clodius’ death or bringing Clodius back to life, what do you think he would have chosen? Even if he had wished for friendship’s sake to raise him from the dead, **the national interest would have prevented him from doing so. You sit here, then, to avenge a man whose life you would never restore if it were in your power to do so.**”⁴³

Up until this section of the speech, Cicero has justified Milo’s murder of Clodius by classifying it as self-defense, but here, we get glimpses of something more. Cicero delivers this section after reminding the jury of Clodius’s past indiscretions and cruelty, speaking on their behalf to argue that Rome is safer and better with Clodius being dead. If the jury reacted so poorly to him in death, they surely would not prefer him alive. By that logic, he argues that Milo did a service to the republic by killing him. Cicero goes as far as to put the onus on Pompey, the sitting Consul, claiming that even he wouldn’t revive Clodius because it would not be in Rome’s best interest. The core of Cicero’s argument here is that Clodius was a threat to the republic’s people and the interests of the state, as proven by the jury’s unwillingness to bring him back to

⁴³ Translation from Berry p. 213

life if they had the chance, so why should Milo be prosecuted? If no one would change his action, why should he suffer a penalty?

Whether or not the jury really would've been against reviving Clodius is beside the point. In Asconius's account of this trial, he tells us that supporters of Clodius were present for this trial and vocal about the proceedings, so Cicero's characterization of the audience's feelings toward the late politician cannot be taken as an all-encompassing fact.⁴⁴ However, the version of the speech we read was published after the trial, so the characterization could've also been modified after the fact to create a false reality about what happened in the trial for readers who were not present. The more striking part of this section is the overarching message it sends. The audience of this speech is likely not ignorant of the very public political rivalry between Cicero and Clodius—Cicero even refers to when Clodius exiled him during this speech.⁴⁵ Here, Cicero is telling the audience that anyone who is deemed to be a threat to the state can be justifiably killed. This isn't an outrageous idea, as treason was a crime that was punishable by death in Rome. According to the Twelve Tables, Rome's foundational legal code, anyone who conspired with traitors to the state should receive capital punishment.⁴⁶ However, in regard to Clodius and the sympathizers of Catiline, Cicero used this speech to blur the line between who were his own political opponents and who were traitors to the state as a whole. By taking on the persona of Rome's savior in his defense of Milo, Cicero uses his influence to demonize the people that he finds to be the enemy. His audience, if they believe Cicero, is then stuck, for "if they sided with

⁴⁴ Berry 180

⁴⁵ "A man who used the weapons of slaves to drive out a citizen whom the senate, the Roman people, and all the nations had called a saviour both of the city itself and the lives of her citizens." This is a reference to Clodius exiling Cicero after his actions to respond to the Catalinarian Conspiracy. Berry p. 211

⁴⁶ Pharr, Clyde, ed. "Ancient Roman Statutes : Translation, with Introduction, Commentary, Glossary, and Index." Translated by Allan Chester Johnson, Paul Coleman-Norton, and Frank Bourne. The Twelve Tables. Accessed April 22, 2024. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/ancient/twelve_tables.asp.

Cicero's opponents, they would (so Cicero implies) abet in the miscarriage of justice."⁴⁷ Cicero only leaves them with one correct political answer.

While this violent rhetoric is easily attributed to the violent details of this trial, some evidence suggests that Cicero added this section of the speech specifically for the speech's publication. Milo, after reading the published version after the trial, allegedly "quipped that had Cicero actually delivered it in its published form, he would have never tasted the mullets of Massilia," where he had been exiled after being found guilty.⁴⁸ In other words, the modified published version may have actually been effective at defending Milo. A motive for these changes after the actual trial, however, could relate not to providing a better defense, but rather to the shift in audience. At this point in his career, Cicero knew that people would read what he argued in court, so his audience for publication changed from the jury to a wider pool of Roman people. This gives him more of a platform to make political conjectures such as how terrible Clodius was and how opposers to the state should be put to death. In the published version, his ending argument is no longer advocating for a 'not guilty' verdict—that will have already been decided. When publishing this speech, Cicero modifies his argument to be more about political commentary. Cicero uses Clodius's death and the *Pro Milone* to argue that violence against an opponent can be justified if they pose a threat, with the threat being completely subjective.

By following the political tensions caused by the Catalinarian Conspiracy and how they manifest in both Cicero's first oration against Catiline and the *Pro Milone*, we can see how Cicero weaponizes his words in the battle against his adversaries. By ostracizing Catiline in the first speech, he forces him into exile with not much more than some powerfully positioned clauses. By vilifying Clodius in the *Pro Milone*, Cicero advocates for and justifies murder by

⁴⁷ Gildenhard, Ingo. p. 177

⁴⁸ May, James M. "The Ethica Digressio and Cicero's Pro Milone: A Progression of Intensity from Logos to Ethos to Pathos." *The Classical Journal* (Classical Association of the Middle West and South), vol. 74, no. 3, 1979, p. 240

publically speculating into popular opinion. While a lack of evidence makes it difficult to see the full scope of these words' effect on their audience, the survival of these speeches through time is a testament to their relevance in Roman society. Cicero was an incredibly smart and accomplished orator who knew the power of rhetoric if employed in just the right ways. In his battle against political adversaries, specifically relating to the Catalinarian Conspiracy, Cicero effectively used his rhetorical skills to spin the narrative in his favor and attack his opponents without ever drawing a sword.

During his time as an orator, Cicero used violent rhetoric to demonize his political opponents like Catiline and his sympathizers. By justifying violence against these men in his speeches, Cicero used his influence as a politician to effectively ostracize his enemies and their ideas. Despite Cicero being a staunch supporter of the republican form of government, his polarizing assertions about who was the enemy fanned the flames of the Republic's fall. During the first century BC, Rome was no longer under any threat from groups outside of the state, and as such, began to endure domestic turmoil.⁴⁹ Cicero contributed to this internal tension by speaking so violently against political opposers and casting them as villains. As Gildenhard says, "Cicero's uncompromising, axiomatic approach to the interpretation of reality should be regarded just as much a symptom of a republican culture in crisis as the power politicians against whom it was directed."⁵⁰ In other words, Cicero's stubborn, aggressive, and ostracizing language contributed to the growing political divide. The violent actions he suggested taking against political opponents, including some that were carried out like the execution of conspirators without trial, were "frequently unsanctioned by law, tradition, or convention, and thus resemble

⁴⁹ Gildenhard, Ingo. p. 199

⁵⁰ Gildenhard, Ingo. p. 389

autocratic actions.”⁵¹ Cicero’s violent rhetoric prevented him and his allies from having civil discourse about the state of the Republic with political opponents.

The internal political strife of Rome in the first century BC only grew during Cicero’s time as a politician. While the majority of legal speeches from the first century did not survive, the lack of commentary or condemnation of Cicero’s use of violent language makes it likely that this kind of language was not out of the ordinary. Likewise, leaders who came after him who we do have surviving writing from, like Julius Caesar, adopted this violent rhetorical strategy and justification of violence to advance their own political agendas. Julius Caesar uses rhetoric to tear down the credibility of Pompey and question the legitimacy of the Roman senate in his narrative about the state of Rome, which paved the way for his autocratic rule in the first century BC.⁵² It is a short step between using your influence and rhetoric to promote violence against a political opponent to using it to cast doubt on the systems of government. The domestic instability in Rome grew under violent and polarizing rhetoric, which were both symptoms of and contributors to a dying state.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Stimson, Jacqueline J. “Killing Romans: Legitimizing Violence in Cicero and Caesar.” PhD diss. University of Michigan, 2017. p. 185

CHAPTER THREE: PARALLELS IN MODERN AMERICA

In the 21st century, we have an academic term for violence that is the result of violent political rhetoric: stochastic terrorism. Coined in 2002, but only recently popularized, stochastic terrorism refers to acts or attempted acts of violence that can be traced back to heightened political language, either explicitly stated or hidden behind coded language and dog whistles.⁵³ As defined by Molly Amman and J. Reid Meloy in their 2021 publication *Stochastic Terrorism: A Linguistic and Psychological Analysis*, it is an act of violence “triggered by political demagoguery” whose chance of happening “increased due to the rhetoric of a public figure.”⁵⁴ Stochastic terrorism does not currently have a formal legal definition. Thus far, it has mainly been used by academics to link extremist political rhetoric with ensuing political violence. Essentially, it is a statistical tool that can help us analyze the connection between violent rhetoric and political mission statements with extremist followers who carry out violence.

Coming from the Greek *stochastikos*, meaning “proceeding by guesswork,” stochastic terrorism was introduced by mathematician Gordon Woo in his attempt to describe “a quantifiable relationship between seemingly random acts of terrorism and the goal of perpetuating fear through mass media’s coverage of the violence.”⁵⁵ It was then repurposed online by an anonymous blogger who used the term to describe a series of events in reverse from Woo’s understanding. The blogger popularized the term to describe violence perpetuated through “mass communication,” putting the emphasis on violent speech coming first.⁵⁶ This is the way academics use the term today—a way to link violent acts to preceding public statements from popular figures.

⁵³ The term was first used by Gordon Woo in his 2002 publication “Quantitative Terrorism Risk Assessment”

⁵⁴ Amman, Molly, and J. Reid Meloy. “Stochastic Terrorism: A Linguistic and Psychological Analysis.” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 5 (October 2021). p. 3

⁵⁵ Amman and Meloy p. 3

⁵⁶ Amman and Meloy p. 3

Amman and Meloy use the exposed kidnapping plot of Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer in 2020 to illustrate how stochastic terrorism can be understood. In the spring of 2020, about a month after the COVID-19 pandemic began, Governor Whitmer introduced restrictions on schools and gatherings in Michigan. She received pushback on these policies from right-wing groups and even garnered attention from then-President Donald Trump. He tweeted on April 17th, 2020 to ‘LIBERATE MICHIGAN.’⁵⁷ Later that month, a group of armed extremists located Governor Whitmer’s home and made plans to “kidnap and potentially murder” her.⁵⁸ They also stormed the Michigan capitol building, armed, and with at least one attacker wearing a mask that read ‘Liberate Michigan.’⁵⁹ While the former President made no explicit mentions of Governor Whitmer, it can be argued that his public anger towards her policies and the idea that the mitten state needed ‘liberation’ inspired the attackers' actions. Amman and Meloy argue that the former president’s comments made the attack statistically more likely.

Drawing a link between instances of violent speech against a political opponent and a violent act by using the concept of stochastic terrorism to characterize it displays how political violence is perpetuated and justified in modern America. Although the language is not typically as explicit as the Roman examples referenced previously, the aggressive and damaging language promoted by prominent politicians is a trend that has been becoming more prevalent over the last decade.

The most notable example of this trend in the last five years was the armed attack on the U.S. Capitol building on January 6th, 2021. In the wake of losing the 2020 presidential election, former president Donald Trump held a rally in Washington D.C. called the ‘Save America

⁵⁷ Amman and Meloy p. 2

⁵⁸ Amman and Meloy p.2

⁵⁹ Amman and Meloy p.2

March,' where he decried the results of the vote, claiming that the election was stolen by Democrats.⁶⁰ He delivered a lengthy speech to his supporters in which he demonized the Democratic party and made vague statements about 'taking back' the country. By accusing them of being behind "the steal," Trump makes the Democratic party into personal enemies of his followers, and direct threats to the state. This characterizes the following call to action.

"...We're going to walk down to the Capitol, and we're going to cheer on our brave senators and congressmen and women, and we're probably not going to be cheering so much for some of them... Because you'll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength and you have to be strong...I know that everyone here will soon be marching over to the Capitol building to peacefully and patriotically make your voices heard... And fraud breaks up everything, doesn't it? When you catch somebody in a fraud, you're allowed to go by very different rules... We're going to try and give [the Republican legislators] the kind of pride and boldness that they need to take back our country."⁶¹

Shortly after this address, a large group of his supporters broke into the Capitol building. While Trump never directly told his followers to smash in windows, destroy federal property, and target opposing lawmakers in their siege, his language in the speech before the attack is littered with implications that force would be necessary. By directing the group to march to the Capitol, telling them to show strength, and asserting that the presence of fraud suspends normal rules, Trump was inviting people to attack their opposition. While he does explicitly say that the

⁶⁰ Naylor, Brian. "Read Trump's Jan. 6 Speech, a Key Part of Impeachment Trial." NPR, February 10, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial>.

⁶¹ Naylor, Brian

march should be peaceful, that idea is overpowered by the next line which implies that attendees of the march can subvert the rules. By saying that supposed illegal activity, in this case, fraud, necessitates that other rules be broken, the former president was inviting illegal activity. These statements were referenced as evidence in Mr. Trump's impeachment trial where he was accused of inciting the armed attack.⁶² In the entire address, Trump calls on his supporters to 'take back the country,' which creates the understanding that America has been stolen from them. By using this rhetoric, Trump promoted the idea that Democrats having control would be detrimental to democracy, effectively attempting to make them enemies of the state. This is similar to how Cicero characterized Catiline without a fair evaluation of whether or not he was a traitor. The Democrats, like Catiline, were damned without proof by a speech. During Trump's remarks, under the pretense of the election being rigged, he justified extreme and violent actions against government officials.

This kind of speech is not an anomaly for the former president. Mr. Trump made violently coded remarks about his opponents throughout his campaign and tenure in office. In the summer before the 2016 election, Mr. Trump criticized fellow candidate Hillary Clinton's stance on gun control, saying that if she "gets to pick her [Supreme Court] judges, nothing you can do, folks," then adding "Although the Second Amendment people, maybe there is."⁶³ This comment implies that listeners who own guns could use them against Mrs. Clinton and her government if she won the election and attempted to change gun laws. In January of 2024, just a matter of weeks ago, an attorney for Mr. Trump was asked a hypothetical question about what he and the Trump administration believed about the extent of a president's power during the former president's hearing for election interference charges. According to the testimony, Mr. Trump's

⁶² Naylor, Brian

⁶³ Prokop, Andrew. "Donald Trump: Maybe 'Second Amendment People' Have a Way to Stop Hillary Clinton's Judges." Vox, August 9, 2016. <https://www.vox.com/2016/8/9/12415644/donald-trump-second-amendment-joke>.

representatives implied that “even a president directing SEAL Team Six to kill a political opponent would be an action barred from prosecution.”⁶⁴ Simply put, he believes that if a president wanted to kill an opponent, he could do so and be legally immune.

While neither of these examples resulted in or were linked to actions of violence, they are clear examples of the ways violent rhetoric is present in American politics. Justifying violence against your political opponents during a speech is not just a trend of Roman times—it is a practice that has made its way into our present-day elections, campaigns, and legal proceedings.

It is important to understand that violent political rhetoric in modern America is not a habit that is specific to former president Trump and right-wing extremists. In early June of 2022, a man named Nicholas Roske traveled to the home of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh with the intention of killing him.⁶⁵ He was apprehended before the assassination attempt. Roske admitted to FBI investigators that his motive was his anger over “the leaked Supreme Court draft opinion overturning *Roe v. Wade*,” and months prior to this act, he had said to an individual online that he wanted to “remove some people from the Supreme Court.”⁶⁶ This action was taken in the wake of the leaked opinion for *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* in May of 2022, which struck down a previous ruling regarding the constitutionality of abortion rights.

Roske, in response to this leak, had hoped to kill at least one conservative justice in an attempt to

⁶⁴ Beitsch, Rebecca. “Trump Team Argues Assassination of Rivals Is Covered by Presidential Immunity .” The Hill, January 10, 2024. <https://thehill.com/regulation/court-battles/4398223-trump-team-argues-assassination-of-rivals-is-covered-by-presidential-immunity/>.

⁶⁵ Cramer, Maria, and Jesus Jiménez. “Armed Man Traveled to Justice Kavanaugh’s Home to Kill Him, Officials Say.” The New York Times, June 8, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/08/us/brett-kavanaugh-threat-arrest.html>.

⁶⁶ Lybrand, Holmes, and Tierney Sneed. “FBI Says Man Accused of Attempting to Kill Brett Kavanaugh Said He Was ‘shooting for 3’ Justices | CNN Politics.” CNN, July 27, 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/27/politics/kavanaugh-roske-arrest-warrant/index.html>.

prevent the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* ruling from being finalized later in the summer.

Before Roske's assassination attempt, prominent Democrats made their disapproval of the Supreme Court very public. Shortly after the leak, Vice President Kamala Harris called the opinion a "direct assault on freedom" and argued that Republican leaders were "weaponizing the use of the law against women."⁶⁷ 2022 Assistant House Speaker Katherine Clark denounced the opinion on social media, ending her criticism of the court with "We will not go quietly."⁶⁸ This kind of language was not new to Democrats either. In 2020, when the Supreme Court first began taking up cases regarding abortion, Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer berated Justice Gorsuch and Justice Kavanaugh for their part in conservative rulings. "You have unleashed a whirlwind," he said in front of a large crowd at the Supreme Court. "You will pay the price."⁶⁹ For the Democrats, however, much of their aggressive language is more ambiguous in comparison to their Republican counterparts. Vice President Harris's words are a criticism of Republicans, but they do not lay out any specific calls to action for her supporters to follow. Katherine Clark's statement is generally more geared toward encouraging people to speak out about their disagreement, not act violently. Schumer's office has since qualified his remarks by saying they were "a reference to the political price Senate Republicans will pay for putting these justices on the court."⁷⁰ In other words, he meant that they would pay the price at the polls.

⁶⁷ Garcia, Eric, and Alex Woodward. "Kamala Harris Calls Supreme Court Draft Overturning Roe v Wade 'Direct Assault on Freedom.'" *The Independent*, May 4, 2022. <https://www.the-independent.com/news/world/americas/us-politics/kamala-harris-roe-v-wade-supreme-court-b2071073.html>.

⁶⁸ Schnell, Mychael. "Democrats Denounce Leaked Supreme Court Draft Ruling Nixing Roe v. Wade." *The Hill*, May 3, 2022. <https://thehill.com/regulation/court-battles/3474836-democrats-denounce-leaked-supreme-court-draft-ruling-nixing-roe-v-wade/>.

⁶⁹ Moreno, J. Edward. "Schumer Warns Kavanaugh and Gorsuch They Will 'Pay the Price.'" *The Hill*, March 4, 2020. <https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/486007-schumer-warns-kavanaugh-and-gorsuch-they-will-pay-the-price/>.

⁷⁰ Moreno, J. Edward.

Roske's anger towards the Supreme Court was the same anger many Democratic politicians claimed to feel. The stark difference between the violence committed by Roske and the attack carried out on January 6th, however, is that Roske's actions cannot be explicitly linked to one speech or call to action from a political figurehead. It is clear that leaders in the Democratic party were also outraged with the court's decision, and they did not attempt to hide that anger from the public, but no Democratic leaders made any orders or implications of commands to inspire Roske to do what he did. While Democrats are not completely free from the trend of aggressive political rhetoric, their words are across the board less threatening than their Republican counterparts.

According to the Wall Street Journal, in 2021, Capitol police reported to have investigated around 9,600 threats against legislators.⁷¹ Comments from politicians like the ones previously discussed have normalized violence in our political sphere. Whether it comes in the form of a legal opinion, a post on social media, or a rallying cry at a campaign, violent rhetoric has seeped into 21st-century politics—and we can see it manifesting in acts of increased aggression towards and the demonization of political opponents. It's one thing to debate your opponent's qualifications during a campaign, it's another to imply that strong action needs to be taken against them and the fate of the country hangs in the balance.

In their 2019 book *How Democracies Die*, political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt discuss the slippery slope to political violence. “American democracy” they argue “has relied upon two norms that we often take for granted—mutual tolerance and institutional

⁷¹ WSJ Opinion. “WSJ Opinion: The Fine Line between Heated Rhetoric and Political Violence.” The Wall Street Journal, November 1, 2022.
<https://www.wsj.com/video/series/opinion-review-and-outlook/wsj-opinion-the-fine-line-between-heated-rhetoric-and-political-violence/4A68D623-415A-4446-A396-4CD2A1A236A6>

forbearance.”⁷² Being able to sustain our democracy, state Levitsky and Ziblatt, is directly correlated to our ability to civilly disagree with one another. While Democrats may not be using violent rhetoric to the same extent as Republicans, they are certainly participating in uncivil treatment of political opponents. In response to the Trump administration’s immigration policies, Democratic Representative Maxine Waters encouraged her followers to confront Trump supporters and staff in public.⁷³ This statement came after two separate members of President Trump’s cabinet were harassed by opponents and denied service at restaurants.⁷⁴ The inability to treat those who disagree with us with respect violates an unspoken rule of American democracy, say Levitsky and Ziblatt.⁷⁵ This violation makes our democracy susceptible to complete deterioration.

The Public Religion Research Institute, a nonpartisan, nonprofit research organization has been surveying public opinion on political violence since 2021, conducting eight separate surveys since March of 2021.⁷⁶ In the most recent poll, nearly one in four Americans, both Republicans and Democrats, believe that “because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country.”⁷⁷ Intense verbiage garners intense responses. The political violence we have experienced over the last decade in the United States is born out of the violent rhetoric that has become all too commonplace in statements from our leaders.

⁷² Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die*. New York City, NY: Broadway Books, 2019.

⁷³ Calfas, Jennifer. “Maxine Waters Tells Supports to Harass Trump Staffers.” *Time*, June 25, 2018.

<https://time.com/5320865/maxine-waters-confront-trump-staffers-family-separation-policy/>.

⁷⁴ Calfas, Jennifer.

⁷⁵ Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. pp. 212-213

⁷⁶ “Threats to American Democracy Ahead of an Unprecedented Presidential Election.” PRRI, March 20, 2024.

<https://www.prii.org/research/threats-to-american-democracy-ahead-of-an-unprecedented-presidential-election/#:~:text=Disturbingly%2C%20support%20for%20political%20violence,up%20from%2015%25%20in%202021.>

⁷⁷ “Threats to American Democracy Ahead of an Unprecedented Presidential Election.”

In the case of the Roman Republic and Cicero, we saw how violent political rhetoric and polarization can lead to the ruin of a republic. By justifying violence against another party, opposing voices are silenced, which paves the way for autocratic rulers. So what can be done to prevent a total decline of American democracy? Practicing civil disagreements is a good first step. Levitsky and Ziblatt hail political movements that resonate with both sides as helpful tools for this.⁷⁸ If we can identify more movements that “crosscut” allegiances, it could help us agree with our political rivals at least on some matters. It can help us humanize them. By finding common ground, we can open up channels of conversation that have a foundation of understanding. The Associated Press reports that even in our divided democracy, there are some issues that the majority of Americans can still agree on. Voting rights and free speech protections are among these issues, with 90% of Americans able to find common ground.⁷⁹ By starting with where we do agree, we just might have an easier time humanizing our opposers, which can reintroduce civility into the conversations where we don’t agree. Disagreement is an important part of a healthy democracy; civil disagreement is a vital component of one that can continue to survive.

⁷⁸ Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. p. 220

⁷⁹ Fields, Gary, and Amelia Thomson Deveaux. “Yes, We’re Divided. but New AP-NORC Poll Shows Americans Still Agree on Most Core American Values.” AP News, April 3, 2024.
<https://apnews.com/article/ap-poll-democracy-rights-freedoms-election-b1047da72551e13554a3959487e5181a>.

CONCLUSION

During his lifetime as a leader and orator, Cicero employed inflammatory rhetoric to attack and demonize his political opponents. He used speeches to promulgate a conspiracy against him and justify the execution and exile of people who were involved in the plot. Cicero also claimed that the death of a political opponent was beneficial to Rome, arguing that people should be grateful for his opponent's removal and that the state is better for his absence. Rather than take arms against these men, Cicero chose to attack them with his words by convincing his audience of their evils and urging the public to protect themselves. He uses language to rally supporters and the crafty way in which Cicero justifies violence poises that crowd against his opponents. Cicero's justification of violence creates a political setup in which people cannot peacefully disagree with each other.

By first ostracizing Catiline and forcing him into exile with his words, Cicero uses violent rhetoric to make his own political opponents into enemies of the state. Later in his career, Cicero gives politicians who sympathized with Catiline the same treatment. In his defense of Milo in the killing of Clodius, Cicero characterizes his ideas for politics as a detriment to the Republic and something that the people need to protect themselves against. Cicero, in his speeches, urged Romans to save themselves from politicians like Clodius. In these speeches, Cicero propped himself up as the savior of Rome, convincing his audience that his opinions were consistent with the best interest of the Republic and that his opponents would be the Republic's demise.

This kind of language is present in our own politics. Political discourse in the United States over the last decade has become increasingly polar, largely in part due to the heated style of rhetoric that has been normalized both in online posts and live speeches—and it has spurred

actual acts of violence. The casual way in which former President Trump lobbed coded threats against his opposers has been linked to attacks carried out by his supporters. Democrats have harassed Republican lawmakers in public solely because of their beliefs. It is commonplace in both parties to treat your opponent with a lack of civility.

How Cicero used rhetoric to alienate his opposition and rally support was unique in the first century BC. However, in the 21st century AD, it is common for American politicians to lean into intense word choice and heated language. In both instances, political messaging centers around the “fate” of the state in question; Cicero argues that Clodius and other Catalinarians would’ve been a detriment to Rome, Mr. Trump argues that it’s vital for Republicans to take back the country, and Democratic lawmakers have stated that the Supreme Court is doing irreparable damage to the United States.⁸⁰ However, having two opposing sides that are incapable of treating the other with civility is the real enemy of democracy. Just as Cicero’s violent rhetoric contributed to an overall hostile political environment, the aggression and hostility of our politicians are damaging American trust in government.⁸¹ The fragile and polarized state of our country is not the fault of one politician or party, but rather a collective normalization of this kind of violent rhetoric. As Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, “No single political leader can end a democracy; no single leader can rescue one, either. Democracy is a shared enterprise. Its fate depends on all of us.”⁸²

Just as we critically analyze Cicero’s words for their credibility, we must critically analyze the statements coming from our own politicians. With very little other Latin available to

⁸⁰ Schnell, Mychael.

⁸¹ Jones, Jeffrey M. “Record Low in U.S. Satisfied with Way Democracy Is Working.” Gallup.com, February 7, 2024. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/548120/record-low-satisfied-democracy-working.aspx>.

⁸² Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. p. 230

qualify Cicero's claims about the conspiracy against him, we consider his word and content choice alongside his biases. We understand that Cicero likely modified accounts of certain events or characterizations to benefit himself politically. It is easier to separate ourselves from the political drama of the Roman Republic and be critical.

But as voters, consumers of media, and citizens, it is important to employ these same analytical skills on the rhetoric coming from our own politicians. Violence against dissenters is not a sign of a healthy democracy, and it should not be normalized. We must work to be more tolerant of opposing opinions to protect our democracy. Practicing civility in debates and treating your "opponent" with respect is key to having healthy debates that could result in genuine, positive change. When we have the ability to recognize how our rhetoric is violent and damaging, we can take more direct action to address it. Understanding how justifications of violence appeared in ancient rhetoric makes us better equipped to detect it in modern politics—a skill that is necessary for making disagreements civil again.

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