

Original Paper

Is Donald Trump a Modern-Day Catiline?

Jaime González-Ocaña^{1*}

¹ Chair, Classics and Modern Languages Department, Brunswick School, Greenwich, CT, USA

* Jaime González-Ocaña, E-mail: jgonzalez-ocana@brunswickschool.org

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Abstract

Could the story of a failed Roman politician who organized a plot to seize the Roman republic in 63 BCE be a metaphor for Donald Trump's political persona—his initial presidential run against the establishment, his rhetorical effort to overthrow the status quo and the natural order of things in national politics, the love affair Trump has always had with the struggling working-class voters (with the “forgotten” Americans), his constant testing the constitutional limits of our republican system of government? Could both figures be symptoms of times when a republic is in crisis and reminders of the perils that political divisiveness and civil disunion bring to a democracy?

Keywords

catiline's conspiracy, sallust, cicero, roman republic, donald trump, american democracy, civil unrest, comparative politics

1. Introduction

In the first months of 2016, I got carried away in one of my Latin classes, dissecting and translating chapter five of Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae*. Sallust's essay is “one of the sharpest pieces of political analysis to survive from the ancient world,” in the words of classicist Mary Beard (2015, p. 38). The text is vibrant, eloquent, powerful. The depiction of Lucius Sergius Catiline, the nobleman ringleader who organized a plot to overthrow the Roman Republic in 63-62 BCE, is psychologically rich and dramatic. The writing is elaborate and precise, with its well-structured sentences, its careful choice of lexicon, its play with interlocking word order, and the other rhetorical devices Sallust uses with a double objective: first, to intensify the portrait of Catiline as a man of excess (almost a “larger-than-life” character); second, to contrast the innate positive traits of Catiline's character with his abundant personal flaws. Suddenly, I found my thoughts drifting to contemporary political commentary; for those were the days of the 2016 Republican presidential primary. Thinking out loud, I challenged my students with this question: “Isn't Donald Trump some modern-day Catiline? Equipped for the best,

but maybe fatally attracted to the worst?” The class went silent. Lack of knowledge to pass judgment? Lack of interest? Maybe there was just no desire from any of my students to put his or her political views out there. For Trump has been since the very beginning of his presidential run in June 2015—no doubt about it—a polarizing figure, just as Catiline was in his time.

2. A Mixed Bag of Good and Bad

Sallust’s description of Catiline is the portrait of a man with immense talents and natural qualities. He was intelligent and persistent. A “decent” speaker (according to Sallust), Catiline possessed the ability to understand human nature. He could attract people to his cause and incite extreme loyalty among his followers. Boldness was one of his major personality traits. A bit later in the text, Sallust describes Catiline’s spirit or soul as “fierce” and “unrelenting” (*ferox animus; crudelis animus*). Catiline’s end confirmed such traits of character—his boldness and audaciousness, but also his extreme courage, if we are to believe chapters 60 and 61 of Sallust’s history. Catiline falls in the thick of the battle, “fighting hard himself” and defiant in his last breath. His body is finally located away from his men, deep within the enemy lines, “still breathing slightly and showing in his face the fierceness of spirit (*ferociam animi*) that he possessed when alive.”

So Sallust’s Catiline is a mixed bag—and so is Marcus Tullius Cicero’s. Cicero, the great Roman orator and statesman who, serving as a consul in 63 BCE, uncovered Catiline’s plot and spoke in the Senate in favor of Catiline’s conviction, depicts Catiline as “so active, so prepared, so cunning”—but he also says of Catiline, in the second part of this description, that he was “so vigilant in evil, so industrious in crime.” (Years after the event, Cicero showed his admiration for Catiline’s qualities a bit more openly.) If only Catiline (Sallust’s and Cicero’s reader feels) had utilized those positive personal qualities for the “right cause”!

I saw Trump’s persona during the 2016 Republican primaries as a similar blend of good and bad qualities. Nobody could doubt Trump’s charisma, energy, talent, determination, cunning, political intuition to gain advantage, and strategic intelligence. On Chris Matthews’s “Hardball,” I heard a guest speaking of Trump as “a psychological assassin.” Matthews commented: “Trump certainly finds [in his opponents] the one thing of value to attack.” Without a doubt, Trump is also skilled at capturing the people’s imagination. His ability to read the moods and minds of the American public is undeniable. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have seized the Republican presidential nomination, and he wouldn’t have defeated Hillary Clinton in the 2016 November general election to become the 45th President of the United States.

But, as with Catiline, Trump’s multiple flaws seem to counterbalance his positive qualities. To mention just a few: his recklessness, his irreverence, his ability to provoke and engage in futile verbal fights, his capacity for hurling insults (and even sinking into downright vulgarity at times), his tendency to lower the level of political discourse, and his pathological penchant to lie. Above all, there is Trump’s boldness, excessiveness, lack of verbal moderation and mental rigor. (Sallust brilliantly summarizes

Catiline's excessiveness and lack of moderation with a memorable climax, or *gradatio*: "His insatiable mind always craved the excessive, the incredible, the impossible.") If Trump could only have reined in these flaws... He could have become (he would have been!) the perfect, two-term president the GOP base desperately sought. Yet, as many analysts have pointed out, without the flaws, the excesses, and the larger-than-life personality (and the hair!) Trump wouldn't be Trump anymore. During the 2016 primaries, a trend of thought in American public opinion argued that Trump was "measured with a different stick" and that "he got away with a lot." "Trump's unpredictability is not bound by the regular laws of politics," one commentator pointed out. A good portion of the GOP was up in arms for months trying to stop Trump's nomination, partly because of Trump's divisive and controversial public image. "Trump is someone destructive of the efforts of the party," former RNC leader Douglas Heye commented on *The Rachel Maddow Show* in 2016, well before Trump became president. The trend has only grown since his presidency: traditional conservatives had tried—and failed—to contain Trump's toxic effect on American politics and social life. For example, in an open letter signed on May 12, 2021, over 100 influential national Republican officials threatened to form a 3rd party unless the GOP breaks from Trump in the upcoming 2024 presidential election.

The same idea about Catiline's untouchability is embedded in Sallust's text—his ability to defy the establishment and threaten Rome's stability. According to historical sources, Catiline had been active in his plotting to overthrow the state for years. His bellicose and defiant attitude dates back at least to Dec. 29, 66 BCE, when he was seen armed in the Forum, participating in a threatening demonstration. Cicero, speaking on the Senate floor on November 8, 63 BCE, stated the idea in the famous opening line of his *First Catilinarian*—his first speech against Catiline: *Quo usque tandem abutere, Catilina, patientia nostra?* "To what extent, pray tell, will you abuse our patience, Catiline?" Reasonable Americans tired of putting up with Trump's nonsensical comments have often had a similar feeling about Trump. Consider this gem, uttered at a campaign event at Sioux Center, Iowa, on Saturday, January 23, 2016: "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot people, and I wouldn't lose voters." Trump's rhetorical defiance has been limitless. To what extent, Donald, will you abuse our patience?

3. Populism and Radicalism

A second critical parallel between Catiline and Trump is their revolutionary public persona. Sallust depicts Catiline as an insurgent troublemaker and anti-establishment figure—although this portrait should be slightly nuanced: on the one hand, classicists believe Sallust and Cicero exaggerated a bit Catiline's radicalism; on the other, Catiline enjoyed the backing of several wealthy, influential political figures in his consular campaign of 64 BCE (Catiline ran twice for consul—and lost—before taking to extreme measures and resorting to open insurrection, as I'll mention later.) Yet even with this caveat, it's clear that the figure emerging from both Sallust's monograph and Cicero's speeches is one of a man who is ready to throw the state into chaos, to overthrow the republic, and to burn Rome (literally) for

the sake of his political advantage. The classical sources described Catiline as populist and radical. The legendary 19th-century historian and jurist Theodore Mommsen characterizes Catiline's movement as an "anarchist plot" and "a rebellion against the oligarchy" (see pp. 167-171). Catiline's political program, had he been elected consul, certainly would have included radical legislative proposals—among them, eliminating the financial difficulties of his followers by canceling all outstanding debts and a bill to settle the urban poor on parcels of public land. Classicist John T. Ramsey writes that Catiline "appears to have directed his appeal more and more to the down and out, those who had burdened themselves with debt and those who have suffered from the upheaval" caused by Sulla's tumultuous dictatorship (Barnes & Ramsey, 1988, p. 4). The failure of Rullus' land reform bill in the early months of 63 BCE likely fueled discontent among Catiline's potential supporters. It is not fully clear whether Catiline was truly sympathetic to those "down and out" or opportunistically used his influence to use the cause of his co-conspirator Manlius, the leader of an energetic peasants' revolt. Yet Sallust clearly asserts that the rebellion was about class struggles and divisions and that Catiline appealed to those who had no means, in particular the city populace: "The commons [i.e., *plebs* in Sallust's Latin] ... at first out of their eagerness for revolution were all too supportive of war"; then, they "changed their minds" (48.1), no doubt after the exposure and arrest, and subsequent execution in Rome, of six of the rebellion's leaders, in December 3 to 5, 63 BCE.

But this is a critical link between Catiline and Trump, not to be discarded: a populist appeal that translates into the rhetorical ability to promise thin air. In his last speech (his harangue to his loyal troops on the battlefield of Pistoria, on or about 5 January, 62 BCE), Catiline used patriotic language to exalt his cause: "We are contending for our native land, for freedom, for our life" (*pro patria, pro libertate, pro vita*), while the consular forces of Rome were fighting "on behalf of the power of a few" (*pro potentia paucorum*). Meanwhile, Trump has always promised the restoration of a national dream: "You are going to be so happy." "I'll make you rich." "It will be so much better." Those who belong to the lower socioeconomic strata of American society have bought into his message. The poor, the uneducated, the struggling working-class people: that's what mainstream media has always said. This trend was clear since the very beginning of the 2016 primaries: exit polls in the New Hampshire primary indicated that Trump defeated Kasich 41% to 13% among voters with no college degree (45% of New Hampshire's voters with an education less than high school voted for Trump), and 39% to 11% among voters with a yearly income under \$50,000. It's striking to me (and many analysts have commented on this) that Donald Trump, the archetypical East Coast millionaire intimately connected to New York City in people's imagination, obtained broader support among those Americans.

However, like Catiline's, Trump's coalition seems to be a loose conglomerate of forces agglutinated by their discontent with the status quo. Cato Institute researcher Emily Ekins pushed against the idea of one Trump voter. Her voter study group after the 2016 presidential election uncovered five types of Trump voters: the American Preservationists, the Free Marketeers, the Staunch Conservatives, the Anti-Elites, and the Disengaged (according to her labels). Evan Osnos of *The New Yorker* argued all

along since the summer of 2015 that Trump's frankness and lack of political correctness appealed to those at the fringes of society, the "forgotten Americans" (including white supremacists and neo-Nazis): "These are people who have felt as if that they have fallen away from the main current of American life, politically and economically, and culturally, and all of the sudden they discovered Donald Trump, and within two weeks after his announcement they had endorsed him." In a piece in *USA Today* on February 25, 2016, Glenn Reynolds spoke of the "plebes mak[ing] the Donald increasingly acceptable." According to Brendan O'Neill in a piece in *The Spectator* during the 2016 primaries, Trump's movement was a "class revolt." "Few writers cared to defend the memory of Catiline or present him in a favorable light," writes John T. Ramsey (2013, p. 3). For his second consular campaign, in 63 BCE, Catiline did not have the backing of influential supporters. Trump's first endorsement from a high-profile political figure was New Jersey's governor Chris Christie, on February 26, a day after CNN's Texas Republican Debate. (Nowadays, Christie has become the most vocal Trump opponent during the GOP 2023 primary debates.) And Trump loves to present himself as "an outsider." His closing statements in that 2016 CNN debate were a desperate effort to distance himself from elected politicians: "I am not a Washington guy"—like "those over here," he meant to say, thinking of Rubio and Cruz. Few elites have dared to publicly embrace Trump or admit their support for Trump during his campaign or presidency. As Catiline had Rome divided and in a state of panic, so Trump had half of the country (and half of the GOP) shocked and disgruntled after his 2016 presidential victory, worried about the direction the nation would take under his presidential leadership. As we move into the 2024 presidential election, Trump's populism has the same effect on the nation's imagination: divisiveness and confrontation.

4. The January 6th Insurrection

Certainly, Catiline was no saint—and neither is (for many Americans) Donald Trump. But some reasonable voices out there will argue that it's unfair and unreasonable to compare Donald Trump to an outlawed Roman politician whose ambition and selfish interest led him to stage a coup-d'état and openly wage war against the Roman government: "from his plots within the city to the open warfare of the battlefield," as Cicero states in his *Third Catilinarian* (3.17). I would have agreed with them... until the final months of 2020. Then, the "stolen election" lie started, and the January 6th, 2021, attack on the Capitol took place. The idea of Donald Trump raising a revolutionary militia against the American government, as Catiline did against Republican Rome, suddenly didn't seem so far-fetched. The January 6 attacks have not only radically changed Donald Trump's political and historical legacy forever. They have also brought the two figures, Trump and Catiline, closer than ever in the realm of historical analogies. In particular, Trump's approach to the January 6th events is remindful of Catiline's tactics and rhetoric, as these are portrayed in Cicero's speeches and Sallust's monograph. Catiline's plans for rebellion were unclear, organic, and vague. Catiline was supposed to enter the city after his followers had created chaos, burnt fires at night, and assassinated his political opponents. In the hands

of the insurgents, Rome would be open to Catiline's assault, leading his co-conspirator's (Manlius) army. In a classical analysis of the revolt (Robin Seager's 1973 paper in *Historia*), the uprising failed greatly due to the ineptitude and indecision of Catiline's co-conspirators in Rome. Another analysis (Lester Hutchinson's 1967 study) agrees that Catiline was "overconfident in the ability and resolution of his lieutenants"; Lentulus, in particular, showed "insubordination" and "indecision" (p. 162).

Trump started his open insurrection against "the establishment" already in the 2016 campaign trail, at least ideologically, vocally, and rhetorically. What he proposed he would do as a potential president was worrisome, if not unconstitutional at times. During his presidency, his use of political office to spread bias, punish political opponents, benefit allies, and try to suppress dissent in the media and public opinion was considered close to the limits of the Constitution. After the 2020 presidential election, Trump pushed his constitutional defiance one step further by openly lying about the election results and claiming that the election had been "stolen." Catiline's failure to secure the consulship in 63 BCE *de facto* dashed any prospects he might have harbored for attaining power through lawful channels. The same mindset and circumstances dominated Trump's personal and political standing after losing the 2020 presidential election. Such a mindset especially transpired during the January 6th events, when Trump led his supporters to an uprising in the Capitol to help reverse the 2020 election results. The pro-Trump mob broke into the U.S. Capitol to disrupt Congress proceedings to certify Joe Biden's 306 to 232 Electoral College win over President Trump. The final objective was to coerce Mike Pence to reject the Electoral College votes (specifically Arizona's, Georgia's, and Pennsylvania's).

Trump and his supporters have announced the protest movement for weeks, but it was loosely planned. It evolved organically from Trump's 9:00 a.m. rally on the Ellipse. It is interesting to note Trump's omnipresent language of violence and destruction in that January 6 speech and beyond. In the closing paragraphs, Trump used a rhetoric that emboldened action, justified violence, and glorified the patriotism of his cause (see the speech's transcript in Naylor 2021). He urged his supporters to march on the Capitol in war terms: "We fight. We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you are not going to have a country anymore." He then repeated two concepts dear to his ideology (and fundamental to Catiline's characterization): pride and boldness. First, he stated them separately: "We have overwhelming *pride* in this *great country* Our exciting adventures and *boldest* endeavors have not yet begun." Then Trump combined pride and boldness in the closing paragraph: "We're going to try and give [our Republicans] the kind of *pride* and *boldness* that they need to take back our *country*." (Italics are mine.)

The language of Trump's collaborators equally suggested conflict and violent struggle (see Kuznia et al., 2021). War analogies abounded. On his January 5th podcast, speaking ahead of the January 6th rally, Steve Bannon suggested "a cataclysmic battle" was coming, that "all hell was going to break loose," and that "tomorrow is game day." He used menacing metaphors and evoked the beaches of Normandy, stating that Trump supporters had "a moral obligation" to "the kids that died at Normandy." Bannon also defined the January 6 Capitol attacks as "a battle" between "the children of light and the forces of

darkness.” Alex Jones said, “This is a war, this is not regular times,” comparing the gravity of the situation to “Hitler bombing London.” Michael Flynn drew comparisons to Civil War battlefields and called to action. Roger Stone called it “a struggle between the godly and the godless, between good and evil This is nothing less than an epic struggle for the future of this country, between dark and light.” Rudy Giuliani foreshadowed the January 6th rally as a “trial by combat.” Ali Alexander (the political activist who organized the January 6th demonstration) also used fiery rhetoric and said the rally would be a “knife fight.”

This imagery of fire, universal struggle, and the confrontation of light and shadows is particularly interesting in the rhetoric supporting or confronting Trump’s rebellious approach. A judge on January 12, 2021, decried that Trump and his allies “stoked the flames of fear” that led to the January 6 violence. GOP congressman Adam Kinzinger commented on March 2023, referring to Trump’s responsibility for the attack, that “the guy who lit the fire has to pay the price for it.” Former DHS Official Elizabeth Neumann declared in September 2020 (as per NPR) that Trump was pouring “fuel on the fire” of domestic terrorism with his rhetoric that supports white supremacy and sows fear.

Echoes of similar fire imagery and violent rhetoric can be found in Cicero’s dramatic characterization of Catiline’s conspiracy in his *First Catilinarian*. Cataclysmic vocabulary and the image of Rome burning are constantly brought to the mind of the senators listening to his speech (like in 1.3: Catiline wants “to lay waste to the whole earth with slaughter and fire”). Cicero uses the imagery of light and darkness to showcase the contrast between Catiline’s concealed machinations and the revelation of Catiline’s plans in the open. Thus, “darkness” and “shadows” are synonyms of Catiline’s nefarious plans versus the “light” of having the plans clearly revealed, and thus saving the Republic (i.e., 1.6, *passim*). Cicero also amply develops the metaphor of disease and the ill body of the state to emphasize the insidious nature of Catiline’s threat. Cicero labels Catiline the “plague of the Republic” (*pestis*, 1.11, 1.30), “the root and seed of all future evils” (1.30); with him, “the danger will reside and be enclosed deeply in the veins and the bowels of the Republic” (*in venis atque in visceribus*, 1.31). In the end, Trump’s intimidation of Vice President Mike Pence into interfering with the counting of the true electoral votes on January 6th is also remindful of Catiline’s personal intimidation of Cicero. According to our classical sources, Catiline tried to get Cicero killed on different occasions; most notably, the conspirators’ assassination attempt at Cicero’s house in early A.M. on November 7, 63 BCE, failed. Pence went against Trump’s public demands that he helped overturn the results of the 2020 election. The climax of the threat against Pence was the mob’s chants of “Hang Mike Pence,” calling for Pence’s death, as they entered the Capitol on the afternoon of January 6th. In an event at Manchester, NH, on June 2021 (Pence’s second public address since leaving office), Pence called the January 6th insurrection “a dark day in the history of the United States.”

In short, many examples point to rhetoric emphasizing the legitimization of violence against the state and the revolutionary, almost primeval nature of Trump’s supporters’ endeavors. The rioters in the January 6 Capitol attacks shared Trump’s same sentiment and goals: “We were there just to overthrow

the government,” stated one before the January 6 Commission; another assailant’s testimony in front of the commission (in the July 13, 2022, hearings) spoke of the attacks as “feeling like insurrection and civil war.” Jamie Raskin, Democrat, Maryland congressman, the lead impeachment manager, stated at the impeachment proceedings that Trump’s “inner political circle was planning what I think of as a coup,” that they were involved in “mobilizing violence,” akin to “something we had not seen, essentially, since the War of 1812.” (In a different statement, Raskin spoke of the insurrection as a “medieval method” to gain power.) Trump’s war rhetoric has only increased since January 2021. In a statement made on March 30, 2023, as his legal troubles were about to escalate, Trump promised “death and destruction” in case he was going to be indicted. Trump’s rhetoric has constantly glorified the actions of the January 6th rioters in his 2023 primary rallies. Trump has been casting the 2024 elections as the final battle in the primaries campaign trail, combining violent language with desperate populist appeals to those “left behind”: “I am your warrior, I am your justice, and for those who have wronged and betrayed, I am your retribution,” he stated in a December 2023 rally. As a scholar has noted, Trump is invoking the 2024 presidential “as the last stand for America, so to speak ... the final battle to save America” (Yousef & Ordoñez, 2023).

5. The Crisis of the Republic

Trump’s efforts to deny the validity of the 2020 presidential election and his role in inciting the January 6th insurrection have confirmed, for many, that he has become an existential threat to American democracy, just as Catiline was for the Roman Republic in Cicero’s eyes. Cicero constantly evokes his concern for safeguarding the republic in his speeches against Catiline. In his *First Catilinarian*, Cicero several times characterizes Catiline as a real threat to the state’s very existence: Catiline acted *contra rem publicam*, “against the republic,” Cicero states as he contrasts actions done “for the safety” or “for the destruction” of the republic (*ad salutem* vs *ad perniciem*). Scholars have distrusted Cicero’s first speech: the consul might have exaggerated Catiline’s menace to overplay his own accomplishments in eliminating the conspiracy. A classical view on the issue is E.J. Phillips’: closing his 1978 paper in *Historia*, Phillips states that “Cicero can be faulted on his exploitation of the *First Catilinarian* conspiracy for propaganda purposes” and that Cicero’s rhetoric “may also give a genuinely inflated impression of the importance of the conspiracy But arbitrary rejection of Cicero’s statements is impermissible” (p. 448). In all truth, Cicero labels Catiline’s revolt in his first speech as “a civil plot” (*civilis coniuratis*) rather than a full-scale civil war. It is also clear, from Cicero, Sallust, and other contemporary sources, that “there was danger of violence” at Rome and “considerable evidence for political tension at the time” (in Phillip’s phrasing, 1978, p. 442). The Senate finally declared Catiline *hostis* (public enemy of the state) after he left Rome in November 63 BCE to join Manlius’ army in Etruria.

Trump’s insurrection has often been presented as “an attack on democracy”; President Biden labeled the events of that day several times as “the worst attack on democracy since the Civil War” (for

instance, April 29, 2021). The language of the federal case 1:23-Cr-00257-TSC, the Grand Jury indictment from Special Counsel Jack Smith filed August 1st, 2023, accuses Trump of damaging criminal behavior and federal violations in four counts: conspiracy to defraud the U.S., conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding, obstruction of and attempt to obstruct an official proceeding, and conspiracy against rights. (Items 100-105 in the filing detail Trump's efforts to intimidate Mike Pence; items 106-124 summarize Trump's fraudulent activities leading to the January 6th insurrection.) A Colorado Supreme Court ruling from December 19, 2023, based on Section 3 of the 14th Amendment, removed Trump from Colorado's primary ballot because he incited insurrection and promoted a "call to violence." Scholars and democracy experts have been sounding the alarm since 2015, noting the potential progression now from a violent insurrection to a systematic dismantling of democracy and the tearing away of democratic protections if Trump is re-elected. There are too many examples to cite; mentioning a few will suffice. John Hudak of the Brookings Institution has called Trump, his advisors, his family, and his supporters "anti-democratic. That's a real problem. And we haven't really experienced that in history." Law professor Mike Dorf noted that Trump's election lies "revealed a willingness on the part of mainstream characters in one of the two major parties to go along with what is essentially an authoritarian and antidemocratic movement." Another law professor, Neil Buchanan, stated that we came "very close to a coup" and that "the end of constitutional democracy was visible" since Trump's 2016 ascent to power. Suzanne Mettler of Cornell University notes that America is in a constitutional crisis, with progressive "democratic deterioration" and threats combined in the present "like never before" in American history. Anna Grzymala-Busse of Stanford has pointed out parallels between the situation in America and other international democratic crises.

Reminders of the threat Trump represents to American democracy have also come from Trump's party. GOP Rep. Tom Rice said that he voted for Trump's (second) impeachment because "what he did in my mind is what dictators do" (according to a dispatch from *Business Insider*, 6/14/2021). In an op-ed published in *The Washington Post* on May 5, 2021, Liz Cheney wrote, "Trump is seeking to unravel critical elements of our constitutional structure that make democracy work—confidence in the result of elections and the rule of law. No other American president has ever done this." Among Trump's ex-collaborators, former White House Chief of Staff John Kelly stated to CNN on October 2023 that Trump is "a person with nothing but contempt for our democratic institutions, our Constitution, and the rule of law." A series of young women, former White House staffers, have dared to come forward and testify about Trump's involvement in the January 6th insurrection. Their testimony also effectively articulates Trump's danger to democracy through his ability to manipulate the crowds and radicalize the masses for violent purposes. Cassidy Hutchinson (former Trump's White House Aide to Chief of Staff Mark Meadows and author of a damaging memoir, *Enough*) who testified before the January 6th Committee, stated in a CNN interview on September 26, 2023, that "Donald Trump is the most grave [sic] threat to our democracy in our lifetime and potentially in American history ... In a second term, Trump would not have guardrails." Hutchinson points to Trump's incendiary behavior on January 6th,

noting that “There was a reason why Trump wanted to go to the Capitol on January 6th and be with his supporters Donald Trump also knows the impact that his words have and the impact that his presence has on his supporters. He knows that he himself [sic] riles people up. He knew that the crowd was armed that day. He knew that there were people angry about this. So, knowing Donald Trump, knowing what I knew inside the White House—this was not a mistake. He did not want just to go to the Capitol, go there, make a little speech and then go back to the White House.” (There are reports that Trump had the doors and windows of the Oval Office open to hear directly and enjoy the roar from the January 6th insurrection as the attack on the Capitol was going on.) Sara Matthews, former Deputy Press Secretary in the Trump Administration and 2020 Trump Campaign Spokeswoman, who also testified in front of the January 6th Committee, following up on Hutchinson’s interview (on CNN with Anderson Cooper), noted that “Trump has no regard for the Constitution or the institutional norms of the Office.” She also spoke to Trump exactly knowing what he was doing and saying on January 6th: “A hundred percent [Trump knows the value of the words he uses], and I think he has learned nothing from January 6th, and if anything it has just emboldened him to continue to use his supporters in a way that is dangerous.” Matthews uses the imagery of fire (again) to remind the public of Trump’s threat: “I’ve been to so many Trump rallies when I worked for him, he knows how to *fire up* a crowd and exactly what to say that would *light up* that *fuse*, I think that’s really dangerous when he knows the power he has, and his posts had only gotten increasingly erratic.” (Italics are mine.)

It might well be that, as Cicero and Sallust magnified the danger Catiline posed to Rome, contemporary observers might be exaggerating Trump’s threat to democracy. The figure of Catiline became “a byword for villainy” in Roman literature, in the words of Mary Beard (2015, p. 42). Looking back to this tumultuous moment in American history, it will be interesting to know how future generations will assess the challenge Trump turned out to be in reality for our Republic. In this regard, the question of popularity is important when reflecting on Catiline’s and Trump’s revolutionary movements. To some extent, popular support means some degree of legitimacy. The Roman Senate was not unanimous in its opposition to the 63 BCE conspirators. A handful of senators and the praetor Lentulus actively participated in the conspiracy. According to Sallust (as mentioned before), the conspirators lost the ample public support they had among the common people when the populace learned of the plans to set the city on fire (48.1-2). News of the arrest and execution of the conspirators in Rome reached Catiline’s camp in northern Italy on December 15, 63 BCE, causing massive desertions. Trump’s public support, in contrast, seems to be much more important; his ideas about the illegality of the 2020 presidential election have spread. A survey published in January 2022 found that “Millions sympathize[d] with the rioters who attacked the Capitol on the January 6 attacks” (as per NPR). The same survey found that six out of ten Americans thought the American democracy was “in crisis,” a position even more prevalent among young people and the Republican electorate. As we head into the 2024 presidential cycle, CNN is reporting that Donald Trump leads the GOP primary field by around

40 percentage points nationally and leads Biden narrowly in a hypothetical rematch, including an edge over Biden in key battleground states like Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Arizona, and Nevada.

6. Conclusions: From Pistoria to Washington, D.C

So, in some staggering ways, Donald Trump *is* a modern-day Lucius Sergius Catiline. Even the strange correlation between the two fateful dates (January 5-6th, 62 BCE—January 6th, 2021) seems to confine some cosmic meaning and invites the exploration of the analogy. Trump’s boldness, extreme pride, recklessness, and ability to stoke his followers’ passion and incite violence match and even surpass Catiline’s: The arc of Trump’s influence and dimension in universal history goes beyond the scope of Catiline’s figure. In reality, Trump’s historical magnitude is *out of reach*, so to speak, for Catiline. Yes, the Roman revolutionary leader died on the battlefield and commanded an army of 5,000 men against the Roman Senate. But in reality, he never held state power. Conversely, Trump was the most powerful man in the world for four years, and he might become the American president again if he wins a second turn, which is a real possibility, albeit still unclear, at the moment of this writing.

In sum, it is obvious that no two historical times are identical and that comparing different periods is tricky, as a very different set of circumstances dictates the reality of every historical situation. And yet, as Mary Beard suggests, “the conflict between Catiline and Cicero became a powerful template for understanding civil disobedience and insurrection throughout Roman history and beyond” (2015, p. 43). What is truly striking from the Catiline-Trump comparison is how both figures represent a critical moment of crisis in the life of a republic—and this in three different ways.

First, both Catiline and Trump tried relentlessly and boldly to test the limits of the political system. Catiline and Trump challenged the mechanisms of the republican order for their own self-advantage, seeding division and at the cost of civil disunion and public opinion’s unrest. Trump has been said to be constantly putting the nation on the brink of governability, throwing the U.S. into a persistent constitutional crisis.

Second, both Catiline and Trump might be manifestations of “a possible structural problem of a general kind,” using Christian Meier’s phraseology (2005, p. 133). The eminent German ancient historian, writing at the beginning of the third millennium, brought to mind the crisis of the Roman Republic as an example of what happens to political communities when historical changes outpace the ability of a society to adapt and deal with new challenges. (See Chapter 5, “Deeds and Contingencies,” 2005, pp. 102-136. Meier also mentions the rise of Hitler, which finally led to World War II and Auschwitz, as another similar moment in history.) “We know of cases when problems have arisen that a society could not master within the framework of the traditional institutions,” writes Meier, “of cases when a society could not cope—among other things—with the great changes it was undergoing, usually in the form of unintended side effects of its own actions” (2005, pp. 133-134). The downfall of the Roman Republic, Meier notes, was such a moment. Scholars have pointed out that, even though Catiline’s conspiracy was not powerful enough to overthrow the state, it was an indicator, along with other factors, that the

Republic was mortally sick: many problems had been left unresolved for too long and the elites and the political system had failed to address structural problems that, in the end, engulfed the Republic in violence and self-destruction. The conspiracy, notes Eric Gruen in the tenth chapter (“Discontents and Violence”) of his classic study *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic*, “strengthened awareness of a common interest in order and stability. The moment itself called to notice a number of authentic social ills which had particularly lacked effective expression The shape of the social structure remained basically unaffected ... but the grievances had been brought to public attention ... prominent leaders recognized the utility of responding to needs expressed in the Catilinarian affair” (1995, pp. 431-432). In parallel, the last seven or eight years of the American democracy could well be one of those historical moments Meier wrote about. A moment in which the political tools at our disposal are inadequate for the challenges that might follow Trump’s revolutionary daring and political provocations: from the elimination of a peaceful transition of power to the complete delegitimization of our electoral system. Like during the downfall of the Roman Republic, “It may well be the case that politicians and the political process are failing increasingly to address the overarching process of change [and] the burdens placed on traditional institutions and on the traditional form of education, among other things, proved too great,” notes Meier in regards to the crisis of the Roman Republic (2005, p. 132). Catiline and Trump might be taken thus as symptoms of an era in crisis, of shifting structures, rather than true mechanisms of political change.

Finally, Catiline’s affair might be a reminder of our Republic’s current dangers and vulnerability due to political divisiveness and civil disunion. Sallust’s last chapters of his *Bellum Catilinae*, in particular, are an indictment of the cruel realities of civil war. Sallust’s narrative at the end of his volume is powerful and dramatic. The narrative highlights the bloodiness and violence of the decisive Roman response. Having put down the rebellion, Sallust writes that there is absolutely no joy in the Roman army after the victory. For, inspecting the battlefield, “while they were turning the corpses of the enemy,” many found among the Catilinarian forces family members, close friends, and acquaintances. The point is brought up brilliantly by Sallust’s final epigrammatic sentence, condensing in short sentence a high number of rhetorical devices in typical Sallustian style. *Ita varie per omnem exercitum laetitia, maeror, luctus atque gaudia agitabantur*—“Happiness, sorrow, mourning, and excitement were felt in different manner through all the army.” The verb in the passive displays a personification and gives the idea of the fluctuating emotions among the prevailing army (*agitabantur*—the combination of disparate feelings “continued to dart back and forth”). The contrastive enumeration, in the form of a chiasmus, “poignantly intermingles the conflicting emotions felt by the survivors (note the adverb *varie*) and provides a neat *packaging* effect that draws Sallust’s account to a tidy conclusion that may seem too abrupt for our expectations,” notes John T. Ramsey, one of the most astute and capable analysts of Sallust, in one of his commentaries to the text (Barnes & Ramsey, 1988, p. 68).

The passage especially rings true in our moment in American history. Talk that brings us back to a rhetoric of civil war and the threat of authoritarianism abounds in our public opinion and political

discourse. According to a recent survey (UChicago News, Jan. 5, 2023), “more than 40% of Americans think a civil war is likely in the next decade.” Bob Altemeyer’s research in *The Authoritarians* (among other scholars) constates that a disturbing number of Americans have right-wing authoritarian views: 26% of Americans have highly right-wing authoritarian views (versus 13% in Canada or Australia) and the percentage jumps to 75% among those over 45 years old. This is a moment in which “more Americans think that resorting to violence may be necessary to save the country, especially among Republicans,” a radio commentator noted in NPR on December 2023 (Yousef & Ordoñez, 2023). Thus, Sallust’s final chapters on the battle of Pistoria encapsulate all the contradictions bringing Americans into conflict today. Sallust’s conclusion is a powerful reminder of the potentially terrible consequences America can face soon, given the instability of the American political and ideological landscape due to the divisiveness and constant confrontation that Catiline and Trump so aptly embody.

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