

III Cicero Institute

Thoughts on Marcus Tullius Cicero

Why He Embodies the Ideals of the Cicero Institute

Joe Lonsdale

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Marcus Tullius Cicero has long inspired visionaries. The rediscovery of his works helped spark the Renaissance, and his writings pervaded the thoughts of America's Founders. He was one of the most eloquent defenders of liberty and republican government that ever lived. Yet today, Cicero has been largely forgotten. Sometimes people ask me why we chose the name "Cicero Institute" for our group promoting policy reform. Below are eight reasons Cicero embodies the ideals that our institute tries to cultivate and spread. I also explain how Cicero's legacy shapes our modern life, and how his life can enlighten us today.

BELIEVED IN THE POWER OF IDEAS

Cicero's favorite subject was rhetoric, the study of persuasion. He understood that effective rhetoric could convince people to embrace good ideas and abandon failed ones. His stirring defenses of freedom and republican government would be read throughout the ages, and make him one of the most quoted authors in human history.

BELIEVED IN THE POWER OF COMMERCE

Cicero came from the "equites," the landholder and commercial class that achieved prosperity through its business activities. Unlike the nobility, Romans expected this class to engage in trade and earn their own living. Throughout his career, Cicero's greatest supporters were merchants, whom he in turn believed were the staunchest defenders of the Roman Republic.

DEVOTED TO PUBLIC SERVICE

Cicero famously said, "Not for ourselves alone are we born." He dedicated his life to defending both

freedom and republican government, and was willing to sacrifice his personal position and fortune to do so.

ATTACKED SPECIAL INTERESTS

Cicero's first major legal battle, in 70 BC, was against Verres, the former Roman governor of Sicily. Cicero successfully prosecuted Verres for using his position to enrich friends, embezzle money, and suppress speech. Throughout this career, Cicero focused on attacking those who would abuse the public trust for personal gain.

PUT IDEALS INTO PRACTICE

Cicero did not merely talk about good government, he implemented it. As temporary governor of Cilicia in modern-day Turkey, Cicero was known for his mild system of government. He limited the grasping hand of tax-collectors, and returned land stolen by the previous government to its rightful holders.

POLITICAL PRAGMATIST

Cicero believed in working within the system to change it. Cicero's brother wrote a pamphlet on how to electioneer and win votes, and Cicero used it to attain higher office. He also was not afraid to make compromises. He made alliances with one-time political opponents, such as the conservative military commander Gaius Pompey, in order to protect the Republic and promote reforms.

EMBODIED INTEGRITY

Despite Cicero's tendency to compromise, he refused to compromise on his core beliefs.¹ He offered his life to his opponent Mark Anthony rather than compromise with Anthony's emerging dictatorship. He also proclaimed the truth

¹ One possible exception was Cicero's execution of Catalina for treason without a formal trial, which seemed to work against his belief in the consistent rule of law. There is debate, however, about what the Roman legal system would demand in such a circumstance, and Cicero believed that Catalina's attempt to overthrow the Republic demanded a drastic response.

irrespective of the consequences. He summed up this belief in the quote, “If we are not ashamed to think it, we should not be ashamed to say it.”

INSPIRING BIOGRAPHY

Cicero grew up in the small town of Arpinium, about seventy miles South of Rome. He was not from the noble class, and his opponents in the Roman capital referred to him as an “immigrant” and an “outsider.” Yet Cicero’s hard work allowed him to climb to the highest rungs of Roman life, the Senate and the Consulship. Unlike many of his noble counterparts, his work and ideas would outlast him, and inspire countless generations.

CICERO’S LEGACY

Cicero was murdered in 43 B.C.E., at the orders of his rival Mark Antony. Cicero’s head and hands were severed and displayed as macabre trophies on the very rostrum from which he had attacked Antony earlier in the year. His death, however, could not silence the orator whose speeches would continue to be read, heard, and even memorized by Western leaders for millennia.

The classical heritage of our modern world owes a considerable debt to Cicero. Cicero embodied the conservative tendency to reflect upon the principles of our ancestors, as he, in his time, affirmed the importance of the old Greek philosophers from whom the Roman civilization inherited so much. He also affirmed the necessity of a balanced life and a government balanced between different groups for ensuring personal and collective stability. He trumpeted what became known as “natural law,” or the true and correct law that could be divined from examining nature and reality, and which had a higher authority than any existing law. Cicero believed that the natural law pointed the way to liberty and justice, and this was one of the classical world’s greatest gifts to future thinkers.

Later generations took Cicero’s rhetoric and work and expanded upon it. It was Petrarch’s rediscovery of Cicero’s letters in the 14th century that inaugurated the Renaissance, which, through a re-examination of the classical world, recovered the ideas of individual liberty and republican government that Cicero so championed.

The American founders also saw Cicero as their progenitor. John Adams said that “all the ages of the world have not produced a greater statesman and philosopher united in the same character.” Thomas Jefferson cited Cicero’s writings on natural law as one of his main influences in writing the Declaration of Independence, and James Wilson of Pennsylvania, one of the forgotten authors of the American Constitution, cited these theories as underlying all of the new American government.

As Edmund Burke once said, “People will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors.” Understanding the past helps us better light the way to the future, which is why our generation would be well served to understand the example and wisdom of Marcus Tullius Cicero.