

PAUL A. RAHE

CICERO AND REPUBLICANISM IN AMERICA *

To assess Cicero's influence on American republicanism, one must first attend to a larger question: the relationship between self-government in antiquity and the peculiar form of self-government embraced by Britain's rebellious colonies in North America. Among students of American history, this question has given rise to considerable controversy, and there is every reason to suppose that the dispute will continue (1).

Thirty-seven years ago, Clinton Rossiter studied the character of the American Revolution and issued as his verdict that "the Americans would have believed just as vigorously in public morality had Cato and the Gracchi never lived" (2). A quarter of a century thereafter, Bernard Bailyn examined in detail the pamphlet literature occasioned by the Stamp Act Crisis and the pertinent public debates leading up to the American Revolution. He found "the classics of the ancient world . . . everywhere in the literature of the Revolution," but he concluded that "they are everywhere illustrative, not determinative, of thought. They contributed a vivid vocabulary but not the logic or grammar of thought, a universally respected personification but not the source of political and social beliefs. They heightened the colonists' sensitivity to ideas and attitudes otherwise derived" (3).

In the intervening years, Hannah Arendt argued an entirely different

* In citing the ancient texts, I have used the abbreviations provided in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd edition, ed. N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard, Oxford 1970. Where possible, these texts and modern works of similar stature are cited by the divisions and subdivisions employed by the author or introduced by subsequent editors (that is, by book, part, chapter, section number, paragraph, act, scene, line, Stephanus page, or by page and line number). In some cases, where further specification is needed to help the reader to locate a particular passage, I have included in parentheses as the last element in a particular citation the page or pages of the pertinent volume of the edition used.

(1) For a recent attempt to sort out this question, see Paul A. Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern: Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution*, Chapel Hill 1992.

(2) Clinton Rossiter, *Seedtime of the Republic*, New York 1953, 356-59.

(3) Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Cambridge Mass. 1967, 23-26.

case. "Without the classical example shining through the centuries," she wrote, "none of the men of the revolutions on either side of the Atlantic would have possessed the courage for what then turned out to be unprecedented action," and she therefore averred that the American Revolution's "ultimate end" was public, participatory "freedom" of the sort exemplified in the ancient city "and the constitution of a public space where freedom would appear" (4). Twenty-one years ago, Gordon Wood took up her suggestion, contending that "for Americans the mid-eighteenth century was truly a neo-classical age" and that their "compulsive interest in the ancient republics was in fact crucial to their attempt to understand the moral and social basis of politics." As he put it, "the sacrifice of individual interests to the greater good of the whole formed the essence of republicanism and comprehended for Americans the idealistic goal of their Revolution. From this goal flowed all of the Americans' exhortatory literature and all that made their ideology truly revolutionary" (5).

Still more recently, J. G. A. Pocock reconsidered the vast literary output of the American revolutionaries and surveyed the writings of the British commonwealth tradition that they drew on. He suggested that "the American Revolution" be considered "less as the first political act of revolutionary enlightenment than as the last great act of the Renaissance." He concluded that it was "a flight from modernity"; he described it as the "last great pre-modern efflorescence" of a species of thinking "anchored" in a continuous and relatively coherent tradition of political speculation stretching from Aristotle through Guicciardini, Machiavelli, Harrington, the radical Whigs, and Bolingbroke on to Jefferson; and he attempted a magisterial history of what he dubbed "the civic humanist paradigm." "In terms borrowed from or suggested by the language of Hannah Arendt," his book purports to tell "part of the story of the revival in the early modern West of the ancient ideal of *homo politicus* (the *zōon politikon* of Aristotle), who affirms his being and his virtue by the medium of political action, whose closest kinsman is *homo rhetor* and whose antithesis is the *homo credens* of Christian faith." He conceded that "not all Americans were schooled in this tradition," but he insisted that "there was (it would almost appear) no alternative tradition in which to be schooled" (6). Though Pocock's position has come under

(4) Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York 1963, 197, 258.

(5) Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*, Chapel Hill 1969, 48-70.

(6) J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue and Commerce in the Eighteenth Century*, "The Journal of Interdisciplinary History" 3, 1972: 119-34 (esp. 120, 121 n. 6), and *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton 1975 (esp., 550).

attack, he continues to assert that Americans are obsessed with "virtue," that the pertinent species of that quality is inseparable from "the practice of citizenship in the classical or Graeco-Roman sense of that term," and that it presupposes the view "that the human personality" is "that of a *zōon politikon*" and is "fully expressed only in the practice of citizenship as an active virtue" (7).

So well might we ask whether those Americans who, at the time of the Revolution, adverted to Cicero generally did so as a form of window dressing or in order to deepen their understanding of the political issues at hand. At first glance, it might seem easy to reach a decision. If it were legitimate to judge the influence of an author on a subsequent epoch simply by counting the number of references and citations in the surviving papers of the leading figures of that age, one would have to conclude that Cicero and his writings had little impact on the American Revolution. John Adams seems to have modelled himself on the ancient Roman forensic orator, philosopher, and statesman (8): he certainly paid close attention at every stage in his life to his predecessor's thinking and example (9). Thomas Jefferson wrestled with Cicero's philosophical works as a young man (10); he urged that others at a similar stage in life do the

(7) J. G. A. Pocock, *Cambridge Paradigms and Scotch Philosophers: A Study of the Relations Between the Civic Humanist and the Civil Jurisprudential Interpretation of Eighteenth-Century Social Thought, in Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, Cambridge 1983, 235-52 (esp. 235, 239, 242-44).

(8) See Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams*, New York 1976, esp. 6, 30, 32, 237, 246, 270-73, 277, 280, 282-83, 306, 315.

(9) See, for example, *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, ed. L. H. Butterfield, Cambridge Mass. 1961, I 63, 65, 73, 110, 251-53, II 113, 340, 359, 362, 386, III 239-40, 271: Diary Entries under 21 and 30 December 1758, January and Summer 1759, 24 January 1765, 28 August 1774, Personal Receipts and Expenditures in 1778-79, Diary Entries under 15 and 25 April and 20 June 1779, 7 and 13 August 1796, and Autobiography (regarding 1758); *Papers of John Adams*, ed. Robert J. Taylor, Cambridge, Mass. 1977-, I 39-45, II 116-117, 125-27, 230: Exchange of Letters with Jonathan Sewall in February 1760, Letters to James Warren on 25 July 1774 and to William Tudor on 4 August 1774, *Novanglus*, 23 January 1775; *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813*, ed. John A. Schutz and Douglass Adair, San Marino, Cal., 1966, 44-46: Letter from John Adams to Benjamin Rush on 4 December 1805; *The Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, Boston 1850-56, IX 602-4, X 388-89: Letters to Benjamin Rush on 27 September 1808 and to Elihu Marshall on 7 March 1820; and *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, ed. Lester J. Cappon, Chapel Hill 1959, II 350-52, 380-83, 434-39: Letters from John Adams to Thomas Jefferson on 9 July and 4 October 1813 and on 16 July 1814.

(10) See *Jefferson's Literary commonplace Book*, ed. Douglas L. Wilson, Princeton 1989, 56-61.

like (11); and he returned repeatedly to Cicero in his maturity and in his old age (12). James Wilson cited Cicero repeatedly in the inaugural lecture "Of the Study of the Law in the United States" — which he delivered in 1790 in his capacity as Professor of Law at the College of Philadelphia to an audience including George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Alexander Hamilton. In the series of "Lectures on Law" that he delivered in the course of the year following, Wilson virtually wrapped himself in the Roman statesman's toga, quoting liberally from his forensic and political orations, from his philosophical works, and even from the letters that he penned to his family and friends (13). But Adams, Jefferson, and Wilson were exceptional. For the most part, their contemporaries appear not to have given the Roman sage much heed.

Cicero appears to have been cited but once in the course of the Constitutional Convention (14); he was mentioned twice in the writings of

(11) See, for example, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd, Princeton 1950-, VIII 405-8, IX 38-39, 201, X 72, XI 299-300, XII 14-19: Letters to Peter Carr on 19 August 1785, from James Madison on 15 November 1785 and 22 January 1786, to Thomas Elder on 26 June 1786, and from and to Peter Carr on 18 April and 10 August 1787.

(12) See, for example, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* VIII 322-23, X 518, XI 159, 521-24, XV 223-24, XX 633-36, XXIV 462-63: Letters to John Stockdale on 28 July 1785, to William Stephens Smith on 11 November 1786, to Philip Mazzei on 16 February 1789, to John Stockdale on 1 July 1787, to Amand Koenig on 29 June 1789, from John Pemberton on 16 July 1791, and to Jean François Froullé on 10 October 1792; *Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels: "The Philosophy of Jesus" and "The Life and Morals of Jesus"*, ed. Dickinson W. Adams, Princeton 1983, 327-36, 364-66, 387-91, 394-99: Letters to Joseph Priestley on 9 April 1803, to Edward Dowse on 19 April 1803 (with Syllabus of an Estimate of the merit of the doctrines of Jesus, compared with those of others), to Charles Thomson on 9 January 1815, and to William Short on 31 October and 4 August 1820; *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh, Washington, D.C., 1903, XII 343-45, XIV 147-48, 372, 404-5, XV 211, 353: Letters to John Wayles Eppes on 17 January 1810, to John Adams on 5 July 1814, to Pierre Dupont de Nemours on 31 December 1815, to Amos J. Cook on 21 January 1816, to John Brazier on 24 August 1819, and to George Summers and John B. Garland on 27 February 1822; *Thomas Jefferson Correspondence Printed from the originals in the Collections of William K. Bixby*, Boston 1916, 238: Letter to Wells and Lilly on 1 April 1818; O. W. Long, *Thomas Jefferson and George Ticknor: A Chapter in American Scholarship*, Williamstown Mass. 1933, 16: Letter to George Ticknor on 14 January 1816; and *The Adams-Jefferson Letters* II 548-50, 574-76: Letters from Thomas Jefferson to John Adams on 10 December 1819 and 12 September 1821. Note, in this connection, *Jefferson's Literary Commonplace Book* 159-61.

(13) *The Works of James Wilson*, ed. Robert Green McCloskey, Cambridge Mass. 1967 I 85, 88-90, 106, 122n, 128n, 132n, 133n, 145-46, 162, 164-65, 196, 207, 236, 238-39, 245, 273, 285n, 288-89, 297n, 303, 342, 358, 377-78, 428, II 511, 535, 557, 598, 603-4, 608, 609n, 631-32, 643n, 694. See also *ibid.* 712, 716: On the History of Property.

(14) *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, ed. Max Farrand, New Haven 1911-37, I 308: 18 June 1787.

those who opposed ratification of the Constitution (15) and not at all in *The Federalist* (16). Benjamin Franklin published a translation of *De Senectute* in the 1740s, and for a time this figures in his correspondence (17). In his *Autobiography*, he quotes a brief passage from the *Tusculan Disputations* (18), and elsewhere he occasionally cites a classical tag (19) — but there is no indication that he otherwise paid much attention to the ancient Roman. George Washington inherited a copy of *De Officiis* (20), but he seems not to have paid its author any heed. While in his prime, he sought to have busts made of generals such as Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Charles XII of Sweden, and Frederick the Great (21). But when told that this would be prohibitively expensive and when offered the opportunity to purchase at a reasonable price the images of a number of literary figures (the Roman orator among them), he appears to have dropped the matter (22). Never once in his speeches, in his letters, or even in the diary he kept does he cite or mention the revered statesman of ancient Rome (23). Alexander Hamilton alludes to

(15) *The Complete Anti-Federalist*, ed. Herbert J. Storing, Chicago 1981, 3.12.11, 5.1.21: "Essays by William Penn," (Philadelphia) "Independent Gaze-
teer," 3 January 1788; and "Essays by A Farmer," (Baltimore) "Maryland Ga-
zette," 29 February 1788.

(16) See *The Federalist Concordance*, ed. Thomas S. Engeman, Edward J. Eri-
er, and Thomas B. Hofeller, Chicago 1988.

(17) In this connection, see *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard
W. Labaree et al., New Haven 1959-, II 401-5, 412n, 416, 449-50, III 113, IV 114,
V 260-61: Letters from James Logan on 26 February 1744 and to William Strahan
on 31 July and 18 September 1744, Extracts from "The Pennsylvania Gazette" (21
March 1744), and Letters from James Logan on 6 March 1747 and to William Strah-
an on 4 February 1750. Note *ibid.* XXVIII 311: Editorial Note on the Preface to
a Reprinting of James Logan's *Cato Major*.

(18) *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree et al.,
New Haven 1964, 153.

(19) *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* I 14, 32, 43, III 336-37, 402n, 413n, IV
150-51, XXVII 430-35: Silence Dogood Nos. 4, 10, and 14 ("The New England
Courant," 14 May, 13 August, and 8 October 1722), *Poor Richard Improved* (1749),
The Education of Youth (1749), Appeal for the Hospital ("The Pennsylvania
Gazette," 15 August 1751), and Letter to Madame Brillon ("The Ephemeria") on
20 September 1778. Note *ibid.* XXIII 497-98: Letter from Alexander Small on 15
March 1777.

(20) *The Papers of George Washington*, ed. W. W. Abbot, Charlottesville
1983, Ser. A, VI 292: Inventory of the Books in the Estate (c. 1759).

(21) *The Papers of George Washington* Ser. A, VI 355: To Robert Cary & Co
(with Invoice), 20 September 1759.

(22) *The Papers of George Washington* Ser. A, VI 400: Invoice from Robert
Cary & Co., 15 March 1760.

(23) Cicero is notably absent from *The Writings of George Washington*, ed.
John C. Fitzpatrick, Washington, D.C., 1931-44, and *The Diaries of George Wash-
ington*, ed. Donald Jackson, Charlottesville 1976-79.

Cicero on two occasions — neither consequential (24). The Roman orator appears in the commonplace book of James Madison and his eloquence is mentioned in an early letter (25). Then, he drops almost entirely from sight. In the published papers of George Mason, Gouverneur Morris, Richard Henry Lee, Henry Laurens, and John Marshall, his name never comes up at all (26).

But the fact that a dog barks rarely or not at all cannot be taken as proof positive that he does not exist. We know that Cicero was read in American schools (27). We can observe in the self-conscious conduct of the American Founders many of the virtues that he singled out for praise; and, of course, his eloquence was a benchmark by which American statesmen measured their own efforts. If he is rarely mentioned in the critical political debates, it is in part because he was a last-ditch defender of republicanism and not a founder, and it is in part, as John Adams pointed out (28), because his theoretical writings on politics were then available only in fragmentary form. Cicero also fell prey to the assault on classical republicanism, its ethos of glory, its penchant for war, and its vulnerability to faction launched by figures such as Michel de Montaigne and Thomas Hobbes and taken up by James Harrington, John Locke, David Hume, the Baron de Montesquieu, and Jean Louis de Lolme. This last point needs elaboration (29).

(24) *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold C. Syrett, New York 1961-79, IV 185, XIX 332-33: Constitutional Convention Speech on a Plan of Government, 18 June 1787, and *To Defence* No. XX, 23-24 October 1795.

(25) *The Papers of James Madison*, ed. William T. Hutchinson, William M. E. Rachal, et al., Chicago 1962-77, Charlottesville 1977-, I, 19, 159-62: *Commonplace Book*, 1759-72, and *Letter to William Bradford* on 28 July 1775.

(26) See *The Papers of George Mason*, ed. Robert A. Rutland, Chapel Hill 1970; Jared Sparks, *The Life of Gouverneur Morris with Selections from his Correspondence*, Boston 1832; *The Letters of Richard Henry Lee*, ed. James Curtis Ballagh, New York 1970; *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, ed. Philip M. Hamer, Columbia S.C. 1968-; *The Papers of John Marshall*, ed. Herbert A. Johnson et al., Chapel Hill 1974-

(27) See Robert Middlekauf, *A Persistent Tradition: The Classical Curriculum in Eighteenth-Century New England*, "The William and Mary Quarterly" 3rd ser., 18 (1961): 54-67, and *Ancients and Axioms: Secondary Education in Eighteenth Century New England*, New Haven 1963, esp. 75-92, 154-58, 191-95.

(28) *The Works of John Adams* IV 194-95: *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* (1787-88). See *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* XIV 158-59: *Letter from John Adams* on 16 July 1814.

(29) For a more detailed discussion, see Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, 249-616.

I

Among those who challenged the enthusiasm for antiquity, Montaigne must be accorded first place, for, in the late sixteenth century, he laid the groundwork for the humanitarian critique of classical and Christian virtue presupposed by the later proponents of modern science and commercial society. The essay entitled "Of Virtue" is a good illustration of his approach. There, he begins his discussion by stating the unorthodox opinion that — at least for ordinary men — "resolute steadfastness" is nothing more than "a species of passion," akin to rage, "that drives and agitates" the soul and "to some extent tears it out of itself." Then, he devotes the bulk of what follows not to a discussion of virtue *per se*, but to a series of anecdotes concerning the practice of suttee in India, the activities of the sect of Assassins in Syria, and the like. In each case, courage and self-sacrifice turn out to be irrational and highly disagreeable passions rooted in what the men of the time would have recognized as religious fanaticism (30).

In other essays, Montaigne pursues the same rhetorical strategy. The first third of the chapter entitled "Of Cruelty" he dedicates not to an account of cruelty itself, but to a rambling discussion never quite stating but clearly indicating, nonetheless, that heroism and self-sacrifice require one to take a perverse and twisted pleasure in doing violence to oneself. As he explains at the outset, there is a difference between "virtue" and that "natural mildness (*douceur*) and ease of disposition (*facilité*)" which we call "goodness" and which we would be right in attributing to God. Virtue can hardly itself be divine: it "demands a road rough and thorny"; and for that reason, it depends on external or internal opposition and often "cannot do without the assistance of vice." Sometimes, in fact, virtue climbs "to so high a point that it not only has contempt for pain but positively enjoys it."

Witness the younger Cato. When I see him die after tearing out his bowels, I cannot be satisfied to believe simply that he then possessed a soul totally free from trouble and fear; I cannot believe that he merely sustained himself in that mode of comportment which the rules of the Stoic sect ordained for him: calm, without emotion, and impassible. There was, it seems to me, in that man's virtue too much of spiritedness (*gaillardise*) and verdancy for things to come to an end there. I believe without any doubt that he felt pleasure and bliss in an action so noble, and that he enjoyed himself in it more than in any other action of his life.

(30) *Les essais de Michel de Montaigne*, ed. Pierre Villey and V.-L. Saulnier, Paris 1978, 2.29 (705-11): "De la vertu".

Montaigne is even prepared to doubt that the Roman Senator "would have been willing to be deprived of the occasion for so fine (*bel*) an exploit." And though he firmly denies that he subscribes to the opinion himself, he manages to cause the reader to suspect that Cato "was grateful to fortune for having subjected his virtue to so beautiful (*belle*) a test." He even makes that reader wonder whether the Roman was not, in fact, therefore secretly pleased that circumstances had enabled Caesar to tread "underfoot the ancient liberty of his fatherland" (31).

Despite appearances, Montaigne is not making an *ad hominem* assault on Cato's integrity. In another context, he speaks of the man as "furnishing every example of virtue." That is, in fact, the point. While ostensibly giving courage and self-sacrifice all due praise, he effectively uses the example of Cato to debunk them both; and at the same time, he discreetly intimates that the one quality really worthy of esteem is that "natural *douceur* and *facilité*" which makes a man like Montaigne himself unable to see an innocent animal pursued and killed without feeling "displeasure." "In the end," he elsewhere observes, "no eminent and spirited (*gaillard*) virtue is without some unruly agitation." For at the heart of the longing "always to be the best and to be superior to others," exemplified by that model for classical republican manhood Homer's Achilles, lies an uncontrolled anger or rage that somehow remains invisible to men (32). One might even say that virtue is the disease of which it is said to be the cure.

One can avoid such confusion and self-delusion — but only by abandoning the Platonic supposition that the soul's longing for the beautiful and noble is an erotic divination of the good. Montaigne insists on identifying the good with the useful. And of course that requires weighing virtue in the scale of security and well-being. Aristotle may "rank glory first among the external goods," and Cicero may choose virtue not for profit, but for its beauty and the honor attached to it. Montaigne does not follow the example they set. He prefers profit and dismisses Cicero as a man "frenzied" with the "passion" for renown. In the Frenchman's estimation, "all these judgments which are grounded in external appearances are marvelously uncertain and doubtful." Beauty and honor are worse than inadequate as guides. "Even when I would not follow the straight way for its straightness," he notes, "I would follow it because I have found from experience that at the end of the tale it is commonly the

(31) *Les essais de Michel de Montaigne* 2.11 (422-35): "De la cruauté".

(32) Cf. *Les essais de Michel de Montaigne* 2.11-13 (422-35, 567, 610), 31 (720): "Apologie de Raimond Sebond", "De la cruauté", "De juger de la mort d'autrui", and "De la colère" with Hom. *Il.* 6.208.

happiest and the most useful." As a consequence of lowering his sights and of emphasizing man's kinship with the beasts of the field, Montaigne can write, "I, who maneuver always close to the earth, hate that inhumane wisdom which would make us disdainful of and hostile to the cultivation of the body" (33).

In the seventeenth century, Sir Francis Bacon, René Descartes, Thomas Sprat, Sir William Petty, and John Locke all embraced Montaigne's critique of the "inhumane wisdom which would make us disdainful of and hostile to the cultivation of the body." It was on this foundation that Bacon and Descartes dismissed the dictates of the ancient political philosophers, exalted medicine, and defended the new science against the classical republican disdain for the practical arts (34). It was with their argument in mind that Thomas Sprat debunked the ancients' contempt for those engaged in "*Trafic, and Commerce*" and that Petty urged William Penn to "discourage" in Pennsylvania "the Learning of latin & greek" and to "promote" in its place "arithmetic & measuring & drawing" (35). And it was on the basis of the arguments advanced by Montaigne, Bacon, and Descartes that Locke articulated the case for a new way of life and a new social order friendly to commerce, technology, and medicine and based on the humanitarian principle that "the Preservation of all Mankind . . . is, every one's Duty, and the true Principle to regulate our Religion, Politicks, and Morality by" (36).

In the eighteenth century, following the publication of Locke's political, educational, and philosophical works, the critique aimed at the austere virtues so prized in the republics of ancient times, which Montaigne had invented and Bacon, Descartes, and Locke had developed, gained powerful support in a great many quarters. Thus, for example, Giambattista Vico traced the "heroic deeds" of the Romans to "the intolerable pride, profound avarice, and pitiless cruelty" which the patricians had exhibited in their treatment of the plebeians "precisely during that period

(33) *Les essais de Michel de Montaigne* 2.11 (434-35), 16 (618-30), 3.13 (1106): "De la cruauté", "De la gloire", and "De l'expérience".

(34) Cf. *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath, London 1857-74, VI 403-05 with III 430, and consider VI 646-48 (translated at 720-22) in light of III 527-39, 557-85, 591-620. Then, cf. René Descartes, *Oeuvres et lettres*, ed. André Bridoux, Paris 1953, 168 with 129-30, 133.

(35) Thomas Sprat, *The History of the Royal-Society of London, For the Improving of Natural Knowledge*, London 1667, 3.34 (408), and *The Petty Papers*, ed. Marquis of Lansdowne, London 1927, II 114, 238.

(36) John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, ed. John W. and Jean S. Yolton, Oxford 1989, para. 116. Consider John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government: A Critical Edition with an Introduction and Apparatus Criticus*, 2nd edition, ed. Peter Laslett, Cambridge 1970, II.ii.6 in light of Lix.86-87.

which Livy himself describes as having been the age of Roman virtue." The public virtue so celebrated in antiquity was grounded on "the grievous, ugly, and cruel private vices" of an aristocracy intent on retaining absolute control of a *familia* that included slaves and clients as well as children and wives (37).

In a strikingly similar fashion, Montesquieu later traced the "frightful tyranny" of emperors like Caligula not to lawless rule itself, but to a cause more profound: "the *esprit général* of the Romans." When the republic fell, he contended, "their fierce humor remained; the citizens were treated as they themselves had treated the enemies they had conquered, and they were governed on the same plan." The characteristic ferocity of these exemplars of classical virtue was, in fact, rooted in the tyrannical character of their domestic institutions: for men "accustomed to making sport of human nature in the person of their children and slaves could scarcely be acquainted with the virtue which we call humanity." Montesquieu loathed slavery. He thought it contrary to natural right, and he was persuaded that it caused the masters to become "haughty, proud, curt, harsh, angry, voluptuous, and cruel." To the warriors who lorded it over the helots of Sparta and the slaves of Rome, he evidently preferred those whom he termed the "timid bourgeois." That is why he argued that "even virtue has need of limits," and that is why he championed commerce and technological progress. For trade and progress in the arts tend not only to render slavery superfluous but to undermine the martial spirit and substitute a pacific, cosmopolitan ethos (38).

In much the same spirit, Lolme defended the prosaic liberty of modern England against the admirers of classical republicanism, who supposed that "the only proper employment of a free Citizen is, to be either incessantly assembled in the forum or preparing for war. — Being valiant, inured to hardships, inflamed with an ardent love of one's Country... and with an ardent love of glory." In his estimation, fervent patriotism turns out, upon close examination, to be "nothing more than an ardent desire of injuring all Mankind for the sake of the Society of which we are Members" while the ancient citizen's much touted longing

(37) Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, 2nd edition, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, Ithaca 1968 para. 38. See Jeffrey Barnoux, *The Critique of Classical Republicanism and the Understanding of Modern Forms of Polity in Vico's New Science*, "Clio" 9, 1980, 393-418.

(38) *Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, ed. Roger Caillois, Paris 1949-51, II 147-48, 151, 395, 490-98, 502-5, 585-86: *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* 15, and *L'esprit des lois* 11.4, 15.1-11, 16-17, 20.1-2.

for honor was "nothing more than an ardent desire of committing slaughter, in order to make afterwards a boast of it" (39).

In America, this critique of antiquity had an enormous impact. Thomas Paine denounced the *Iliad* as "a book of false glory, tending to inspire immoral and mischievous notions of honor" (40). The architect Benjamin Latrobe, though best remembered now for pioneering the Greek Revival, shared Paine's opinion. Homer's epic, he told a friend, "poisons the minds of young men" and "fills them with a rage for military murder and glory" (41). The poet Joel Barlow held a view still more extreme. In the preface to his American epic *The Columbiad*, he traced "the fatal policy of states" and "the miseries and degradations of social man" in large part to "the false notions of honor inspired by the works of Homer." In his opinion, the survival of his great predecessor's works was "one of the signal misfortunes of mankind" (42).

In 1789, Benjamin Rush launched a campaign to banish the study of classical languages from the curricula of American schools and colleges (43). He thought such pursuits a waste of time, and he linked the love of war, royalty, and titles with the love of Latin and Greek (44). These languages, he averred, "consume the flower of human life, and by enabling us to read agreeable histories of ancient crimes often lead us to imitate or tolerate them" (45). Two decades later, his views were unchanged. "Were every Greek and Latin book (the New Testament excepted) consumed in a bonfire, the world would be the wiser and better for it," he thundered. "'Delenda, delenda est lingua Romana' should be

(39) Jean Louis de Lolme, *The Constitution of England*, 3rd edition, London 1781, 242.

(40) *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip S. Foner, New York 1945, II 543: *The Age of Reason* (1794). See A. Owen Aldridge, *Thomas Paine and the Classics*, "Eighteenth Century Studies" 1, 1968, 370-80.

(41) Benjamin Henry Latrobe, *The Journal of Latrobe*, New York 1905, 65-82 (at 74): Letter to Ferdinand Fairfax on 28 May 1798.

(42) Joel Barlow, *The Columbiad* (Philadelphia 1809) I v-vii, II 194-95. See also A. Owen Aldridge, *The Concept of the Ancients and Moderns in American Poetry of the Federal Period*, in *Classical Traditions in Early America*, ed. John W. Eadie, Ann Arbor 1976, 99-108.

(43) Benjamin Rush, *An enquiry into the Utility of a knowledge of the Latin and Greek languages as a branch of liberal Studies, with hints of a plan of liberal instruction, without them, accommodated to the present state of society, manners, and government in the United States*, "American Museum" 5, 1789, 525-35.

(44) *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, ed. L. H. Butterfield, Philadelphia 1951, I 522-25: Letter to John Adams on 21 July 1789.

(45) *Letters of Benjamin Rush* 1 516: Letter to John Adams on 15 June 1789.

the voice of reason and liberty and humanity in every part of the world" (46).

Cicero did not escape the criticism directed more generally at the ancients. In December, 1819, Thomas Jefferson wrote to John Adams that the letters of Cicero, which he was then rereading, breathed "the purest effusions of an exalted patriot, while the parricide Caesar is left in odious contrast." But he felt compelled to add a disclaimer lest his correspondent mistake his attitude. "When the enthusiasm . . . kindled by Cicero's pen and principles, subsides into cool reflection," Jefferson remarked,

I ask myself What was that government which the virtues of Cicero were so zealous to restore, and the ambition of Caesar to subvert? And if Caesar had been as virtuous as he was daring and sagacious, what could he, even in the plenitude of his usurped power, have done to lead his fellow citizens into good government? I do not say to *restore it*, because they never had it, from the rape of the Sabines to the ravages of the Caesars. If their people indeed had been, like ourselves, enlightened, peaceable, and really free, the answer would be obvious. "Restore independence to all your foreign conquests, relieve Italy from the government of the rabble of Rome, consult it as a nation entitled to self-government, and do it's will."

For the Romans, such a reform would have been inconceivable. The "whole nation" was "steeped in corruption, vice and venality," and there was nothing that "great and virtuous men" like "Cicero, Cato, and Brutus" could have done, "had it been referred to them to establish a good government for their country." The truth is that the opponents of Caesar "had no ideas of government themselves." They thought only of "their degenerate Senate." And the people were worse. They had no idea "of liberty." They thought only of "the factious opposition of their tribunes." Jefferson was even willing to deny that Rome had ever known "one single day of free and rational government" (47).

John Adams's response is also worthy of attention — for it fleshes out Jefferson's argument and throws light on what the Virginian had in mind. Of the Romans, Adams wrote, "I never could discover that they possessed much Virtue, or real Liberty there." His point was that "Pride, Strength, and Courage, were all the virtues that composed their National Characters." These were, indeed, the qualities that had inspired the admiration conferred on Rome. Pride drove the Romans to attempt the conquest of an empire, and strength and courage enabled them to succeed.

(46) *Letters of Benjamin Rush* II 1066-67: Letter to John Adams on 2 October 1810.

(47) *The Adams-Jefferson Letters* II 548-50: Letter from Thomas Jefferson to John Adams on 10 December 1819.

But men like Adams and Jefferson openly doubted whether qualities of this sort really deserved admiration — and ultimately they denied that pride, strength, and courage were virtues at all. The qualities that so distinguished the Romans might, in the end, prove inseparable from the corruption, vice, and venality which had ultimately destroyed even the pretense of liberty at Rome (48). Like Tyrtaeus before them, the two Americans were advocates of a revolution in ethics. The Spartan poet had denied that quickness, agility at wrestling, brute strength, physical beauty, the golden touch, regal bearing, and eloquence were of import when separated from capacity in war (49). His American critics denied that pride, strength, and courage deserved regard when not in service to the institution and maintenance of that free and rational government suited to an enlightened and peaceable people. Jefferson spoke for all or nearly all of his compatriots when he wrote that “the establishment of another Roman empire, spreading vassalage and depravity over the face of the globe, is not, I hope, within the purposes of heaven” (50).

II

At this point, it would be tempting to bring this discussion to a close. But to do so would be to provide a one-sided account of Cicero's influence on American republicanism, for the judgment reached by John Adams and Thomas Jefferson in December, 1819 is hard to reconcile with what each had to say on another occasion. In 1775, Adams insisted that the “revolution principles” embraced by his compatriots were “the principles of Aristotle and Plato, of Livy and Cicero, and Sidney, Harrington, and Lock[e]” (51). Half a century thereafter, Jefferson traced the “authority” of the Declaration of Independence to “the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, [such] as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, etc.” (52). Clinton Rossiter and Bernard Bailyn

(48) *The Adams-Jefferson Letters* II 550-51: Letter from John Adams to Thomas Jefferson on 21 December 1819.

(49) Tyrtaeus F12 (West).

(50) *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford, New York 1904-5, XI 476: Letter to Thomas Leiper on 12 June 1815.

(51) *Papers of John Adams* II 230: *Novanglus*, 23 January 1775.

(52) *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* XVI 118-19: Letter to Henry Lee on 8 May 1825. Note Charles R. Kesler, *The Founders and the Classics*, in *The Revival of Constitutionalism*, ed. James W. Muller, Lincoln, Nebr., 1988, 43-68, and John Zvesper, *The American Founders and Classical Political Thought*, “History of Political Thought” 10, 1989, 701-18.

are clearly wrong: Aristotle, Cicero, and the like played a critical role as writers in keeping alive the memory of self-government through a long epoch in which despotism was the norm. And Hannah Arendt was undoubtedly correct in asserting that, "without the classical example shining through the centuries, none of the men of the revolutions on either side of the Atlantic would have possessed the courage for what then turned out to be unprecedented action." But one may doubt her claim that the American Revolution's "ultimate end" was public, participatory "freedom" of the sort exemplified in the ancient city "and the constitution of a public space where freedom would appear." For Gordon Wood was simply wrong in arguing, "The sacrifice of individual interests to the greater good of the whole formed the essence of republicanism and comprehended for Americans the idealistic goal of their Revolution. From this goal flowed all of the Americans' exhortatory literature and all that made their ideology truly revolutionary." The presence of Algernon Sidney and John Locke alongside Aristotle and Cicero is a reminder of the fact that what made the American Revolution truly revolutionary was the Americans' commitment to an understanding of man's inalienable rights that not only distinguished them from the slave-holding, empire-building republicans of the past but set them in opposition to the ancient example.

In February, 1760, Jonathan Sewall wrote to John Adams regarding Cicero. If they were to "peirce through the Glare of false Glory, too apt to dazzle and deceive the intellectual Eye," he contended, they would come to doubt the worth of "the palm for which the roman Orator ran."

It was, the plaudit of a people, at that Time, sunk into a most shameful Effeminacy of Manners, governed by a Spirit of Faction and Licentiousness, to which this *Father of his Country*, at length fell himself a Sacrifice. . . . To be caress'd, applauded and deify'd by *Roman Citizens*, to be raised to the highest Honours which *Rome*, the Mistress of the world, would give, are Rewards, it must be confessed, in their Nature more dazzling and, to an unthinking Mind, more captivating and alluring to the Toils of Indefatigable Study and close thinking; and in these, it will be acknowledged, *Cicero* had greatly the Advantage of us. But are these the most striking? Are there not others, which we, as well as *Cicero*, have in prospect, infinitely superiour, in their Nature, more refined, more lasting? What think you my Friend of the inward pleasure and Satisfaction which the human Mind receiveth from the Acquisition of Knowledge (53)?

"Tully," responded Adams, "therefore, had but few Advantages, in the Estimation of Reason more than We have, for a happy Life. — He had

(53) *Papers of John Adams* I 39-40: Letter from Jonathan Sewall on 13 February 1760.

greater Political Objects to tempt his Ambition, he had better Opportunities to force the Hozanna's of his Countrymen, but these are not Advantages for Happiness. On the Contrary, the Passions which these Objects were designed to gratify, were so many stings for ever smarting in his Mind, which at last goaded him into that Excess of Vanity and Pusillanimity, for which he has been as often blamed, as ever he was praised for his Genius and his Virtues" (54).

In his letter, Sewall had also remarked, "Cicero's name has been handed down thro' many Ages with Admiration and Applause; so may yours. . . . If in the Estimation of the World, a Man's Worth riseth in proportion to the Greatness of his Country, who knows but in future Ages, when New England shall have risen to its' intended Grandeur, it shall be as carefully recorded among the Registers of the Letterati, that *Adams* flourishd in the second Century after the Exode of its first Settlers from Great Britain, as it is now, that *Cicero* was born in the Six-Hundred-&-Forty-Seventh year after the Building of *Rome*?" (55). In reply, Adams admitted that he was not averse to fame. He might have contempt for "the Noisy applause, and servile Homage" paid by the vulgar crowd, but he nonetheless reserved "a strong affection for the honest Approbation of the wise and the good both in the present, and in all future Generations" (56). In later years, when given greater political objects to tempt his ambition than even Cicero had known, Adams would celebrate the fact that his generation had "been sent into life at a time when the greatest lawgivers of antiquity would have wished to live" (57).

III

When they confronted Cicero and his classical forebearers, the American Founders were ambivalent. They admired their predecessors' commitment to self-government; they envied them the renown they had won;

(54) *Papers of John Adams* I 41-45: Letter to Jonathan Sewall in February 1760.

(55) *Papers of John Adams* I 40: Letter from Jonathan Sewall on 13 February 1760.

(56) *Papers of John Adams* I 41: Letter to Jonathan Sewall in February 1760.

(57) *The Works of John Adams* IV 200: *Thoughts on Government* (1776). Consider *Papers of John Adams* II 134: Letter from William Tudor on 29 August 1774 with an eye to the thesis advanced in Paul A. Rahe, *The Primacy of Politics in Classical Greece*, "The American Historical Review" 89, 1984, 265-93.

and in establishing a republic, they sought to emulate their example. But they were wary of the consequences of constructing a polity on man's passion for glory, and so they played down the profound debt which they owed the philosopher-statesman who strived so effectively to make the wisdom of the Greeks accessible in the Latin West and who exemplified in his life the adage of Patrick Henry: "Give me liberty or give me death!"