

Gladiator Politics from Cicero to the White House

The gladiator has become a popular icon. He is the hero fighting against the forces of oppression, a Spartacus or a Maximus. He is the "gridiron gladiator" of Monday night football. But he is also the politician on the campaign trail. The casting of the modern politician as gladiator both appropriates and transforms ancient Roman attitudes about gladiators.

Ancient gladiators had a certain celebrity, but they were generally identified as *infames* and antithetical to the behavior and values of Roman citizens. Gladiatorial associations were cast as slurs against one's political opponents. For example, Cicero repeatedly identifies his nemesis P. Clodius Pulcher as a gladiator and accuses him of using gladiators to compel political support in the forum by means of violence and bloodshed in the *Pro Sestio*.

In the 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns the identification of candidates as gladiators reflects a greater complexity of the gladiator as a modern cultural symbol than is reflected by popular film portrayals and sports references. Obama and Clinton were compared positively to "two gladiators who have been at it, both admired for sticking at it" in their "spectacle" of a debate on February 26, 2008 by Tom Ashbrook and Mike McIntyre on NPR's *On Point*. Romney and Gingrich appeared on the cover of the February 6, 2012 issue of *Newsweek* as gladiators engaged in combat, Gingrich preparing to stab Romney in the back. These and other examples of political gladiators serve, when compared to texts such as Cicero's *Pro Sestio*, as a means to examine an ancient cultural phenomenon and modern, popularizing appropriations of that phenomenon. This paper explores the nature of this imagery and how it can elucidate and provoke questions about the roles of gladiators in both ancient Roman and modern American culture.