

Where forethought thy, Cicero? *Prudentia* as a Critical Error in Ciceronian Leadership

Joseph Hellegouarc'h argued for three fundamental qualities for effective leadership in the Roman world: *consilium*, *prudentia*, and *sapientia* (Hellegouarc'h 1972, 254). Cicero certainly made *prudentia* an integral part of the character and requirements of the *rector rei publicae* in *De Re Publica* (e.g. 2.45, 2.67, 6.1), yet Cicero's form of *prudentia* was only preparatory and supportive of action, independent from the *opera* that were required for the crisis resolution that was the purpose of the *rector*. In fact, far from being an example of forethought or wisdom, Cicero's *prudentia* is retroactive, something bestowed only in hindsight. As Santangelo (2020, 110-111) has made explicit, in contemporary Roman political thought, there is a difference between *prudentia* and *providentia*, with *prudentia* more akin to "wisdom" and *providentia* to "forethought," though the two words are cognate through their derivation from the verb *provideo*.

Despite the semantic relationship between the two words, Cicero shows a decided preference for *prudentia* and its cognate adjective *prudens* in *De Re Publica*, with twelve occurrences of *prudentia/prudens* (1.18, 1.38, 1.58, 1.70, 2.23, 2.45, 2.67, 2.67, 3.6, 3.15., 3.28) and only four of *providentia* (1.71, 2.5, 2.5, 2.12). Cicero's preference for *prudentia* over *providentia* is a critical error in his concept of the ideal statesman. Laelius prefaced the initial discussion of the best type of state and statesmen in Book 1 of *De Re Publica* by referencing the great heroes of the past who had made Rome great through their possession and use of *prudentia* (1.38). But that was then; in *De Re Publica* Cicero was worried about the now. The focus on the past means that Ciceronian *prudentia* was limited to conceptualization, and conceptualization of the past by studying the past; book learning, as Scipio makes clear in *Rep.* 5.5, is the statesman's

sine qua non. Cicero's understanding of *prudentia* is purely theoretical, separate from both the current political climate and the direct activity that will enable the prudent man to see through the necessary actions to resolve a crisis or threat to the *res publica* (Nelsestuen 2019, 384; cf. *Rep.* 6.1). Cicero does not seem to have envisioned forethought as a primary characteristic of his ideal statesman. As Cicero himself described in *De Inventione*, *prudentia* is merely the "knowledge of things that are good, things that are bad, and things that are neither" (2.160). Roman history being exemplary in the extreme, knowledge of the good, the bad, and the neither would only be found by studying the past, not current trends or developments.

It is the retrospective nature of *prudentia* that makes *prudentia* a drawback, not a benefit, to a Roman statesman. Cicero's concept of *prudentia* was in fact regressive and limiting, since it required looking back to the past for a solution to current problems. It is firmly situated with Stoic ethics in *De Officiis* (1.15), and it is synonymous with morality in *De Finibus* (5.58), the kind of morality that is found only in old men (*Sen.* 20; cf. *Off.* 1.122). But, as Cicero would find out for good on December 7, 43, it was useless to bring wisdom to a knife fight. Antony certainly lacked *prudentia* (e.g. *Phil.* 2.81), but that was why he succeeded. He was not bound by the constraints of Cicero's morality or his retrospective view of leadership and, like Octavian, would prove inscrutable to Cicero. Cicero could never shake his adherence to *prudentia*, though Cicero seems to have realized too late that *prudentia* was really a self-referential dog whistle. Those whom Cicero praised for their *prudentia*, for example, Hirtius and Pansa (*Phil.* 3.36), still needed Cicero to advise them on political matters; those who did not act in accordance with Cicero's wishes are criticized for their lack of it, like Brutus and Cassius' failure to kill Antony together with Caesar on the Ides of March (*Phil.* 2.34).

Cicero did not seem to envision his ideal statesman as having any facility with prognostication. Rather, Cicero felt that his *rector* need only be able to react in real time, to use his knowledge of the past to attempt to navigate the present, with little to no thought of the future. This temporal constraint on the statesman's wisdom would ultimately doom the *rector* as a practical model for preserving the Republic.

Works Cited

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