

Dirtbag's Guide to Leadership

At the 2024 CAMWS meeting, Even Dutmer delivered a talk entitled “Not Alone: A Proto-Transformational Collegium of Virtuous Friends in Cicero’s *De amicitia*,” in which he outlined six major contemporary leadership styles and demonstrated how Cicero exemplified two of them. Dutmer emphasized Cicero’s presentation of an upright and forthright character, linking these traits to his political success and rhetorical authority. As I listened, I found myself thinking not of Cicero’s triumphs, but of the final lines of *Bellum Catilinae* (61.3, 5), where Sallust describes the aftermath of Catiline’s last stand: *omnes tamen advorsis volneribus conciderant...ex omni copia neque in proelio neque in fuga quisquam civis ingenuus captus est*. (“all had fallen with wounds in their front....out of the whole army no freeborn citizen was captured either in battle or in flight.”) For all his moral failings and violations of Roman norms, Catiline was an effective leader. His followers fought to the death. None fled. None surrendered.

Dutmer’s reading of leadership theory and Cicero’s character reflects a long-standing rhetorical tradition that links virtue with persuasive power. From Aristotle to Quintilian, ancient rhetoricians argued that the morally upright man is inherently more persuasive: the liar’s soul is divided, the dissolute man lacks discipline, the virtuous man commands trust, the good student learns every lesson, the only way to stop a bad man with rhetoric is a good man with rhetoric (e.g. Arist. *Rh.* 1.1.12, Quint. *Inst.* 12.1.3-13). This tradition persists in the strands of modern leadership theory that argues that ethical character and moral clarity are prerequisites for effective leadership (Lemoine, Hartnell and Leroy 2019, Ciulla 2020). Dutmer, for instance, draws on contemporary models that emphasize *auctoritas* as a product of the cardinal virtues, leading to motivation, morality, and societal flourishing (Dutmer 2024: 21).

But what happens when the “bad guy” leads effectively? What if a profligate inspires loyalty, courage, and sacrifice? What if the liar wins?

This paper explores the leadership style of Catiline as a counterpoint to Cicero’s. While Cicero embodies Roman masculine ideals—*constantia*, *gravitas*, *auctoritas*—Catiline is portrayed by both Cicero and Sallust as his inverse: a man who adapts and ingratiates himself to whomever he meets, regardless of their social or moral worth. He squanders his wealth, associates with criminals, and even allows a woman to take a leadership role. Catiline falls short of all the minimum thresholds for elite masculine values, and yet, he leads a group of outcasts with remarkable cohesion and commitment. If *auctoritas* is generated through the performance of ancestral virtues, then Catiline’s success challenges the coherence of that model.

Drawing on contemporary leadership theory, I argue that Catiline exemplifies what we now call adaptive leadership. This model, developed by Ronald Heifetz and others, emphasizes flexibility, responsiveness to crisis, and the ability to mobilize people to face difficult realities. Adaptive leaders often emerge in times of institutional failure, and they challenge the status quo rather than uphold it. Catiline’s leadership, born in the Social War and Sulla’s civil war, forged in the crucible of debt and political failure, fits this model well. His followers were not the senatorial elite but the disempowered, the indebted, and the desperate. He offered them not stability but transformation.

This reading complicates the moral binaries often imposed on Roman political figures. Cicero, the “good man,” uses the tools of the state—votes, speeches, senatorial decrees—to suppress rebellion. Catiline, the “bad man,” uses charisma, adaptability, and insurgent tactics to build a coalition. Both are effective in their own ways. Both command loyalty. But only one is remembered as virtuous.

This paper aims to reframe our understanding of Roman leadership by taking seriously the effectiveness of “dirtbags.” In doing so, it invites us to reconsider the assumptions—ancient and modern—that link virtue with power, and to explore what leadership looks like when it emerges from the margins.

Works Cited

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