

A Tradition in Crisis: Cicero's *Catilinarians* and American Presidential Rhetoric

This paper demonstrates that Cicero's *Catilinarians* stand at the front of a tradition of crisis speech that finds its fullest expression in the rhetoric of the American presidency. The influence of Cicero's *Catilinarians* on American presidential rhetoric – especially on speeches delivered by FDR, JFK, and George W. Bush – is clearly evident in the definition of crisis and its juxtaposition with historical *exempla*. By reading Cicero through his reception in American presidential rhetoric, this paper contributes to – and advances – the *status opinionis* that a) Cicero's rhetoric in the *Catilinarians* reflects his own political agenda just as much as it does the actual threat that Catiline posed (Vasaly 1993; Batstone 1994; Gildenhard 2011) and b) Cicero's *Catilinarians* were foundational works in the historical development of the “rhetoric of terror,” a concept that has increasingly determined the nature of American presidential rhetoric since Pearl Harbor (Maggio 2007; Neel 2017; Tulis 2017).

On the one hand, it seems unlikely that FDR, JFK, Bush or their speech writers were intentionally invoking Cicero's *Catilinarians*; we certainly cannot prove this relationship. This paper's theoretical orientation, however, emphasizes the major insight of Reception Studies that a work is fundamentally shaped via its interpretation by subsequent readers; tradition, viewed through this lens, transcends the intentions of any single author. In this way, the fact that these three presidents all use rhetoric as a tool to confront the existential crises facing their citizenry (Pearl Harbor; the Cuban Missile Crisis; 9/11) suggests that important aspects of presidential rhetoric originate in Cicero. This reading argues that Cicero inaugurated a tradition of crisis speech, building upon the idea that the *Catilinarians* were “clearly intended to become classics” (Berry 2021: xxiv).

Throughout his speeches against Catiline, Cicero calls into being for his audience an interpretive framework for the crisis at hand in the process of describing it (Vasaly 1993; Goldenhard 2011; Neel 2017). Cicero famously opens *Catilinarian* 1 by setting up an antithesis of ‘you vs. our’ (*abutere patientia nostra*, 1.1) that divides Catiline and his conspirators from the Senate and Cicero (Batstone 1994; Neel 2017). Cicero reinforces this separation via repeated contrast between Catiline’s lawlessness and his own legal authority. Similarly, the rhetoric of FDR, JFK, and Bush consistently positions America as both the unjust victim of a lawless enemy and also as the ultimate arbiter of justice in the world (Lebow 1990; Zarefsky 2004; Maggio 2007). American presidents likewise follow the Ciceronian model by invoking historical examples that allow the audience to comprehend the nature of the current threat to be confronted. Cicero explicitly deploys historical examples to associate Catiline with former threats to the Roman Republic (e.g. *Cat.* 1.3-4) and implicitly connects him to Sulla and his reign of terror (Neel 2017). In framing the threat posed to America, Kennedy associates the USSR with Nazi Germany, Bush connects 9/11 to both Pearl Harbor and the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Roosevelt contrasts the Axis Powers’ aggression with America’s isolationist tendencies in the period after WWI (Lebow 1990; Zarefsky 2004; Maggio 2007; Tierny 2007). Cicero’s Senators would have remembered the carnage that Sulla unleashed on the city two decades before the Catilinarian conspiracy; American victory in WWII and the Cold War were foundational events in the collective memory of the American citizenry in the 20th century and beyond. Cicero and these three presidents thus leverage the past to create the present reality for their fellow citizens.

The reception of Cicero’s *Catilinarians* at moments of inflection in revolutionary and antebellum American history has been well studied (Berry 2021: ch. 6). This paper argues that this reception continued into the 20th century and beyond, by demonstrating that, in the hands of

presidents like FDR, JFK, and Bush, Cicero's rhetoric of crisis in the *Catilinarians* has contributed to the rise of the modern "Rhetorical Presidency" (Tulis 2017).

Works Cited

- Batstone, W.W. 1994. "Cicero's Construction of Consular Ethos in the *First Catilinarian*." *TAPA* 124: 211-66.
- Berry, D. H. 2021. *Cicero's Catilinarians*. Oxford.
- Gildenhard, I. 2011. *Creative Eloquence: The Construction of Reality in Cicero's Speeches*. Oxford.
- Lebow, R. N. 1990. "Domestic Politics and the Cuban Missile Crisis." *DH* 14: 471-92.
- Neel, J. 2017. "Cicero's Rhetoric of Terror." *Mouseion* 14: 437-53.
- Maggio, J. 2007. "The Presidential Rhetoric of Terror: The (Re)creation of Reality Immediately after 9/11." *P&P* 35: 810-35.
- Tierney, D. 2007. "'Pearl Harbor in Reverse': Moral Analogies in the Cuban Missile Crisis." *JCWS* 9: 49-77.
- Tulis, J. K. 2017. *The Rhetorical Presidency: New Edition*. Princeton.
- Vasaly, A. 1993. *Representations: Images of the World in Ciceronian Oratory*. Berkeley.
- Zarefsky, D. 2004. "Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition." *PSQ* 34: 607-619.