

## **“quousque tandem?” An exploration of the Roman world in speeches by modern politicians.**

In November of 63 BCE, as the end of his year as consul approached, Marcus Tullius Cicero gave a speech to the Roman Senate in the Temple of Jupiter Stator, in which he launched a verbal attack on the senator Lucius Sergius Catilina (often anglicised as Catiline). This speech, known as the First Catilinarian, began with the words, “quousque tandem abutere, Catilina, patientia nostra?”, or, “for how long, Catiline, will you abuse our patience?”. This speech would not be the only one Cicero made against Catiline; however, out of the numerous openings of the various Catilinarian orations, “quousque tandem” is undoubtedly the most famous, and the most popular in modern politics. Though particular groups have used classical imagery to their own political advantage, throughout this essay, I wish to focus upon how the words of Cicero have been recontextualised by individual politicians to fit their various political agendas. In light of this, I will explore the way the wider Roman world has been used by politicians, from John F. Kennedy’s defining “Ich bin ein Berliner” speech to Boris Johnson’s recent comparison himself to Cincinnatus, as well as the effectiveness and implications of these individual instances.

The original context in which Cicero gave the First Catilinarian was a politically fraught one. Following the elections of 63 BCE, during which his attempts on Cicero’s life and at the consulship for the year 62 BCE failed, Catiline sent a number of agents, including Gaius Manlius, into Italy in order to gather troops.<sup>1</sup> In late October, a letter was sent out warning Romans in Catiline’s good graces that the city was going to be attacked; on the 21st of October, Cicero proclaimed that there would be an attack on Rome in under a week.<sup>2</sup> On the 21st of October, Cicero proclaimed that an attack on the city itself was expected on the 27th. Within only the first week of November, Catiline had been indicted and an attempt on Cicero’s life had been thwarted; it was the day after this assassination attempt, on the 8th of November, that the First Catilinarian speech was delivered, with the Senate assembled in the temple of Jupiter Stator.<sup>3</sup> The atmosphere in Rome was thick with suspicion, and it was in this atmosphere that Cicero spoke the words, “quo usque tandem abutere, Catilina, patientia nostra?”<sup>4</sup> (hence abbreviated to “quo usque tandem”). For Cicero, this speech was the crystallisation of months of fear, both for the safety of the Roman state and for his own life, and the strength of his emotion in condemning Catiline is clearly reflected in his words: his repeated use of questioning terms such as “quo usque” and “quam diu” at the speech’s beginning convey his bewilderment at Catiline’s actions, whilst his direct address of Catiline emphasises Cicero’s certainty that he is guilty. Yet another saying of Cicero’s was made famous by this speech, albeit in the field of poetry rather than politics: “o tempora, o mores”, or: “Oh the times, oh the customs!”<sup>5</sup> The fact that not one, but two phrases from the opening of this speech have achieved such fame and wide use, both during antiquity and after it, speaks to Cicero’s skill as an orator; “quo usque tandem” was called by Mary Beard “probably the best known Latin quotation after ‘Arma virumque cano ...’”. The phrase “quo

<sup>1</sup> Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae*, 27.1

<sup>2</sup> “Timeline | Conspiracy of Catiline”, Penn State University, accessed 11 July 2023, <https://sites.psu.edu/conspofcatiline/timeline/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Cicero, *In Catilinam*, 1.1

<sup>5</sup> Translation is my own.

usque tandem” has, indeed, been reused throughout history in response to various political developments; in 2000, the phrase “Quo usque tandem abutere CRUESP patientia nostra?” was used by Brazilian state university strikers.<sup>6</sup> Twelve years later, in 2012, a sign reading “Quousque tandem” was held up at a protest against the new Hungarian constitution.<sup>7</sup>

This phrase’s enduring popularity can, perhaps, be attributed to the universality of the emotions captured within it. Even if one cannot replicate Cicero’s specific fury at a man who attempted to have him assassinated and to overthrow the Roman state, outrage, particularly at those whose political views do not align with one’s own, is a sentiment understood by all. This is best illustrated, perhaps, by a senator’s use of the phrase in 2014 - not a Roman senator, as Cicero was, but the junior senator for Texas, Ted Cruz. On the 20th of November, Cruz gave an address on the Senate floor, criticising an executive order by then-President Obama on immigration with the words “quousque tandem abutere, Obama, patientia nostra?”. Cruz, in the beginning of his address, makes reference to the fact that the First Catilinarian was originally given “2077 years” ago, and calls them “powerfully relevant”. Cruz’s use of an ancient Roman speech seems to add legitimacy to his attack on Obama, and make it seem as though history itself supports Cruz’ views. Moreover, by utilising the words of Cicero in particular, Cruz is able to add a high moral tone to his words. Cicero, in the context of Catiline’s conspiracy, was the man who saved Rome from destruction; by using his words, Cruz seems to be attempting to morally align himself with Cicero, thus placing himself as the saviour of the Republic (in this case, the United States, rather than Rome). Moreover, as Cicero is so well-known for his oratory, quoting him could have the effect of strengthening Cruz’ own image as an orator; one might then question how “powerfully relevant” Cicero’s words truly are to Cruz’ message, as opposed to Cicero himself.

However, the effectiveness of this speech is debatable; Sillett (2022) states that Cruz’ words were received with “no little bemusement”, implying that the Senate may not have understood why Cruz was quoting Cicero, let alone the context the original speech was given in.<sup>8</sup> One might then call into question why Cruz would compare himself to Cicero and Obama to Catiline, as well as the relevancy of this comparison. The power dynamics between Cicero and Catiline were vastly different to those between Cruz and Obama; Cicero, as consul, was in a role more similar to that of Obama, the U.S. President, than to that of Cruz. Moreover, Catiline had twice attempted (and twice failed) to become consul, and was raising an army outside of Rome in an attempt to attack it and kill Cicero. Due to this context, some authors have suggested that Cruz’s implication is that Obama was wrongly elected, and that he was attempting an insurrection.<sup>9</sup> I, however, would advance a different viewpoint. It is possible that, rather than being an intentional attempt to paint

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<sup>6</sup> “Lucky City”, Mary Beard, accessed 22 July 2023, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v23/n16/mary-beard/lucky-city>

<sup>7</sup> “Foreign Policy: Europe’s Six Biggest Problems”, Charles Grant, accessed 22 July 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2012/01/05/144730298/foreign-policy-europes-six-biggest-problems>

<sup>8</sup> Andrew J. Sillett, “Quousque tandem: The Reception of a Catchphrase” In *Portraying Cicero in Literature, Culture, and Politics: From Ancient to Modern Times*, ed. Francesca Romana Berno and Giuseppe La Bua. (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2022.) 267-282  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110748703-016>

<sup>9</sup> “Ted Cruz: Confused About Cicero”, Jesse Weiner, accessed 23 July 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/11/ted-cruz-confused-about-cicero/383066/>

Obama as a conspirator and not the rightful president, Cruz' quoting of Cicero was because of the idea of Cicero as a pillar of moral good being seen as more useful than Cicero's actual words. By simply invoking "the wisdom of Cicero" (the title of the video of the speech on Cruz's' Youtube channel), Cruz appears to be constructing an image of himself as a noble, philosophical statesman, acting in the public interests despite the danger to himself; this image of Cicero is so strong that John Adams, second president of the United States, said "all the ages of the world have not produced a greater statesman and philosopher united than Cicero". Cicero's position, and that of the wider Roman world, in modern politics could then be considered to be that of, perhaps, a moral reference point, where association with the classical, old world is of more importance than what the figures from the classical world have to say.

However, the actual sentiment behind the words of Cicero, rather than the legacy of Cicero himself, may have been in the mind of President John F. Kennedy when he made his infamous "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech in West Berlin on the 26th of June 1963, with an audience of as many as one million West Berliners.<sup>10</sup> In this speech, Kennedy made reference to how "two thousand years ago the proudest boast was "civis Romanus sum.", and how at the time of speaking, it had become "Ich bin ein Berliner". The phrase "civis Romanus sum", although likely too frequently said to be attributed solely to Cicero, was undoubtedly however made lastingly famous by him, being used in his orations against Verres, the corrupt governor of Sicily. Throughout the speech, Cicero creates a sense of outrage against the wicked deeds committed by Verres against Roman citizens, using various forms of the phrase "civis Romanus sum" or "civis Romanus", as a reminder that many of Verres' crimes have been committed against Roman citizens, as well as a reminder of the security and protection that ought to be associated with Roman citizenship, and which Verres has not given to the victims of his crimes. Kennedy's aim in quoting this phrase, therefore, may be to call to mind this same sense of security associated with being a Roman, as well as the intolerance for injustice which underpins Cicero's case against Verres.

Perhaps also, by equating the phrase "civis Romanus sum" with "Ich bin ein Berliner", Kennedy may be aiming to emphasise how well established the right citizens of Berlin have to freedom is. By using a Latin phrase and thus invoking ancient Rome, Kennedy makes freedom and security feel like an unquestionable right, rooted firmly in history. It seems then that Kennedy's aim in using the "civis Romanus sum" phrase is to strengthen his own message and emphasise the continual importance of identity and freedom, as well as pride in these things; whilst Cicero's original use of the phrase was to draw attention to the outrages wrongly committed against Roman citizens, Kennedy's aim is to highlight the pride associated with being a citizen of Berlin. Moreover, the very fact that Cicero is so often looked back on as a staunch defender of the Roman Republic may contribute to Kennedy's quoting of him. The idea of defending against dictatorship seems to easily align with the Republic of the United States, lending a historical legitimacy to Kennedy's criticism of the Soviet-controlled East Berlin and its need to "put up a wall" to control its people and "prevent them from leaving".

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<sup>10</sup> "Ich bin ein Berliner", a speech by John F Kennedy in Berlin, 1963", British Library, accessed 24 July 2023, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/ich-bin-ein-berliner-speech-by-john-f-kennedy-in-berlin-1963>

Ultimately, though, both Cicero's and Kennedy's words emphasise the pride associated with citizenship and the sense of status associated with being a "civis Romanus" or a "Berliner"; thus it seems to me that in this case Cicero's sentiments have indeed been recontextualised and rephrased to fit modern politics, rather than, as I would argue Ted Cruz does in his 2014 speech, Cicero's words being largely ignored in terms of meaning in favour of his image and legacy being used to advance a political agenda. Kennedy's words, moreover, are particularly effective due to this rephrasing; it is doubtless that not all of the crowd he addressed in West Berlin, especially given that the speech was translated via an interpreter (whom Kennedy thanks during the speech), would have recognised the phrase "civis Romanus sum". However, by connecting this to 'Ich bin ein Berliner', Kennedy is able to conjure a strong sense of pride in identity which also exists in the phrase "civis Romanus sum", as well as harness the historical impact of Cicero's original words.

The use, reuse, and, perhaps, misuse of the Roman world is not merely limited to politicians in the United States, as evidenced by the content of Boris Johnson's departure speech on the 6th of September 2022. In this case, Johnson did not quote Cicero, nor was it any other figure of the late Roman Republic which he drew upon. Rather, he invoked Cincinnatus, the Roman general who was called away from his farm and out of retirement, being temporarily made dictator in order to defend Rome; having accomplished this, Cincinnatus resumed his life in agriculture.<sup>11</sup> Johnson, referencing this story, said in his speech: "Like Cincinnatus, I am returning to my plough". By comparing himself to Cincinnatus, Johnson conjures an image of himself as simultaneously noble and humble; noble, for choosing to serve his country at all, and humble, for willingly stepping aside and returning to a simple life once his service ended. This humble, rural idea of a farmer may be in response to rising criticism over the number of UK politicians who have been educated at public schools such as Eton, including Johnson; a recent article in the Guardian specifically named Johnson as an example of a public school-educated politician whom the author considered "not fit" to run "our country".<sup>12</sup> By comparing himself to a farmer, Johnson may be trying to diminish the extent to which he is associated with his public school education.

Moreover, Johnson's likening of himself to Cincinnatus by extension means London is likened to Rome. In doing this, Johnson is calling to mind the image of sophistication, imperial splendour and glory often associated with Rome; this has the effect of making the Britain that had Johnson as Prime Minister seem to be also sophisticated, splendid and glorious, thereby creating a positive image of himself and his time in power.

There is also the fact that Cincinnatus, according to tradition, served as dictator a second time after returning to his farm.<sup>13</sup> This fact would likely be known to Johnson, who read Classics at Oxford; one might then view the speech as an indication that Johnson plans to make a return to politics and to power. Moreover, as in the case of Ted Cruz, some

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<sup>11</sup> "Cincinnatus", The George Washington Presidential Library, accessed 25 July 2023, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/cincinnatus/>

<sup>12</sup> Richard Beard, "Why public schoolboys like me and Boris Johnson aren't fit to run our country", *The Guardian*, 8 August 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/aug/08/public-schoolboys-boris-johnson-sad-little-boys-richard-beard>

<sup>13</sup> "Cincinnatus". World History Encyclopedia, accessed 28 July 2023. <https://www.worldhistory.org/Cincinnatus/>

implications of Johnson's speech are more troubling, as Cincinnatus is also attested to have been resistant to allowing the plebeians to have a constitution that would reduce the power of the politically dominant patricians. This sentiment was felt by some to be so alarming that Mary Beard described Cincinnatus as an "enemy of the people" in a Tweet made on the day of the speech.<sup>14</sup> One might consider Cruz' implication, that Obama (by being compared to Catiline) had attempted to kill him and was not the rightful leader of the United States, unintentional. As a result, Cruz' speech could be construed as being merely a misuse of Cicero's words, carried out whilst attempting to harness Cicero's oratorical legacy. However, given Johnson's background in Classics, I would argue the references made by him, and the implications of these references, are alarmingly resonant. Indeed, as speculated by some publications, Johnson may have been alluding to a future return to politics, just as Cincinnatus returned to dictatorship to protect Rome.<sup>15</sup>

Aside from the implications of Johnson's words, however, the effectiveness of them must be considered. When Johnson gave his valedictory speech, it was met with confusion, with many not understanding the meaning of his reference to Cincinnatus; numerous publications including the Washington Post and the Evening Standard published articles explaining who Cincinnatus was. More notably, Mary Beard appeared on the Times Radio to explain who Cincinnatus was.<sup>16</sup> The fact that the reference required explanation could be taken as evidence of the ineffectiveness of Johnson's classical reference; as seemingly few people understood it, one might argue that it is unlikely that any implications the reference carried (such as Johnson being humble) would have been understood either. Though the argument could be made that this reference to Cincinnatus was intentionally vague in order to obfuscate Johnson's intent, I find this unlikely, as if Johnson had plans to return to politics which he did not wish to be publicly known, it is more likely that he would have not made any reference at all.

One might then wish to compare the success and effectiveness of each of the three instances explored thus far. It is undoubtedly true that "Ich bin ein Berliner" is one of Kennedy's most famous speeches, if not one of the most famous in the world; American Rhetoric ranked it as 22nd in its list of top speeches by American orators,<sup>17</sup> and even searching the term "famous speeches" yields the "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech as a result. Although this fame could be attributed to how well known Kennedy himself was and is, particularly due to the well-known circumstances of his death I would argue this is not the case. If, after all, Kennedy's reputation alone was enough to make a speech made by him famous, one could expect any and all of his addresses to achieve the same level of prominence as "Ich bin ein Berliner"; however, this is not the case. One contributing factor to the success and subsequent fame of this speech, far above either Cruz' address to the

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<sup>14</sup> Mary Beard (@wmarybeard), "If you are curious about Boris Johnson's reference to Cincinnatus in his goodbye speech - he was a 5th century BC Roman politician", Twitter post, 6 September 2022, <https://twitter.com/wmarybeard/status/1567039650027413506?s=20>

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Osborne, "Boris Johnson's reference to Roman dictator Cincinnatus hints at his return", *Sky News*, 6 September 2022, <https://news.sky.com/story/boris-johnsons-reference-to-roman-dictator-cincinnatus-hints-at-his-return-12691090>

<sup>16</sup> Times Radio, "'Cincinnatus was an elitist' - Boris resignation speech explained | Mary Beard", YouTube video, 6 September 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBGoL0mpXnU&t=3s>

<sup>17</sup> "Top 100 Speeches", American Rhetoric, accessed 27 July 2023, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/top100speechesall.html>

Senate or Johnson's departure speech, might then be the effective reuse of Ciceronian language and Roman imagery. Kennedy, by using the phrase "Ich bin ein Berliner", provides an equivalent to "civis Romanus sum" that would have resonated well with his audience. By providing this equivalent phrase in German, which his West Berlin audience would have understood, Kennedy is able to not only strengthen his oratory with Cicero's words but also to ensure his meaning, and thus, Cicero's words, would be actually understood and absorbed by the audience.

Comparatively, Cruz, when giving his speech in imitation of Cicero's First Catilinarian, did not attempt to contextualise the speech and made few changes apart from altering the names used. Johnson, meanwhile, made only a reference to Cincinnatus in his speech, and did not contextualise or provide any detail into this. One might then see the success and fame of Kennedy's speech as partly due to the manner in which he used Roman oratory and the Roman world as part of his speech, rather than relying on the words of a Roman orator for the entire body of it, as Cruz appears to have done. Kennedy's speech and constant references to freedom tonally align well with Cicero's speech against Verres and for the freedom and rights of Roman citizens. Johnson's comparison of himself, a wealthy, public-school educated man to Cincinnatus, and Cruz' comparison of Obama, the then-President, to a conspirator who failed twice to achieve executive power in Rome, seem on the other hand to not align with the aspects of the Roman world they refer to. It may indeed be this misalignment of meaning that has contributed to the confusion and criticism around Cruz' and Johnson's speeches and has diminished their effectiveness and success.

To conclude, it is often the case that modern politicians not only use but misuse the words of Roman authors and the wider Roman world in their speeches. Often, the references made in these speeches may be too obscure or too convoluted to mean much of significance to the audiences of them; however, the implications these references carry, vague or confusing as they may be, can be troubling. However, despite the confusion classical allusions can cause, politicians continue to make use of the Roman world and Roman oratory due to how the historical weight associated with Rome adds credence and legitimacy to their own speeches. Regardless of how meaningful or effective the references they make are, politicians can benefit from this sense of legitimacy and historical weight, thus making the use (and indeed, misuse) of classics in modern oratory an attractive prospect.

**3156 words (excluding footnotes and bibliography)**

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