**Cato: Republican Foe of Tyranny**

Marcus Porcius Cato Uticensis, known in history as Cato the Younger, was a prominent conservative Roman senator during the late Roman Republic. His conservative principles looked to preserve the republican ethos of Rome. He lamented the erosion of traditional Roman standards and the sharp decline in virtuous citizenship. Like his contemporary, Marcus Tullius Cicero, Cato was a celebrated orator in the Roman Senate. He followed the Stoic philosophy of the Greek Zeno of Citium and tried to consider issues without emotion and based on objective principles only. Contemporaries admired his scrupulous honesty and righteous adherence to Roman civic and moral traditions. He inspired a significant following, who, like Cicero, abhorred Julius Ceasar’s usurpation of power. Always a vigorous opponent of tyranny, even as a youth, Cato had despised Sulla’s dictatorship. Legend holds he even demanded his teacher to “Give me a sword, that I might free my country from slavery.”

After he had meritoriously managed the Roman administration in Cyprus, the Senate heaped praises and commendations on Cato. They offered him higher positions and greater power in the Republic. Cato, however, lived an austere life and declined all these offers. He believed accepting such honors would have probably been illegal and improper. Exceptionally, few politicians would be so reserved, putting the state ahead of personal aggrandizement.

In character, Cato tirelessly fought to defeat Julius Caeser’s rebellion when the conqueror of Gaul “illegally” crossed the Rubican to invade Rome. Cato joined with the Eternal City’s sole Consul and Caesar’s former ally, Pompey the Great. When Caesar destroyed Pompey’s superior forces in Greece, Cato and his friend Metellus Scipio refused to capitulate. After Pompey’s embarrassing defeat, he was subsequently beheaded by his former allies in Egypt in their attempt to appease Caesar. Caesar, however, was shocked and had the young co-regent Ptolemy XIII beheaded. He then raised the pharaoh’s coregent Cleopatra VII to be the sole ruler of the ancient kingdom. Meanwhile, Cato and Scipio refused to accept Caesar’s generous amnesty offers. They continued the fight in northern Africa. Unfortunately for the Republicans, they were defeated in 46 BC at the Battle of Thapsus in modern Tunisia. Shortly after that, both Cato and Scipio ended their lives. They would rather die than serve a despot.

Cato’s example inspired many in England and the American colonies to reject non-representative governments as tyrannical. Early in the 18th century, the authors of the *Cato Letters*, John Trenchard, and Thomas Gordon, championed Cato’s legacy. They had emerged from different worlds. The elder Trenchard, born in 1662, came from an affluent countryside background. He stood in sharp contrast to the much younger Scottish attorney, Thomas Gordon. The two had met at a coffeehouse and developed a strong friendship. Both had supported Benjamin Hoadley, the Bishop of Bangor. Hoadley denied the divine right of kings and argued in favor of freedom of conscience. Many had attacked Hoadley for not supporting the established Church of England.

Gordon and Trenchard initially worked together to condemn the high Anglican Church with its Catholic character. They went on to write fifty-three essays for the “Independent Whig,” attacking the Episcopal “high church” of England’s pretensions. Their most important collaboration, however, was *Cato’s Letters*, which attracted a much wider audience. Trenchard and Gordon anchored their arguments in classical works. Nevertheless, the purpose of the work was to present a coherent political philosophy. The classically liberal, even libertarian, views in *Cato’s Letters* serve as the ideological foundation for radical Whigs in England. They also had a colossal influence on the late 18th-century American revolutionaries.

American radicals loved *Cato’s Letters*. Letter #59 adduces, “Liberty is the unalienable right of all mankind.” Inalienable means it cannot be separated from the individual. Letter #62 defined liberty as “the power which every man has over his actions, and his right to enjoy the fruit of his labour, art, and industry, as far as by it he hurts not the society, or any members of it, by taking from any member, or by hindering him from enjoying what he himself enjoys.” *Cato’s Letters* influenced American colonists more than any other British writings, including John Locke’s.

Like Locke, *Cato’s Letters* emphasized the darker side of human nature. They purported that humanity is not naturally benevolent, kind, or generous. According to *Cato #40,* “Every man loves himself better than he loves his whole species.” Therefore, men have no apprehensions of taking advantage of their fellow men (and women) through theft, fraud, or force. They contend that “men will never think they have enough, whilst they can take more. Humans are naturally greedy, acquisitive, and self-centered.” The letter forlornly explains, “Whilst men are men, ambition, avarice, and vanity, and other passions, will govern their actions…they will be ever usurping, or attempting to usurp, upon the liberty and fortunes of one another.” American founders concurred and later created a federal government with the division of powers and checks and balances. They spread power as thinly as possible to eliminate the machinations of the politically avaricious and aspiring tyrants.

Not only did Cato the Younger greatly influence the American intellectual and revolutionary elite, but George Washington also greatly admired him. He ordered Joseph Addison’s 1712 production, *Cato, a Tragedy,* performed for all his Continental soldiers at Valley Forge. The American general hoped the play would inspire his soldiers with Cato’s republican spirit. The soldiers appreciated Cato’s resistance to Julius Caesar's tyranny. They witnessed an icon of republicanism, virtue, and liberty. The performance deals with many themes, such as individual liberty versus governmental domination, republicanism versus monarchism, logic versus emotion, and Cato's struggle to hold on to his beliefs to the point of death. Curiously, Addisson’s play had also been the favorite of British King George II’s son and heir to the crown, Prince Frederick, who had died before ascending to the British throne. Frederick, Prince of Wales, considered his father a tyrannical despot.

Frederick’s son and future foe of the American Revolution, George III, read the prologue at the play’s opening. The future King proclaimed, "What, tho' a boy? it may with pride be said / A boy in England born, in England bred.” This was to show that he and his father were natives of England, whereas his grandfather, British King George II, had been born in Hanover in Germany and was a Holy Roman Empire Elector. The irony here is George Washington loved King George III’s father’s favorite play. Frederick and Washington both abhorred tyrannies. Many other revolutionaries shared Prince Frederick’s and Washington’s detest of despotism and used Addison’s *Cato* to make their point.

Scholars assert that Patrick Henry's celebrated ultimatum: "Give me liberty, or give me death!" came from the play’s Act II, Scene 4: "It is not now time to talk of aught/But chains or conquest, liberty or death." Patriot spy Nathan Hale's last words as he was martyred, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country,” came from Act IV, Scene 4, where Cato lamented, "What a pity it is/That we can die but once to serve our country." Washington wrote to his then-favorite general, Benedict Arnold, "It is not in the power of any man to command success, but you have done more—you have deserved it." This came from Act I, Scene 2: "'Tis not in mortals to command success, but we'll do more, Sempronius, we'll deserve it."[[1]](#footnote-1)

Both *Cato’s Letters* and Addison’s *Cato: A Tragedy* inspired American revolutionaries in their quest for liberty and understanding human nature. During the 18th century, Americans looked to the Roman republicans, such as Cato, as their examples to create institutions to control undisciplined human nature while allowing people to pursue their passions and interests. They would spread government authority as thinly as possible to protect people’s control over their actions and guard the people’s rights to enjoy the consequences of their efforts.

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1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)