**Cicero’s Contribution to the Republic:**

**The American Republic**

The American Founders looked at the acclaimed Roman orator, Cicero, as the model for Republican[[1]](#footnote-1) virtue. The iconic statesman’s optimum achievement lay in his development of a natural law theory that significantly contributed to the Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights. Cicero's conjectures laid the foundation for later European natural, inalienable rights theories central to the American Declaration. Cicero’s works were frequently quoted by the Founders and in contemporary orations, pamphlets, and sermons. Most praised the Italian orator for his commitment to the common good, intellect, and lucid communication skills.

Cicero, a native of Arpinum, Italy, demanded a republican government in Rome. He opposed one-man rule and lectured as a self-described constitutionalist. His reputation as an eloquent opponent of tyranny inspired American Founders, most of whom had been trained in classical studies. They especially appreciated Cicero’s ardent patriotism.

Founding Father John Adams especially considered Cicero a personal hero. He describes the Romans as all the ages of the world have not produced a more remarkable statesman and philosopher united in the same character; his *authority should have great weight*.  Thomas Jefferson, Adams’ sometimes friend and sometimes enemy, announced Cicero as *the father of eloquence and philosophy*. Adams’ son, John Quincy Adams, enthusiastically expressed that *living without a Cicero and a Tacitus at hand seems to me like a privation of one of my limbs.* Americans cannot underestimate Cicero’s influence on their nascent republic’s origins.

Charles Carroll of Carrollton was the longest-lived signer of the Declaration and the only Catholic to sign the document. Carroll believed Cicero to be the greatest of the ancient Greeks and Romans. He wrote, after Jesus Christ*, “give me the words of Cicero.”* Carroll considered the Italian (writings) a constant companion with whom he conversed throughout his life. When Carrol died in November 1832, the headlines read: “A great man hath fallen in Israel; the last of the Romans has passed into eternity,” no doubt due to his love for and relationship with Cicero*.*

Sadly, modern schools rarely explore the classics, which were thoroughly enmeshed in the personalities and characters of the American founders. Current ignorance of the classics leaves modern students ill-equipped to comprehend the seismic transformations that gave birth to the

American nation proficiently. Nevertheless, the study of Cicero is paramount to understanding the Founding Generation and the history of political thought competently.

John Adams, like Caroll, worked to emulate Cicero, yet he, like most Founders, filtered the Roman concept of virtue through a Christianized lens. He used the definition of virtue outlined by the 4th-century Church father, St. Augustine, another student of Cicero, and the 13th-century Italian philosopher, St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Augustine’s father was a Roman who had given his son a quality Roman education. St. Thomas shared with Cicero a strong appreciation of natural law. The American Founders also influenced Adams' Christianized view of Cicero. They all had different relationships with the Christian Bible and degrees of doctrinal observance. Their consonances came from the classical Greeks and Romans through the filters of Aquinas and Augustine. Of course, they all embraced 17th and 18th-century Enlightenment thinkers. These Enlightenment men, classical thinkers, and Christian thought were central influences on the Founders’ thinkers.

Many Founders had a love-hate relationship with Christian tradition vs. Classical tradition. Christian American Founders were ambivalent about whether to study the Classics or reject them as pagan writings. Nevertheless, they see that both traditions strongly emphasize the self-restraint and self-discipline necessary for self-government. Thomas Jefferson, who did not accept traditional Christianity, believed that Christian ethics were far superior to Classical ethics. The virtue of “humility” presents a stark contrast between Christianity and the Classics. In classical literature, with actors such as Odysseus, Achilles, and Aeneas, we see boasting as an admirable virtue. Cicero, likewise, is charged with vanity because of his constant bluster. John Adams tried to defend and excuse Cicero for his bravado, while a Roman would never have considered Cicero’s boasting a fault. Adams’ Christian heritage emphasizes humility, a sublime virtue for Christians. Classical virtues require one not to harm oneself or others. Christians, however, must help others with positive benevolence. Jefferson understood this. It is said that he had an Epicurean head but a Christian heart.

From Cicero’s writings, the Founders comprehended how natural law gave rise to natural rights that predate and stand outside government rule. Adams echoed Cicero when he wrote:

*[People have] rights...antecedent to all earthly governments—rights that cannot be repealed or restrained by human laws.*

Cicero believed that a rational and divine order governed the universe. The mark of divine intelligence upon all things is “law.”

From Cicero, the American Founders knew:

*[L]aw is not a product of human thought, nor is it any enactment of peoples, but something eternal which rules the whole universe by its wisdom in command and prohibition*.

These divine or natural laws were eternal, immutable, and universally applicable. Jefferson evinced these laws in the Declaration of Independence, saying they raised Americans to:

*[T] he separate and equal station (with the English) to which the Laws of Nature and Nature's God entitle them*.

This is critical for Americans to understand. For the revolutionaries, natural law and natural rights had priority over all English law and the British King. This gave them the transcendent right to revolt against what they considered unjust authority. These laws came from above. Natural law thus predates any state or its laws.

The American Founders loved Cicero’s poisonous contempt for demagogues and extensive dialogue on philosophy and statecraft. However, Cicero’s understanding of humanity’s origins contradicts contemporary English political thinkers such as John Locke and Thomas Hobbes. They believed humans were solitary beings in the state of nature. Locke’s ideas for natural rights come from his vision of this solitary state of nature. In contrast, like Aristotle, who lived centuries before, Cicero and the pro-republican 17th century English thinker Algernon Sidney all believed man was a political animal; his natural state was living in a community. This outlook anchored Cicero’s foundation of how society is organized.

Interestingly, despite having a different view of the state of nature, Locke idolized Cicero. Locke developed what is essentially a Ciceronian philosophy. The Lockean disciple Thomas Jefferson wrote his protégée James Madison that Locke and Sidney were the two principal sources for the American principles of political liberty and human rights. Studying both Cicero and others would be mandatory curricula at Jefferson’s University of Virginia.

The role of natural law is vital to appreciate how the Founders viewed law, rights, and the government. Their rights were antecedent to the government. They thus have priority over any government law or regulation. The Roman Senator contended that this divine order of the universe exceptionally favors humans. The divine nature can be observed through the human ability to reason and communicate, mainly through speech. His view of humans’ uniqueness is reminiscent of the ancient Greeks’ virtue, their highest moral excellence. They called this virtue *Logos* or “Reasoned Speech.” *Logos* separated humans from animals. It also indicates the Hebrew and Christian belief that humans were made in the image of God, *Imago Dei*.” Christians even call the “Word of God,” in the Gospel of John, *Logos*, “reasoned speech.”

American Founders believed they could create a just new nation through reason. In the new state, individual liberty would be paramount. Men would use reason to adhere to the divine order that Cicero had taught them. Christians would describe the divine order as God’s plan for humanity and quickly accepted Cicero’s explanation for just laws. Although Cicero was a pagan and predated Christianity by decades, he provided the most accessible conduit between the most committed Christians and those more loyal to the classics, along with the Age of Enlightenment.

For the Founders, Cicero served as the model for resisting British tyranny. He opposed Caesar’s usurpation of power in Rome and actively fought Mark Antony's grasp for supremacy upon Caesar’s assassination. Furthermore, Cicero’s concept of natural law allowed the Founders to articulate their right to overthrow the British Crown as an act of justice consistent with the divine order. They did not want to be seen as rebellious rabble to the civilized world. Cicero gave them the vehicle to present their case to the world as legitimate and the actions of civilized people.

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1. Cicero was a champion of the Roman Republic and the republican from of government, especially when it was threatened by Julius Caesar’s dictatorship and Mark Antony subsequent alliance with Caesar’s grandnephew and adopted son, Octavian (later Caesar Augustus). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)