

9-23-1990

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### Recommended Citation

Merrill, Norman W. (1990) "Who Was That Woman I Didn't See You With Last Night?," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 6: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol6/iss2/6>

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# Who Was That Woman I Didn't See You With Last Night?

*Norman W. Merrill*

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*The 1988 presidential campaign elicited numerous complaints about negative campaigning. But compared to the vicious rhetoric popular at the birth of the republic the rhetoric of the latest campaign was quite mild. Invective rhetoric was employed by the Founding Fathers, men like John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and James Callender. The partisan press of the time contributed greatly to the harsh tone of politics. All participants felt free to make acerbic remarks directed at the man rather than the issue, a tradition that continued throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Many of the charges made by American politicians were similar to allegations by politicians of the Roman republic. Since there was no invective tradition in European politics, it seems likely that American politicians were inspired by Roman models. Such attacks were generally lacking in veracity but obviously effected some political end or they would not have been employed for so long. The advent of a more responsible press in the twentieth century tamed the wild, freewheeling invective tradition considerably but did not kill it.*

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**D**uring the 1988 presidential election campaign, observers on all sides complained about negative campaigning and the vicious, derisive, and generally harsh tone of the candidates' speeches. In point of fact, the 1988 campaign, and most of the presidential campaigns of the twentieth century, have been relatively mild in manner when compared with those conducted during the first century of our republic. That is not to say that truly vicious things have not been said in modern times, for the ad hominem argument remains popular, but compared to campaigns conducted in the early years of the nation, modern election campaigns are relatively tame and focus on issues. How biting is the charge that Michael Dukakis was a "card-carrying member of the ACLU" in comparison with these statements made by Davy Crockett about Martin Van Buren.

And this is plain to every thinking man, because they must see that Van Buren is as opposite to General Jackson as dung is to diamond. Jackson is open, bold, warm-hearted, confiding, and passionate to a fault. Van Buren is secret, sly, selfish, cold, calculating, distrustful, treacherous; and if he could gain an object just as well by openness as intrigue, he would choose the latter.

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[Van Buren] is so stiff in his gait, and prim in his dress, that he is what the English call a dandy. When he enters the senate-chamber in the morning, he struts and swaggers like a crow in a gutter. He is laced up in corsets, such as women in town wear, and, if possible, tighter than the best of them. It was difficult to say, from his personal appearance, whether he was a man or woman, but for his large red and gray whiskers.<sup>1</sup>

That is negative campaigning!

Our forefathers indulged in such abusive attacks as a matter of course. Hardly a presidential candidate escaped the scathing comments of his opponent. Indeed, the bigger the issues, the harsher the rhetoric became. Horace Greeley remarked, after a particularly vitriolic race against Ulysses S. Grant, that he didn't know if he had run for the presidency or the penitentiary.<sup>2</sup> The origin of abusing one's political enemies rhetorically and what sources this tradition drew on is the focus of this article.

The invective tradition in American political rhetoric is as old as the American Revolution itself. Inflammatory oratory was a stock-in-trade for men like Patrick Henry and Samuel Adams. The great debate about the nature of the Constitution between the Federalists and anti-Federalists was acrimonious. The party system began to evolve during George Washington's presidency, and with its emergence came an increasingly strident rhetoric.

In 1792 supporters of Thomas Jefferson began to attack the fiscal policies of Alexander Hamilton in *The National Gazette*. Hamilton, never willing to accept criticism gracefully, responded in the *Federalist Gazette of the United States*. The polemical nature of this debate seems to have contributed substantially to the growth of the ad hominem argument in American political life. Many writers of the post-Revolutionary era adopted names from the ancient world when contributing to the constitutional debate and subsequent pamphleteering. Often they chose names that were appropriate to their political stance. Brutus and Cato were popular pseudonyms for staunch Republicans, while others used names of politicians of the ancient world like Aristides, Metellus, and Camillus, to name a few. Hamilton's choice of the name Catallus to respond to his critic is quite revelatory. Catallus was a Roman poet, not a statesman, known for his passionate love poetry and his bitter, often obscene attacks on his rivals and enemies. Many of Hamilton's attacks on Jefferson are worthy of his Roman namesake.

The conflict over Hamilton's fiscal policies faded, but the remaining years of the decade provided many crises that produced more venom, especially between Hamilton and John Adams, who had succeeded Washington in 1796. The two men had disliked one another for many years, and the irascible, acid-tongued Adams did not respond well to Hamilton's constant suggestions about how to conduct the public business.<sup>3</sup> The final rupture came in 1799, when Adams nominated William Vans Murray to negotiate with France instead of declaring war, as Hamilton and other Federalists wished. Disgusted with Adams, Hamilton penned a letter to certain Federalist friends entitled "The Public Conduct and Character of John Adams, Esq., President of the United States." In it Hamilton harshly criticized Adams's conduct of his presidency and strongly urged that the Federalist Party choose Charles Pinckney as its candidate. Through the agency of Aaron Burr, this letter was widely circulated, causing serious problems for the Federalists in the election of 1800. In this case the polemical approach backfired badly.

Nor was Adams shy about using strong, direct language with reference to his enemies. He had a quick temper and the four years of the presidency often pushed him to the breaking point. On one occasion, in May 1800, just prior to firing James McHenry, his secretary of war, Adams had an outburst about Hamilton, declaring, "He is an intrigant, the

greatest intrigant in the world — a man devoid of every moral principle — a bastard and as much a foreigner as Gallatin.”<sup>4</sup> Adams never forgave Hamilton for his machinations. In his *Autobiography*, written many years after Hamilton’s death, Adams wrote of Hamilton:

Although I have long since forgiven this Arch Enemy, yet Vice, Folly and Villany are not to be forgotten, because the guilty Wretch repented, in his dying Moments. Although David repented, We are no where commanded to forget the Affair of Uriah: though the Magdalene reformed, We are not obliged to forget her former Vocation: though the Thief upon the cross was converted, his Felony is still upon record. The Prodigal Son repented and was forgiven, yet his Harlots and riotous living, and even the Swine and the husks that brought him to consideration, cannot be forgotten. Nor am I obliged by any Principles of Morality or Religion to suffer my Character to lie under infamous Calumnies, because the Author of them, with a Pistol Bullet through his Spinal Marrow, died a Penitent . . . I will not conceal his former Character at the Expence of so much Injustice to my own, as this Scottish Creolion Bolingbroke in the days of his disappointed Ambition and unbridled Malice and revenge, was pleased falsely to attempt against it.<sup>5</sup>

Adams clearly got in the last word in this splendid piece of invective. The bitterness of Hamilton’s actions had not faded much, and Adams was not afraid to express his feelings openly as few others could or would do.

Thus, in the first decade of the new republic, a tradition of harsh rhetoric often directed at one’s opponent rather than the issues flourished. The bitter personal enmities between Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson, and their supporters became an integral part of the political scene and appeared in a very public forum. A rough and ready political tradition had arisen, one which future politicians and campaigners would feel free to use.

The abusive tradition in American political rhetoric did not spring full blown from the minds of the politicians of the post-Revolutionary period. Indeed, many of the accusations and charges are similar to those used by the Roman orators of the late republic. An examination of the allegations made by American politicians and those of the late Roman republic reveals some interesting parallels. Romans enjoyed hearing about the shameful behavior of their public figures much as Americans do. Moreover, Romans considered personal attacks a necessary part of political rhetoric. The eminent Roman historian Ronald Syme remarked in *The Roman Revolution*:

In the Rome of the Republic, not constrained by any laws of libel, the literature of politics was seldom dreary, hypocritical, or edifying. Persons, not programmes, came before the people for their judgement and approbation . . . The best of arguments was political abuse. In the allegation of disgusting immorality, degrading pursuits and ignoble origin the Roman politician knew no compunction or limit.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, Syme’s comments could easily have come from an American history text. American politicians from the earliest period used similar accusations. It is not surprising that Americans have adopted charges similar to those of their Roman counterparts. Classical languages and ancient history were the backbone of the early American curriculum. Young scholars read the speeches of Cicero, a brilliant orator, skilled politician, and master of invective. Adams mentions the virtues of reading Cicero frequently in his *Diaries*, and Hamilton invokes his name in his series of essays signed Tully.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the foundation of our republic evolved from a careful study of Greek and Roman government. Even a casual examination of *The Federalist* reveals that the Founding Fathers turned constantly

to the ancients to find a suitable model for the new government, suggesting that they may also have been inspired by the classical models when they attacked their political opponents. American political rhetoric abounds with allusions to Roman historical figures. An examination of passages from Cicero and his predecessors reveals some interesting parallels between the ancient Romans and our political predecessors. Roman rhetorical attacks tend to be more graphic and dramatic than American ones, while American attacks more often occur in the form of slogans, songs, or editorials, but the parallels are clear. How much truth is involved in any of the allegations is debatable, whether we are dealing with American or Roman politicians. The intention of invective rhetoric is to sway the audience to a certain point of view, not necessarily to tell the truth. James Bryce, a British historian, wrote in *The American Commonwealth*:

It is therefore an easy task for the unscrupulous passions which a contest rouses to gather up rumors, piece out old though unproved stories of corruption, put the worse meaning on doubtful words, and so construct a damning impeachment, which will be read in party journals by many voters who never see the defence. The worst of this habit of universal invective is that the plain citizen, hearing much which he cannot believe, finding the foul imputations brought even against those he has reason to respect, despairs of sifting the evidence in any given case.<sup>8</sup>

A common accusation in both Roman and American politics was that the opposition was seeking monarchy or some other form of despotism. This charge suited the political structure of each nation. The Romans had expelled their last king in 509 B.C. and established a republican form of government; Americans had done the same in 1776. Hatred of kings and those with regal aspirations was a common bond to the nations that believed in liberty (a Roman concept) and republican government.

Cato the Elder, a model of Roman puritanism, honesty, and severity, delivered this attack on a Roman magistrate who had illegally flogged some local magistrates for a petty offense:

He said that the local grain supply had not been adequately attended to by the decemvirs. He ordered their clothes to be taken off and the men to be flogged. The Bruttiani flogged the decemvirs, many men witnessed. Who can endure this insult? Who this abuse of power? Who this slavery? No king dared to do this?<sup>9</sup>

Over three hundred years after the expulsion of the kings, a Roman politician is accusing a magistrate of behaving more imperiously than a king.

A century and a half later, Cicero attacked Mark Antony for his regal aspirations.

Marcus Antonius alone since the founding of the city openly surrounded himself with armed guards — a thing which neither our kings did, nor did those who wished to seize power illegally after the kings had been expelled. I remember Cinna; I saw Sulla; and likewise Caesar: these three after the state had been freed by Lucius Brutus were more powerful than the entire republic. None did this.<sup>10</sup>

American politicians also used the names of Caesar and Sulla as archetypal ancient tyrants and Cromwell and Napoleon as modern tyrannical paradigms. Virtually no Roman politician escaped this charge in the last two hundred years of the republic. Cicero himself was charged with behaving like a king and briefly exiled.

American politicians were quick to say that members of the opposition were behaving in a kingly manner or would like to become king. George Washington, who had rejected

the idea of receiving a crown, was nonetheless accused of behaving like a king. There were whispers that his carriage drawn by six horses was like that of George III. At the end of his presidency he was referred to as the American Caesar and Nero.<sup>11</sup> There were dark rumors about the monarchical aim of both Hamilton and Jefferson throughout the 1790s. Writing of the appointment of Hamilton as second in command to Commander in Chief Washington, John Adams declared:

With all the vanity and timidity of Cicero, all the debauchery of Marc Antony and all the ambition of Julius Caesar, his object was the command of fifty thousand men. My object was the defense of my country, and that alone, which I knew could be affected only by a navy.<sup>12</sup>

In the election campaign of 1796, supporters of Jefferson rewrote the words of “Yankee Doodle” to mock the supposed regal ambitions of John Adams:

See Johnny at the helm of State,  
Head itching for a crown,  
He longs to be, like Georgy, great,  
And pull Tom Jeffer downy.

Adams was perceived throughout the campaign as an avowed supporter of the monarchy. Critics claimed that Adams planned to marry one of his sons to a daughter of George III to start an American royal family, a plan supposedly halted only by three visits from George Washington.<sup>13</sup> His son, John Quincy Adams, was dubbed King John II.

In the 1832 campaign between Henry Clay and Andrew Jackson, Jackson was frequently called King Andy, a charge that stemmed from Jackson’s opposition to the National Bank. Supporters of Clay used the slogan “The king upon the throne: The people in the dust.”<sup>14</sup> Jackson was also styled King Andrew the First King of Kings. Cartoonists depicted him in royal robes, trampling the Constitution under his feet. The *Portland (Maine) Daily Advertiser* attacked Jackson’s kingly aspirations, alluding to the great despots of the past:

Is the president preparing for a crown by cajoling us with the prospect of an equal division of goods — by offering his aid to overturn the rights of property, to humble the wealthy, and to put down the exalted? If so, we ask, which is worth the most, monarchy, despotism, the tyranny of one man — or honorable poverty, and the present enjoyment of a constitution and laws which throw the field of exertion wide open to industry, energy, and economy? Let it be remembered that every military chieftain, Sulla, Caesar, Cromwell, all have obtained unlimited and despotic power by pretending to be the sole friends of the People.<sup>15</sup>

Note that the editorial specifically cited two Roman tyrants, both of whom were alleged to have regal aims. These tactics didn’t work, and Jackson was elected despite the accusations. Jackson’s “kingly” behavior was not entirely forgotten, however, and his hand-picked successor, Van Buren, was dubbed King Martin the First.

Abraham Lincoln was a logical target for such charges during the years 1861–1865, when both South and North attacked his tyrannical aims. First, from the *Charleston Mercury*, March 9, 1861:

King Lincoln — Rail splitter Abraham — Emperor! We thank thee for this. It is the tocsin of battle, but it is the signal of our freedom. Quickly, oh quickly begin the fray. Haste to levy tribute. “Enforce the laws” with all possible speed! . . . O low-born, despicable tyrant, that the price of liberty will be paid.

That is invective and a call to liberty worthy of Cicero! Northern newspapers were frequently no more charitable toward Lincoln. The *Bangor Democrat*, April 18, 1861, blasted Lincoln in the following terms:

Yes, Abraham Lincoln, a Tory from his birth, is putting forth all the powers of Government to crush out the spirit of American liberty. Surrounded by gleaming swords and glistening bayonets at Washington, he sends forth fleets and armies to overawe and subdue that gallant little state which was the first to raise its voice and arm against British oppression.

It is rather entertaining to see the prairie-born log splitter portrayed as a member of the British Tory party, crushing out the light of liberty, a feat the original Tories had been incapable of doing.

During the Reconstruction period President Andrew Johnson was named, as was Jackson before him, King Andrew the First. Gradually, however, as the republic began to seem reasonably safe from those interested in assuming monarchical power, accusations of imperious or despotic behavior became less popular. Though the memory of rule by English kings was in the dim past and accusations of tyrannical behavior no longer swayed the electorate, in moments of severe constitutional stress such charges did periodically recur. When Franklin D. Roosevelt attempted to pack the Supreme Court in 1937, the *New York Herald Tribune* editorialized:

No President of the United States ever before made the least gesture toward attempting to gain such a vast grant of power . . . It was a French King, Louis XIV, who said, "L'état, c'est moi" — "I am the State." The paper shell of American constitutionalism would continue if President Roosevelt secured the passage of the law he now demands. But it would be only a shell.<sup>16</sup>

Although this is a more sophisticated attack than those of a century earlier, the allusion to Louis XIV, a model absolute monarch, is clearly intended to warn its readers about Roosevelt's aims. Roosevelt's decision to run for an unprecedented third term in 1940 brought many unflattering accusations about his real motives. One headline read WALLACE PRAISES DICTATORS, SLAMS PRIESTS IN BOOK MS. The article below began:

Many people will be surprised to learn that Henry A. Wallace, Roosevelt candidate for the vice-presidency, once praised Dictators Lenin, Stalin, and Mussolini, and repeated religious criticisms which are certain to horrify many good Christian Americans.

Other anonymous signs and slogans appeared with messages such as:

Save Your Church!  
Dictators Hate Religion  
Vote Straight Republican

and

3rd Term  
3rd Reich  
3rd Internationale<sup>17</sup>

In more recent times, John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan have been charged with having "imperial presidencies." Cartoonists have also portrayed many re-

cent presidents in imperial garb, but fortunately campaigns of the last forty years have provoked few severe constitutional crises that raised questions about any candidate's regal ambitions.

Another ad hominem argument popular with both Roman and American politicians was that one's opponent had engaged in some form of immorality, especially inappropriate sexual behavior or association with disreputable companions. For Romans, who were publicly quite puritanical, such companions included prostitutes of both sexes, actors, Greeks, and dancers. American politicians seem to favor illicit affairs with women of lower status.

Cato the Censor sought to have former consul Lucius Quinctius Flaminius expelled from the Senate in 184 B.C. because of his immorality. One of the incidents Cato cited in support of his removal was an episode of cruelty and immorality that occurred when Flaminius was serving as pro-consul in Gaul. This is Cato's version.

He reproached Flaminius because he had brought Philip the Carthaginian, a notorious and expensive prostitute, who was induced by the hope of great gifts, with him from Rome into Gaul. This boy, playfully mocking the consul, was often accustomed to complain that just at the time of the gladiatorial games he had been taken from Rome in submission to his lover. By chance they were banqueting and flushed with wine when it was announced that a Gallic deserter of noble status had come to the banquet with his children who had wished to meet the consul and receive his promise of protection face to face. He was led into the tent and began to speak to the consul through an interpreter. In the middle of his speech, Flaminius said to his prostitute, "Do you wish, since you missed the gladiatorial shows, to see this Gaul die here now?" When the boy nodded yes, not taking him too seriously, the consul drew his sword, which was hanging above his head, and struck the Gaul in the head while he was still speaking.<sup>18</sup>

Cato masterfully brings out the sense of outrage. A holder of the highest magistracy of the republic, drunk, in a couch with a Carthaginian whore, murders a noble man seeking refuge and the protection of the Roman people. The Romans had just finished a twenty-year war with Carthage and the pro-consul is consorting with a Carthaginian whore. Such an attack would have had a profound impact on the audience.

Let us look at two similar allegations of shameful immorality brought by Cicero more than one hundred years later. In the first passage, Cicero is prosecuting Verres, the corrupt governor of Sicily, in the year 70 B.C. According to Cicero, Verres allowed justice to be administered at his house by Chelidon, his favorite prostitute.

A Roman knight, Caius Mustius, a man noted for his integrity, went to Chelidon. With him went Marcus Junius, a very honest and pure man. Oh, your praetorship was bitter, miserable, and unworthy for many people! I will pass over the other things, but with what great shame, with what great sorrow do you think that such men came to the house of a prostitute? Men who would never, under any condition, have undergone such a disgrace unless the reasons of duty and kinship had forced them, came, as I said, to Chelidon. The house was full. New laws, new decrees, new judgements were sought. The house was crowded not with an assembly of whores, but rather with people seeking justice. Mustius spoke, explained the situation, sought help, offered a bribe. That prostitute answered in a civilized manner and said she would gladly help.<sup>19</sup>

Cicero masterfully underscores the shame and outrage of this situation. The legal affairs of the whole island of Sicily are managed not by the praetor Verres, the man whom Rome

had sent to administer the legal system, but by a prostitute, albeit a most civilized one. Honest citizens, who would ordinarily never go near such a shameful place, are forced to go to a prostitute to gain justice.

Almost thirty years later, Cicero attacked Mark Antony for his shamelessness:

The tribune of the plebs [Antony] was riding in a Gallic chariot. Lictors wearing laurel wreaths preceded him, among whom carried on an open litter was a mime whom the decent townspeople from the neighboring towns who unavoidably happened to meet her greeted her not by that well-known mime name, but as Volumnia. A wagon full of pimps followed, the most disgusting comrades; his scorned mother followed the girl friend of her shameless son like a daughter-in-law.<sup>20</sup>

The tribune was the people's representative in the Roman government. Here he is riding in a Gallic chariot instead of on horseback, as a proper magistrate would. And what comprises the retinue of this elected representative of the people: a female mime, protected by the laurel-wreathed lictors, military attendants who ordinarily accompanied only the highest magistrates of the Roman republic and carried before them the fasces, symbolic of the government's authority, a wagon loaded with pimps, and finally his mother, who should have had the place of honor near her son, brings up the rear of this shameful parade. The female mime was synonymous with prostitute for the Roman audience. Volumnia, the name of an old Roman family, was therefore not an appropriate name for a mime. In addition, she is carried on a litter as if she were a proper Roman matron, and the fact that the litter is open only adds to the disgraceful nature of the procession.

American politicians from the beginning of the republic have delighted in regaling audiences with the real or imagined indiscretions of their leaders. The American sense of indignation and outrage is not generally as vehement as that of Roman politicians, for Americans tended more to the comic or satiric side of the issues.

Alexander Hamilton had an affair with a married woman named Reynolds. Her husband blackmailed Hamilton until 1796, when fellow Federalists forced Hamilton to publish a forty-page document, *The Reynolds Pamphlet*, which disclosed details of the affair, defended his own behavior, and lashed out at his accusers in the characteristic Hamilton manner. Before 1792, however, Hamilton had been one of the most vigorous assailants of the immorality of others. In his pamphlet he never really apologized for his behavior, but rather tried to portray himself as a victim of the "conspiracy of vice against virtue":

Relying upon the weakness of human nature, the Jacobin Scandal-Club, though often defeated, constantly returns to the charge. Old calumnies are served up afresh, and every pretext is seized to add to the catalogue. The person whom they seek to blacken, by dint of repeated strokes of their brush, becomes a demon in their own eyes, though he might be pure and bright as an angel but for the daubing of those wizard painters.<sup>21</sup>

So much for apology. Hamilton had admitted his guilt and the blackmail, yet somehow "the Jacobin Scandal-Club" and its "wizards" (Jefferson and friends) were responsible for his problems. Madison wrote to Jefferson in October 1797 about Hamilton's pamphlet.

Next to the error of publishing it at all, is that of forgetting that simplicity and candour are the only dress which prudence would put on innocence. Here we see every rhetorical artifice employed to excite the spirit of party to prop up his sinking reputation; and whilst the most exaggerated complaints are uttered against the unfair persecution of himself, he deals out in every page the most malignant insinuations against others. The

one against you is a masterpiece of folly, because its impotence is in exact proportion to its venom.<sup>22</sup>

Here, early in the American political tradition, American politicians are using the immorality of their opponents as fertile ground for political attack, much as the Romans had millennia earlier. John Adams also remarked on “the profligacy of [Hamilton’s] life; his fornications, adulteries and his incests.”<sup>23</sup> Clearly Adams is employing the same style of attack that Hamilton and others practiced. Such influential men obviously set the tone for their successors.

Adams was also attacked with a rather amusing charge of immorality. Republicans claimed that he had sent General Charles Pinckney to England on an American frigate to procure four pretty girls as mistresses, two for Adams and two for Pinckney. When the usually choleric Adams heard this accusation, he laughed and claimed that Pinckney had obviously kept all four girls and cheated him of two.

Jefferson suffered from similar slanderous allegations about his immoral behavior. During his presidency one James Callender, a man who had the tacit support of Jefferson and his partisans in his attacks on Hamilton and Adams in the early 1790s, turned against Jefferson and alleged that he kept one of his female slaves, Sally Hemings, as a mistress and was the father of some of her children. Facts had never deterred Callender in the past and he spread the stories about “Dusky Sally” throughout the Federalist press. In 1808 thirteen-year-old poet William Cullen Bryant, angered, like so many New Englanders, by Jefferson’s embargo, penned a five-hundred-line poem, “The Embargo,” which contained the lines

Go wretch, resign the presidential chair,  
Disclose thy secret measures, foul or fair.  
Go, search with curious eye, for horned frogs,  
Mid the wild wastes of Louisiana bogs;  
Or, where Ohio rolls his turbid stream,  
Dig for huge bones, thy glory and thy theme.  
Go, scan, Philosophist, [Sally’s] charms  
And sink supinely in her sable arms;  
But quit to abler hands the helm of the state,  
Nor image ruin on thy country’s fate.<sup>24</sup>

In the same poem Bryant also referred to Jefferson as a Cromwell. A poet from the *Boston Gazette* printed the following verses to be sung to “Yankee Doodle”:

Of all the damsels on the green,  
On mountain, or in valley  
A lass so luscious ne’er was seen,  
As the Monticellian Sally.  
Yankey Doodle, who’s the noodle?  
What wife were half so handy?  
To breed a flock of slaves for stock,  
A blackamoor’s the dandy.<sup>25</sup>

Many other similar poems and songs circulated thanks to Callender and his Federalist friends. Jefferson stayed out of the furor as much as possible during his two terms.

Enemies of John Quincy Adams attacked him for several alleged indiscretions. He was said to have enjoyed premarital sex with his wife. He purportedly had procured an American serving girl for the Russian czar when on a diplomatic assignment to Russia, a charge

that harkens back to Cicero's complaint about pimps who followed Mark Antony. The *Natchez Gazette* made the following comment on Adams after his election:

The courtly voluptuary, refined in all the stratagems of sensuality, the privileged libertine at whose approach innocence trembles and the blushing cheek grows pale, who considers virtue as the *ignis fatuus* of imagination and health and happiness as his lawful prey, the deceitful diplomatist, the fawning sycophant, the superannuated beggar.<sup>26</sup>

Modern scholars generally agree that such portrayals of the puritan, patrician Adams are considerably exaggerated.

Over the next half century the allegations of immorality continued apace. Andrew Jackson was accused of living in sin with his wife Rachel because of some irregularities in her divorce. In the campaign of 1828 anti-Jackson crowds waved banners proclaiming "The ABC's of Democracy — The Adulteress — The Bully — And the Cuckold."<sup>27</sup> William Henry Harrison allegedly fathered three children with a Winnebago woman. Lincoln appeared on the battlefield cracking jokes with "his pimps and pets." In the campaign of 1864, a story emerged that Lincoln had an illegitimate daughter. Though untrue, the story was widely disseminated during the campaign. Ulysses S. Grant was also supposed to have fathered an illegitimate daughter by an Indian woman. Of course the immorality of fathering illegitimate children was compounded by racism, as Sally Hemings was black, and Harrison and Grant allegedly chose Indian women. Such accusations, however untrue, must have swayed some voters.

In the campaign of 1883, Grover Cleveland became embroiled in a genuine sex scandal. Well before he appeared on the national scene, Cleveland had fathered an illegitimate child in his home town of Buffalo. Although he assumed financial responsibility for the child and his private immorality had nothing to do with his ability to be president, Republicans, embarrassed by the involvement of their own candidate, James G. Blaine, in a far more serious railroad scandal, seized on Cleveland's sexual indiscretion. The Republican newspapers delighted in excoriating the otherwise honest Cleveland. Charles Dana wrote in the *New York Sun* that "the American people will knowingly elect to the Presidency a coarse debauchee who would bring his harlots with him to Washington and hire lodgings for them convenient to the White House." Other writers branded him as a "libertine," "rake," "a gross and licentious man," "a moral leper," and "worse in moral quality than a pickpocket, a sneak thief, or a Cherry street debauchee, a wretch unworthy of respect or confidence." Republicans were fond of chanting the slogan "Ma! Ma! Where's my pa?"<sup>28</sup> Cleveland supporters did get in the last word after the election, however, when they added the refrain "Gone to the White House. Ha! Ha! Ha!" Blaine was also reproached for his alleged immorality. The *Indiana Sentinel* wrote:

There is hardly an intelligent man in the country who has not heard that James G. Blaine betrayed the girl whom he married, and then only married her at the muzzle of a shotgun . . . If, after despoiling her, he was too craven to refuse her legal redress, giving legitimacy to her child, until a loaded shotgun stimulated his conscience — then there is a blot on his character more foul, if possible, than any of the countless stains on his political record.<sup>29</sup>

These attacks and the multitude of others that assailed both Cleveland and Blaine are quite clearly reminiscent of the attacks made by Cicero and Cato two millennia earlier. It is remarkable to think, in the case of Cleveland, that one private act of immorality many

years earlier, for which he had assumed full responsibility, could have provoked such an emotional uproar, much of which is mere rhetorical hyperbole. In like fashion, the charges against Blaine would appear to be a reciprocal response by Cleveland supporters.

Similar allegations continued to be used in the twentieth century, but they generally lacked the vehemence of the nineteenth-century attacks. Critics attempted to blacken Woodrow Wilson with accusations that he was involved with a Mrs. Peck and had even pushed his wife Ellen downstairs, causing her eventual death.<sup>30</sup> Rumors emerged that he had contemplated divorce, that Mrs. Peck had sued for breach of promise, and that a large payoff had been arranged. Wilson was understandably upset by such rumors, but they seemed to have little effect on his successful reelection campaign. Warren G. Harding was a devoted lady's man who had had at least two mistresses, one of whom, Nan Britton, alleged after his death that she had borne him a child. The other, Carrie Phillips, a married woman, took an expense-paid vacation to the Orient during the months of the campaign.

Allegations of immorality as a means of political attack have not been as numerous in the years since World War I, although rumors about John Kennedy's womanizing were rife. The most damaging charge of immorality in recent years was the innocent admission by Jimmy Carter that he had once felt "lust in his heart," quite a comedown from the rhetoric of earlier campaigns. The ad hominem argument may have lost some of its charm for the campaigners of the mid to late twentieth century for a variety of reasons. Newspaper reporters have become far more concerned with reporting the truth and scrutinizing the validity of campaign rhetoric. The reporting of the news is also more up to date than it used to be. The press, despite the complaints of modern politicians and observers, is far more trustworthy and less biased than it used to be. Much of the most splendid invective was the direct result of a very partisan press. Partisan newspapers like the *National Gazette*, the *Gazette of the United States*, and Benjamin Franklin Bache's *Aurora* contributed significantly to the harsh tone of politics. In the twentieth century the press has been far more objective. Thus, it is much more difficult for a story that deals with alleged immorality to be published unless it has been thoroughly examined. Libel laws are invoked more often. In more recent times, a candidate who found himself embroiled in a sex scandal, as Gary Hart did, withdrew, so that his behavior was no longer a campaign issue.

A third allegation that found favor with both American and Roman politicians was an attack on the drinking habits of one's opponents. Two outbursts from Cicero demonstrate the vicious tone such attacks could take. Lucius Calpurnius Piso, a member of an old, respected Roman family, a consul in 58 B.C., had been a friend of Cicero's until 58 B.C., when he supported Cicero's enemies who wanted Cicero exiled. Upon his return from exile in 56 B.C., Cicero delivered a scathing attack on Piso after Piso was charged with corruption in administering his province. Here is how, according to Cicero, Piso behaved while holding the highest office in the state.

Who saw you sober in those days? Who saw you doing anything which was worthy of a free man? Finally who ever saw you in public? When the house of your [co-consul] resounded with cymbals and song, when he himself danced naked at this party in which while he twirled his dancer's hoop, he did not fear the wheel of fortune. Piso, himself neither so consummate a glutton nor so musical, lay in the stench and filth of his Greek friends. This disgraceful party of yours happened in those struggling times for the republic just like the battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs. No one could tell whether Piso himself drank or vomited more.<sup>31</sup>

In such a manner did Piso conduct his official duties. The drinking, the dancing, and the Greek friends were all charges calculated to stir the anger of the audience. Romans frowned on dancing. They despised the Greeks as a silly, frivolous race and certainly had no use for heavy drinking by public officials at private parties, especially when the republic was undergoing such political turmoil. Yet Cicero rebuked Mark Antony even more harshly thirteen years later. Antony held the office of master of the horse, the man in charge of the army during a political crisis. Here is how he conducted himself on one occasion.

You with that throat of yours, with those flanks, with that gladiatorial strength of your whole body, had drunk so much wine at the wedding of Hippas that it was necessary for you to vomit in the sight of the Roman people on the following day — an act not only foul to see but even to hear about. If this had happened to you during dinner when you were drinking those immense drinks, who would not think it shameful. In the assembly of the Roman people while conducting public duties, master of the horse, who shouldn't even belch, you vomited up wine mixed with stinking bits of food, filling your lap and the whole platform.<sup>32</sup>

Once again, Cicero lambasts a public official for his disgraceful drunkenness, and for revealing its aftermath to the entire Roman people. Compounding the disgrace was the fact that Hippas was a Greek mime, a totally inappropriate companion for a Roman magistrate. Behavior like Antony's would be shameful at a private dinner party, but in a public meeting, while acting on official business, such behavior was unspeakable. Such attacks on Antony were not without cost to Cicero. In 43 B.C., Antony's men caught up with Cicero's party on the road and as Cicero put his head out of the coach, he was beheaded.

Accusations of drunkenness have become a standard part of the rhetorical repertoire of American politicians as well. American society has always considered the consumption of spirits somewhat sinful. Thus, allegations that certain candidates drank more than they should appealed to the puritanical side of the American electorate.

Allegations of drunkenness arose in the early campaigns of the nineteenth century. Supporters of John Quincy Adams attacked Jackson's drinking habits. When William Henry Harrison ran in 1840, a friend of Henry Clay's remarked of Harrison, "Give him a barrel of hard cider and a pension of two thousand a year and, my word for it, he will sit the remainder of his days in a log cabin, by the side of a sea-coal fire and study moral philosophy."<sup>33</sup> A popular campaign song ran as follows:

Hush-a-bye-baby;  
Daddy's a Whig,  
Before he comes home  
Hard cider he'll swig;

Then he'll be Topsy  
And over he'll fall;  
Down will come Daddy  
Tip, Tyler and all.<sup>34</sup>

Adroit Whig campaign managers managed to turn Harrison's enjoyment of hard cider into a positive issue by contrasting the simple drinking habits of Harrison to the "luxurious" living style of the incumbent Van Buren, who drank champagne.

James Polk was pilloried as a drunkard and a coward who had fainted away and fallen from his horse in battle. His opponent in the campaign of 1844, Henry Clay, was accused

of violating every sin in the Decalogue. One pamphlet proclaimed, “The history of Mr. Clay’s debaucheries and midnight revelries in Washington is too shocking, too disgusting to appear in print.”<sup>35</sup> Quite a claim when one considers what was routinely appearing in print at the time. Another pamphlet claimed, “Clay spends his days at the gambling tables and his nights in brothels, [and always carries] a pistol, a pack of cards, and a brandy-bottle.”<sup>36</sup> Franklin Pierce, who apparently did have an actual drinking problem, was referred to as “the hero of many a well-fought bottle.” When John C. Fremont ran in 1856, he was falsely charged with being a drunkard.

Andrew Johnson committed an indiscretion similar to that of Mark Antony, apparently showing up at the inauguration of 1865 tipsy. Local comedians found this story highly amusing and parodied him as follows:

. . . inspired of many a pot,  
Which made him drunk as any sot,  
At the inauguration.

Oh, was it not a glorious sight  
To see the crowd of black and white  
As well as Andrew Johnson tight  
At the inauguration.<sup>37</sup>

Johnson was never allowed to forget the unfortunate episode. The *New York World* said harshly that Johnson was “an insolent, drunken brute, in comparison with whom Caligula’s horse was reputable.”<sup>38</sup> Once again, an American journalist alludes to Roman politics to defame a politician. Caligula, surely one of the most depraved men ever to rule Rome, once appointed his horse as consul. Poor Johnson is then more unworthy a political creature than the horse that once shared Rome’s highest office.

Grover Cleveland, mercilessly lashed in the campaign of 1884, suffered more indignities in the subsequent campaign. He was called the “Beast of Buffalo” who got drunk regularly and beat his wife (he had married his ward, Frances Folsom, in 1886). Mrs. Cleveland finally issued a statement declaring that the charges were “without a shadow of foundation.”

A rather amusing anecdote emerged about William Jennings Bryan, a teetotaler who frequently showed up for speeches smelling “like a wrecked distillery.”<sup>39</sup> Finally the truth came out. Bryan thought that gin was a fine deodorant and was accustomed to wash himself and his clothes with it.

The last politician whose drinking habits became an issue, with good reason, was Theodore Roosevelt. The enthusiastic manner of the naturally effusive and ebullient Roosevelt led people to believe he drank heavily. Reporters delighted in recording that Roosevelt drank excessively. One reporter in Butte, Montana, reported that TR had consumed fourteen highballs during a fifteen-minute interview. In 1912, the following lines appeared in the periodical *Iron Age*: “He lies and curses in a most disgusting way. He gets drunk, too, and that not infrequently, and all his intimates know about it.”<sup>40</sup> Roosevelt, who was actually a very light drinker, sued for libel and won, putting reporters and politicians on notice to be more careful in the future. Discussions of the drinking habits of one’s political opponents have not been too evident since TR’s suit.

These three categories of political attack are by no means the only common ground between Roman and American politicians, who derided the luxurious habits of their opponents, their ignoble origins, and their racial background, among other things. Personal

attack covers a wide ground, and both republics allowed their citizens wide latitude to abuse their political opponents. Both cultures evidently enjoyed the freewheeling rhetoric. This custom did not come from British politics. Bryce says in *The American Commonwealth*:

A presidential election in America is something to which Europe can show nothing similar. Though issues which fall to be decided by election of a Chamber in France or Italy, or of a House of Commons in England, are often far graver than those involved in the choice of A or B to be executive chief magistrate for four years, the commotion and excitement, the amount of "organization," of speaking, writing, telegraphing, and shouting is incomparably greater in the United States.<sup>41</sup>

The parallels make it clear that just as our constitutional form of government was derived from Greek and Roman models, so too the methods employed by politicians in gaining elective office were inspired by classical rhetorical models. Who better to turn to than the masters of the past to insult and defame opponents of the present? Thus, in many ways our campaign rhetoric, despite what we may feel about negative campaigning, is more temperate now than it ever has been. 🗣️

*This article is an expanded and revised version of one which originally appeared in The Undermountain Review, Berkshire School, Sheffield, Massachusetts.*

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## Notes

1. David Crockett, *The Life of Martin Van Buren* (Philadelphia: Robert Wright, 1837), 13, 80–81.
2. Paul Boller, *Presidential Campaigns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 129.
3. Joseph Charles, *The Origins of the American Party System* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 59.
4. Page Smith, *John Adams* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962), vol. 2, 1027–1028.
5. John Adams, *Autobiography*, in *The Adams Papers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), vol. 3, 434–435.
6. Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 149.
7. John Adams, *Diaries*, in *The Adams Papers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), vol. 2, 251–252. Tully, the regular name for Cicero in the eighteenth century, was derived from his nomen Tullius. In the third essay, which he signed Tully, Hamilton quotes a line from the opening of Cicero's famous *First Catilinarian Oration*: "How long, ye Catilines, will ye abuse our patience?" Virtually every educated reader would recognize the line and understand the allusion to Catiline, a man who tried to overthrow the Roman republic in 63 B.C.
8. James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth* (London: Macmillan, 1891), vol. 2, 210.
9. Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae*, 10. 3. 19.
10. Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Philippics*, 5. 17.
11. Thomas Bailey, *Voices of America* (New York: Free Press, 1976), 34–35.
12. John Adams to Adrian Van Der Kemp, April 25, 1808.
13. Page Smith, *The Shaping of America: A People's History of the Young Republic* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 279–281.
14. Boller, *Campaigns*, 55.
15. Quoted in the *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), August 2, 1832, 2.

16. *New York Herald Tribune*, February 6, 1937.
17. Hugh A. Bone, "Smear" Politics: An Analysis of 1940 Campaign Literature (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Public Affairs, 1941), 17.
18. Livy, 39. 42.
19. Cicero, *Verrine Orations*, I. 137.
20. Cicero, *Philippics*, 2. 58.
21. Alexander Hamilton, *The Reynolds Pamphlet*, in *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1908), vol. 7, 377.
22. James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, October 20, 1797, in *Letters and Other Writings of James Madison* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott, 1865), vol. 2, 119.
23. Samuel Hopkins Adams, "Presidential Campaign Slanders," *Life*, October 2, 1944, 53.
24. William Cullen Bryant, "The Embargo," ed. Thomas O. Mabbott (Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars' Facsimiles, 1955), lines 111–120.
25. Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the President* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), 214. Malone devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of the slanders of Callender and others on Jefferson.
26. S. H. Adams, "Campaign Slanders," 54.
27. Boller, *Campaigns*, 46–50.
28. *Ibid.*, 148–150.
29. *Ibid.*, 152.
30. *Ibid.*, 209.
31. Cicero, *In Pisonem*, 22.
32. Cicero, *Philippics*, 2. 63.
33. Boller, *Campaigns*, 66.
34. *Ibid.*, 75.
35. *Ibid.*, 80.
36. *Ibid.*
37. S. H. Adams, "Campaign Slanders," 57.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Boller, *Campaigns*, 175.
40. *Ibid.*, 199.
41. Bryce, *American Commonwealth*, vol. 2, 196.

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