

Investigating the Relationship between Political Violence and Moralism in Late Roman Republic and Early American Republic

Rachel Yang, Class of 2022

This project is a comparative historical study on the two republic paradigms, Rome and the United States, in search for a greater understanding about the nature, past, and present of republicanism. The premise of this project is inspired by historian John R. Howe's essay, "Republican Thought and the Political Violence of the 1790s." Howe observes that the US politics in the late 18th century was marked by a spirit of intolerance and paranoia, and that the Founders had a peculiar concern with the virtue of their political enemies. Howe attributes this to the Founders' belief that a republican system is an inherently vulnerable one, because it is largely dependent on the moral integrity of its constituents. Therefore, they perceived any political dissents as potential conspiracies to sabotage the republic.

This association between virtue and republicanism traces back to the Roman Republic, which is one of the major sources of ideological inheritance to the US Founders. Towards the end of the Roman Republic (ca. 133 BC – 31 BC), there was a period of tremendous political volatility that led to the collapse of constitutional stability. Similar to the American Republic, partisan hostility and a fixation on virtue accompanied this trend of political violence in Rome. One remarkable distinction between the two republics, however, is the diametrically opposed eras in which this phenomenon occurred: one during the decline of a republic and other during its establishment. Through my research, I sought a way to connect and explain the parallels and disparity between the two model republics, which may lend important insights to our current understanding about republicanism.

In order to narrow my focus on the study of two astoundingly complex periods and polities in history, I picked out some of the most illustrious examples of political violence to analyze. For the Roman Republic, I selected the careers of three individuals: Tiberius Gracchus, Lucius Appuleius Saturninus, and Lucius Cornelius Sulla; and for the American Republic, I focused on the controversies surrounding the new US Constitution, the Whiskey Rebellion, and the Alien and Sedition Acts. For my primary sources, I found the writings of Greco-Roman moralist historians such as Plutarch and Polybius to be the most useful, since their works reflect the tendency to attribute the trajectory a republic to the moral strength of its citizens. Among my secondary sources, the works of historians Bernard Bailyn, Issac Kramnick, and J.G.A. Pocock played a crucial role in the formation of my thesis for their insightful studies on republicanism in the US and the connection between the Roman and American Republics.

At the end of my research, I arrived at the following conclusions: political violence in republics is most likely to emerge under a state of constitutional uncertainty, in which there lacks established precedents with which to evaluate the conducts of politicians. This explains the seemingly contradictory periods in which political violence occurs in the late Roman Republic and early American Republic, because tradition was wearing away in the former and did not exist yet in the latter. This state of constitutional uncertainty exposed a crucial defect of republicanism: its overreliance on concepts such as "virtue" and "public interest" that allow too much room for contestation and interpretation. Consequently, republican principles can easily become empty vessels that demagogues can appropriate in whichever way that complement their personal agenda. This contributed to the fall of the Roman Republic. Figures like Saturninus and Sulla disguised personal ambition as public mindedness by using moralist rhetoric to advance their careers, even if it led to bloodshed and civil wars. Yet they met no repercussion because the loss of constitutional certainty makes it difficult to discern who is genuinely have public good in mind. The failure of the Roman Republic convinced the US founders of the inherent fragility of republicanism. Since their understanding of Rome's legacy mostly came from ancient moralist scholars, the Founders believed it was a loss of virtue that had doomed their predecessor. With a mentality of paranoia, the Federalists and Antifederalists often perceived each other as trying to institute monarchy or mob rule, even when both groups proclaimed allegiance to the republic. This again illustrated the ramification of the enormous interpretive potential of republicanism. Towards the end of my project, I presented two proposals to explain why political violence preceded the establishment of political stability in the US, while it led to the demise of the Roman Republic. Firstly, the foresight that the Founders had gained from their understanding of Roman history and the utmost responsibility of reviving republicanism they believed they carried prevented them from advancing their personal interest at the expense of constitutional stability. The demagogues of the late Roman Republic, on the other hand, were deprived of these concerns. Secondly, with centuries more of intellectual development to draw from, the US Constitution resolved some of the inherent defects of classical republicanism that may appear as opportune for demagogues. Most notably, it merged the boundary between private and public interests and created a more well-defined and well-integrated executive office that is less likely to be abused.

Faculty Mentor: Patrick Rael

Funded by Martha Reed Coles Summer Fellowship

Reference:

Howe, John R. "Republican Thought and the Political Violence of the 1790s." *American Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1967): 147-65.