

# HOW TO RUN A COUNTRY

An Ancient Guide for Modern Leaders

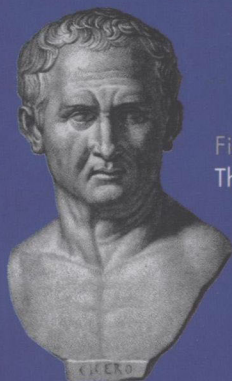


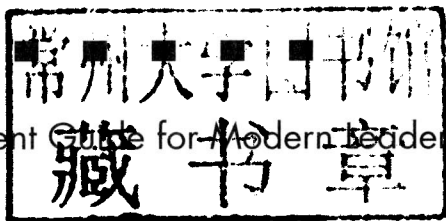
Fig. 1:  
The author

Marcus Tullius Cicero

Selected, translated, and with an  
introduction by Philip Freeman

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Marcus Tullius Cicero

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## INTRODUCTION

I seem to read the history of all ages and nations in every page—and especially the history of our country for forty years past. Change the names and every anecdote will be applicable to us.

—John Adams on Middleton's *Life of Cicero*

Marcus Tullius Cicero was born in 106 BC, four hundred years after Rome had expelled her last king and established the Republic. Cicero was from the small country town of Arpinum in the hills southeast of Rome. It was also the home of Gaius Marius, who had scandalized the aristocracy of the Roman senate with his populist politics and reorganization of the army into a volunteer force with no property qualifications for service. When Cicero was still a toddler,

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Marius saved Rome from an invasion by Germanic tribes from across the Alps and cemented his hold on political power.

Cicero's family was of modest means, but his father was determined to give Marcus and his younger brother Quintus the best education possible. The boys studied history, philosophy, and rhetoric in Rome with the finest teachers of the day. As a young man, Marcus served a short and undistinguished term in the army, after which he began his legal training in Rome. One of Cicero's first cases as a lawyer was defending a man named Roscius unjustly accused of killing his father. This put young Cicero at odds with Sulla, the Roman dictator at the time, and his corrupt administration. It was a brave act, and Roscius was acquitted, but when the trial was finished Cicero thought it best to remove himself from Rome to pursue his studies in Greece and Rhodes.

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After Sulla died and Rome had returned to republican government, Cicero began his rise through the ranks of the magistrates from quaestor to praetor and at last, after a hard-won campaign, to the office of consul, the highest office in the Republic. But the country Cicero ruled over during his year in office was not the same one his ancestors had known. The small village on the banks of the Tiber River had grown to an empire stretching across the Mediterranean. The simple ways of heroes such as the fabled Cincinnatus, who returned to his plough after being called to lead his country in war, had given way to corruption and abuse at home and abroad. The citizen armies of years past had become professional soldiers loyal to their generals rather than the state. Sulla's march on Rome and the subsequent slaughter of his political opponents had set a terrible precedent that would never be forgotten. The bonds of constitutional

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government were coming apart even as Cicero rose to the heights of Roman power. To make matters worse, the political factions of the day refused to listen to each other, the economy was stagnating, and unemployment was an ongoing threat to civic stability.

During Cicero's term as consul, the disgruntled nobleman Catiline tried to violently overthrow the senate, only to be stopped by Cicero and his allies. But three years later Pompey, Crassus, and Julius Caesar formed a triumvirate to rule Rome behind the scenes. They invited Cicero to join them, but he wanted nothing to do with such an unconstitutional arrangement. Still, he owed a great deal to Pompey for his support over the years and was impressed with the promise of Caesar. Cicero bided his time, tried to maintain good relations with all parties, and waited for the return of his beloved Republic.

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Marginalized in the senate and without real power, Cicero in frustration began to write about how a government should be run. As Caesar conquered Gaul, then crossed the Rubicon and plunged Rome into civil war, Cicero penned some of the greatest works of political philosophy in history. The questions he asked echo still today: What is the foundation of a just government? What kind of rule is best? How should a leader behave in office? Cicero addressed these and many other questions head-on, not as an academic theorist but as someone who had run a country himself and had seen with his own eyes the collapse of republican government. He wrote for anyone who would listen, but his political influence had markedly declined. As he wrote to a friend: "I used to sit on the deck and hold the rudder of the state in my hands; now there's scarcely room for me in the bilge."



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Caesar's victory in the civil war and the beginning of his benevolent dictatorship seemed like the end of the world to Cicero. But the Ides of March in 44 BC gave birth to a new flurry of optimism as Cicero worked for the rebirth of republican government. He placed his hopes in young Octavian, Caesar's great-nephew and heir, believing he might restore Rome to its former glory. But Octavian's alliance with Mark Antony showed Cicero that power once gained is not easily set aside. Cicero's final attempt to restore the Republic was to turn his formidable oratorical talents against the tyranny of Antony—but the age of freedom had passed away. With Octavian's assent, Antony passed a death sentence on his nemesis. Cicero's last words were to the assassins who came for him: "At least make sure you cut off my head *properly*."

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Cicero was a prolific author who wrote many essays, treatises, and letters dealing with how to run a government. This short anthology can provide only a small sample of his ideas recorded over many years and under different circumstances. Hopefully it will inspire readers to explore further other surviving works of Rome's greatest statesman.

Cicero was a moderate conservative—an increasingly rare breed in our modern world—who believed in working with other parties for the good of his country and its people. Rather than a politician, his ideas are those of a statesman, another category whose ranks today grow ever more diminished.

Cicero's political writings are an invaluable source for the study of ancient Rome, but his insights and wisdom are timeless. The use and abuse of power has changed little in two

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thousand years. For those who will listen, Cicero still has important lessons to teach. Among these are:

1. *There are universal laws that govern the conduct of human affairs.* Cicero would never have thought of this concept of natural law in terms used later by Christians, but he firmly believed that divine rules independent of time and place guarantee fundamental freedoms to everyone and constrain the way in which governments should behave. As the American Founding Fathers, careful students of Cicero, wrote in the *Declaration of Independence*: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

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2. *The best form of government embraces a balance of powers.* Even the most noble kings will become tyrants if their reign is unchecked, just as democracy will degrade into mob rule if there are no constraints on popular power. A just government must be founded on a system of checks and balances. Beware the leader who sets aside constitutional rules claiming the need for expediency or security.

3. *Leaders should be of exceptional character and integrity.* Those who would govern a country must possess great courage, ability, and resolve. True leaders always put the interest of their nation above their own. As Cicero says, governing a country is like steering a ship, especially when the storm winds begin to blow. If the captain is not able to hold a steady course, the voyage will end in disaster for all.

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4. *Keep your friends close—and your enemies closer.* Leaders fail when they take their friends and allies for granted. Never neglect your supporters, but even more important, always make sure you know what your enemies are doing. Don't be afraid to reach out to those who oppose you. Pride and stubbornness are luxuries you cannot afford.

5. *Intelligence is not a dirty word.* Those who govern a country should be the best and the brightest of the land. As Cicero says, if leaders don't have a thorough knowledge of what they are talking about, their speeches will be a silly prattle of empty words and their actions will be dangerously misguided.

6. *Compromise is the key to getting things done.* Cicero writes that in politics it is irresponsible to take an unwavering stand when circumstances are always evolving. There are times to

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stand one's ground, but consistently refusing to yield is a sign of weakness, not strength.

7. *Don't raise taxes—unless you absolutely have to.* Every country needs revenue in order to function, but Cicero declares that a primary purpose of a government is to assure that individuals keep what belongs to them, not to redistribute wealth. On the other hand, he condemns the concentration of such wealth into the hands of the few and asserts that it is the duty of a country to provide fundamental services and security to its citizens.

8. *Immigration makes a country stronger.* Rome grew from a small village to a mighty empire by welcoming new citizens into its ranks as it spread across the Mediterranean. Even former slaves could become full voting members of society. New citizens bring new energy and ideas to a country.

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9. *Never start an unjust war.* Of course the Romans, just like modern nations, believed they could justify any war they wanted to wage, but Cicero at least holds up the ideal that wars begun from greed rather than defense or to protect a country's honor are inexcusable.

10. *Corruption destroys a nation.* Greed, bribery, and fraud devour a country from the inside, leaving it weak and vulnerable. Corruption is not merely a moral evil, but a practical menace that leaves citizens at best disheartened, at worst seething with anger and ripe for revolution.

Even those who disagreed with Cicero couldn't help but admire the man. In his later years, Octavian, now the emperor Augustus, came upon his own grandson reading one of Cicero's works. The boy was terrified to be caught with a book written by a man his

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grandfather had condemned to death and so tried to hide it beneath his cloak. But Augustus took the book and read a long part of it while his frightened grandson watched. Then the old man handed it back to the youth saying, "A wise man, my child, a wise man and a lover of his country."



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