

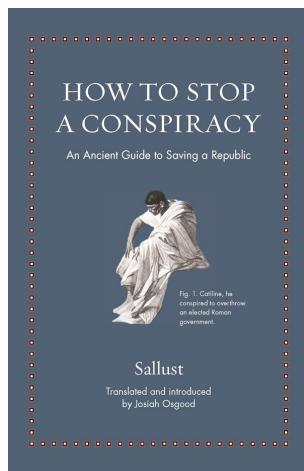
Book Review

How to Stop a Conspiracy: An Ancient Guide to Saving a Republic

Osgood (J.) (ed., trans.), Pp. xxxviii + 195.
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022.
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Josiah Osgood, the Chair of Classics at Georgetown University, is the editor and translator of this new book in the series of *Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers*, but most importantly, given the subject matter of this book, he resides in Washington, D.C. – the very embodiment of the modern conspiracy theory, a place where men breathe together in secret more often than not and plans imaginary and real are stoked to life by the fires of political zeal and intrigue. It was much the same in Rome in 63BC, when the life of that old Republic was threatened by a power-hungry

and overly exposed senator named Lucius Sergius Catilina. In the 2,000 years that have passed since his great conspiracy, he has become known to us simply as Catiline – a name now synonymous with attempted or failed conspiracies against a lawfully-elected government.

In this volume, Osgood uses the history of Catiline brought down to us through his contemporary in the Roman Senate, Sallust, to highlight not only why such a conspiracy was not only possible in Ancient Rome but also why such dangerous plots against modern democracies continue to exist and flourish. Our examination of this volume must then be one which takes events in modern history into account throughout the reading. Like any good conspiracy theorist, we must question everything because the evidence of a successful conspiracy will always be naught for the very reason that the conspiracy succeeded. It is in this air of mistrust that Osgood introduces us to the primary source of all our events. That is the newly retired Sallust, who by all modern accounts is not quite so blameless and impartial, as he would like to appear. He ascribes the reason behind this attempted coup against the Roman Republic to the over-indebtedness of the Roman people and only begrudgingly acknowledges the fact that the Roman Senate had in the past 100 years fostered an air of mistrust in the general population. The Senate appeared, as they always did, as a group of individuals that wanted only to enrich themselves to the detriment of the poor.

Thus, the situation was ripe for anyone with any populist sentiment or just an inkling of the brewing disaffection within the population of the city. We can never be entirely certain if Catiline was an opportunist or an actual populist. What we can be sure of in Osgood's new translation was that Catiline was a Patrician of an old noble family and that he had become over-indebted himself and now faced certain ruin if he did not capture the highest office in the land, that of consul, by legal or illegal means. Once before, Catiline had stood for the office of consul and he had failed. In the election of 63BC he would not end up on the losing side again. This wonderful build-up of political tension is such a great feature of Sallust in this translation, that any modern reader whether you are a student or teacher, cannot help but be swept along with all the intrigue, plotting and spying.

Another reason why the war against Catiline is so successful is that Sallust did not need to build up the career of the main protagonist, Cicero, who was already a brilliant orator and did a great job of getting his own achievements across, especially of how he managed to inform and convince the Senate that such a conspiracy indeed existed and once it came to light how quickly he was able to snuff it out. Sallust merely had to echo some of these sentiments and could commit the rest of the work to other characters that would become prominent in the future. It is this detail that also places this new volume in a league of its own when recounting history to an audience that thrives on that behind-the-scenes feel in politics. It could easily be said that *How to stop a Conspiracy* is a 2000-year-old version of the television political thriller *House of Cards*.

Although Sallust played around with the facts and some of the chronology of the events and even his supposed neutrality and unbiased approach to writing this account probably did hide his conservative perspective of events, the ultimate worth of *How to Stop a Conspiracy* is for the reader to recognise that the Roman Republic was flawed either way. Even though it survived Catiline and his rebellion, 50 years on from 63BC the Republic would be gone and replaced by the Empire of Augustus, thus showing that 'The War against Catiline' was just another systematic cancer that had already spread on the Republic – a cancer when established in a nation state cannot be cured without the death of the patient and that system of government.

In this volume of the *Ancient Guide* series, Osgood with the surroundings of Washington D.C. would probably like to leave the reader with one lasting impression especially in the light of the times we find ourselves in now. That impression would have to be the debate between Julius Caesar and Cato the Elder in front of the Roman Senate. While Caesar advocated moderation on the part of the senators, Cato went in for the kill with this most memorable line in his oration: 'Other crimes you may prosecute after they have been committed. But if you don't stop this from happening, once it does, you will appeal to the courts in vain. In a captured city, there is nothing left for the vanquished'. In *How to stop a Conspiracy* Osgood uses the platform of the Classical past to inform the modern readership of the inherent dangers that will always exist in a flawed Republic and that it is ultimately up to the citizenry in a democracy to rid themselves of populist fictions or elitist exaggerations and find the real truth of why a Republic such as this must lawfully cohere.

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