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Preserving Democracy: The Role of Mutual Toleration and Decorum

Donald Trump, the 45th president of the United States has often been one to be illustrated as exhibiting autocratic tendencies in more ways than one. His leadership style is heavily criticized. His approach to governance is increasingly questioned. His interactions with many political institutions are exceedingly interrogated by political camaraderie and the citizens of the country that he leads. It is safe to say that Donald Trump is unlike any president the United States has ever seen. He has charges of corruptly obstructing an official proceeding regarding the 2020 presidential election case, 32 charges of retention of national defense information, 34 charges of falsifying business records in the Manhattan DA hush-money case, as well as many sexual assault allegations. How is it that he got into power over one of the most dominant countries in the world? A further question to be asked is, what exactly do citizens of a country do when challenging a leader who has defied basic democracy on numerous counts?

We can see a similar conversation in antiquity regarding Cicero and his challenge against Marc Antony. Throughout Cicero's lifetime associated with the Roman Republic, he faced many challenges and pivotal events that affected the Romans for the rest of the time to come. One of the most monumental events was the case against Marc Antony. Antony was a Roman general and political figure who even served as consul alongside his good friend Julius Caesar for a period of time. However, the year of Caesar and Antony's consulship was marked by a severe political upheaval. That same year, Caesar was assassinated by a group led by Roman senators. The senators believed that Caesar was obtaining too much power and that he posed a great threat to Roman democracy. This marked a prominent moment in the entirety of Roman history that changed the lives of many.

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When analyzing this specific event, it is important to recognize its history and order. Plutarch's "Life of Antony" is a good source that helps us get background information and historical context on Marc Antony and his actions regarding the Roman Republic. Plutarch uses his Life of Antony as a recollection of the type of person Antony was alongside a recount of his political choices. His narrative is enriched by the perspectives of many political figures such as Cicero and Octavian Caesar's adopted heir with who Antony allied). Plutarch begins by highlighting Antony's political career and early life. One specific passage highlights Antony's generosity and loyalty when it comes to his friends but how also he can be seen as acting too fast or without deliberation, "Further, his liberality, and his bestowal of favours upon friends and soldiers with no scant or sparing hand, laid a splendid foundation for his growing strength, and when he had become great, lifted his power to yet greater heights, although it was hindered by countless faults besides" (IV). The duality of Antony's character – his admirable qualities combined with his flaws – makes him a complicated figure, much like modern autocratic leaders who express personal charm with authoritarian tendencies. Plutarch then goes on to recount the assassination of Caesar, Antony's longtime friend and ally, and how he allied himself with Octavian to eliminate their common enemies. However, this alliance ultimately ends due to Antony's affair with Cleopatra, which only intensified his political turmoil. In many ways, the story of Antony mirrors the timeless struggle of dealing with powerful leaders who, while capable, may flout democratic norms in pursuit of their own personal power. Plutarch's narration provides important insight into Antony's character and life, which in turn helps the audience better understand the key figures and political dynamics that are at play in this contested period of Roman history.

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Plutarch's "Life of Antony" not only serves as an illustration of Antony's personal characteristics but his questionable actions as well. The quote "but Antony conquered Cassius; although some write that Antony was not present in the battle, but came up after the battle when his men were already in pursuit" (XXII) showcases Antony's lack of military leadership. Additionally, the quote "at this, Antony was enraged and visited those who had played the coward with what is called decimation. That is, he divided the whole number of them into tens, and put to death that one from each ten upon whom the lot fell. For the rest, he ordered rations of barley instead of wheat" (XXXVIII) only further reinstated the notion that Antony frequently abused his power. To expand, Antony often wielded autocratic power, governing Rome ineffectively with complete disregard for the traditional practice of elections. After all, he had been appointed consul by Julius Caesar, a dictator, bypassing the usual democratic process. Ultimately, Plutarch was able to show Antony as a leader who demonstrated authoritarian tendencies that undermined the credibility and stability of the Republic.

The actions of Antony pose the important question: How can a responsible political leader approach such an autocrat without further endangering the norms of democracy? Cicero's Second Phillipic was an intense denunciation of Antony. Cicero did what any weary individual would do–attack the autocrat with the hope of restoring democracy by removing the person who threatens its institutions. Throughout the philippic, Cicero vehemently criticizes Antony and accuses him of seeking too much power at the expense of the citizens of the Republic. Cicero is a figure that has never held back when it comes to his passionate, and sometimes emotional theories against those whom he is suspicious about. The relationship between Cicero and Antony is one that was fueled by immense opposition and criticism, naked by Cicero's passionate rhetoric and Antony's increasing ambition. Cicero frequently spotlighted Antony's character

flaws especially when it came to his actions following the assassination of Caesar. This concept of betrayal was specifically important for Cicero, who saw himself as a hero of the Republic and its values. The political landscape was overflowing with tension, and Cicero's speeches aimed to shock the Senate against what he believed was a threat to Roman democracy. “You utter fool! Don’t you see that if it is a crime to have wished Caesar killed, which is the charge you bring against me, it is also a crime to have been glad of Caesar’s death? What difference is there between one who advises an action and one who approves of it? Or what does it matter whether I wanted it done or rejoice at the doing? Well then, is there anyone, apart from those who were happy to see Caesar king of Rome, who did not want this to happen or disapproved of the act? So we are all guilty. And so, all decent men killed Caesar so far as it was in them to do so: some lacked design, some courage, some opportunity; none lacked the will” (2.29). Additionally, Cicero makes many other dramatic claims against Antony with his criticism of Antony's affair with a mime, who was very low on the social class totem pole, or tales about Antony's drunkenness, or even his suggestion that Antony was sexually submissive to Julius Caesar, which was common but not respected in the slighted. Cicero was right in his efforts to call out Antony for his alleged wrongdoings however, this only intensified the risk for civil war and partisanship in the Republic.

Could Cicero’s efforts to villainize Antony, even with a given reason, violate the norms of democratic policy as defined in Levitsky and Ziblatt’s “How Democracies Die?” In this recent work of political theory, the authors aim to help us understand the reason why democracies collapse to authoritarianism in institutional and moral terms. The specific feature that I want to analyze for my argument is that of mutual toleration in Chapter 5. The authors state that mutual toleration is absolutely necessary for a thriving and effective democracy. Toleration helps

democracy stay on track and not allow it to fall off of the rails to authoritarianism. This safeguard is extremely important as the Constitution will sometimes fail to provide effective governance. When the government is lacking in a part of political processes, it is up to social norms and practices to keep democracy on track. In the entire Second Phillipic, Cicero spends his time completely attacking Antony. Cicero spews insults like “You utter fool!” (2.29) which acts completely outside of the barriers of mutual toleration. He often acts without self-disipline completely throwing respect out of the window. Cicero might have reason to insult Antony, he sees Antony as an immense threat that could harm the Roman Republic and there should be some sort of punishment against him, however, there should be a specific decorum upheld. Levitsky and Ziblatt outline a more contemporary example of decorum when they bring up President Roosevelt. “As president, however, Roosevelt acted with surprising restraint. He took great care, for example, to avoid appearing to bully Congress by speaking directly to the people or attacking individual members of Congress as they debated crucial votes. In the end, Roosevelt operated well within the bounds of our constitutional checks and balances” (105). This is a prime example of how, even in political discourse, a level of mutual tolerance and respect for your opponent is vital for democratic integrity. Ziblatt and Levitsky also provide examples of how the lack of mutual toleration can only lead a country in the wrong direction. “In the absence of strong norms of mutual toleration, the Spanish Republic quickly fell apart” (86). The book describes how the republic went into crisis after, during the 1933 elections, the right-wing CEDA won. This disrupted the entire country as the governing center-left was replaced. Following that, the country descended into fascism where leftists and anarchists rebelled in Catalonia and Asturias, “by 1936, Spain’s nascent democracy had degenerated into a civil war” (86). It is abundantly clear that without mutual tolerance, a country is a risk of civil war and I think when looking at

this in terms of antiquity, although Cicero was right in his effort to protect the people from Antony, who he saw as a threat, his actions that went against mutual toleration of the opponent, only put the Republic at risk even further.

I do believe that Cicero had a reason for his attack on Antony, however, when he went about it in a way that challenged mutual toleration, he actively weakened the guardrails of democracy by contributing to partisan vitriol.