



# Sallust: The Roman Historian Who Taught the Founders to Believe in Conspiracies

Power, in whatever hands, is rarely content with its present boundaries. — Sallust, *The Jugurthine War*

The United States, often seen as a beacon of democracy and republicanism, draws its inspiration from a rich tapestry of historical influences. Among these influences, the writings of the Roman historian Sallust (Gaius Sallustius Crispus) have played a significant role in shaping the American understanding of virtue, governance, and the fragility of republics. Sallust's works, particularly his monographs *The Conspiracy of Catiline* and *The Jugurthine War*, have resonated with American political thinkers and leaders throughout the nation's history. In this article, I'll share with you the enduring influence of Sallust's writings on the United States, and as a corollary of this influence, you'll come to see why Sallust is *never* taught in public schools anymore.



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## Sallust: The Man and His Works

Gaius Sallustius Crispus, known as Sallust, was a Roman historian and politician who lived during the late Roman Republic, from 86 B.C. to 35 B.C. His career in politics, characterized by controversy and conflict, came to a halt when he was expelled from the Senate in 50 B.C. However, it was his subsequent career as a historian that would secure his place in history. Sallust's writings are marked by their concise and vivid style, often focusing on the moral decline of the Roman Republic, political corruption, and the consequences of unchecked ambition.

## The Influence of Sallust on American Political Thought

### Virtue and Republicanism

Sallust's writings emphasize the importance of virtue as the cornerstone of a stable republic. He argued that the erosion of virtuous behavior and the pursuit of personal gain by politicians would inevitably lead to the downfall of a republic. This theme resonated strongly with early American political thinkers, including the Founding Fathers.

In his farewell address, George Washington warned against the dangers of party politics and the divisive pursuit of self-interest, aligning with Sallust's concerns. Similarly, John Adams wrote that "public virtue cannot exist in a nation without private, and public virtue is the only foundation of



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republics.” This sentiment mirrors Sallust’s belief that moral decay in individuals would ultimately lead to the decay of the republic as a whole.

### **Corruption and Conspiracy**

Sallust’s monographs *The Conspiracy of Catiline* and *The Jugurthine War* delve into political corruption and the consequences of conspiracies against the state. These themes struck a chord with early Americans who had witnessed the divisive effects of the American Revolution and the struggles of maintaining a fledgling federation of republics.

Thomas Jefferson, a key figure in American history and the author of the Declaration of Independence, admired Sallust’s writings. Jefferson saw Sallust’s works as cautionary tales, warning against the dangers of corruption and the need for vigilance in maintaining a just and free society. He described the speeches recorded by Sallust as “worthy of constant study” and “preeminent specimens of logic, taste, and that sententious brevity which using not a word to spare, leaves not a moment for inattention to the hearer.” The American War for Independence itself could be seen as a response to perceived corruption and a conspiracy against the rights of the Colonists.

From Sallust, as well as from the other Roman and Greek historians, the Founding Fathers learned that the liberties enjoyed by the citizens of those commonwealths were regularly targeted by conspiracies of men in high places determined to enslave the people and establish themselves as tyrants. The Founders recognized that the conspiratorial view of history was not a theory — it was a fact.

### **The Fragility of Republics**

Sallust’s works highlight the inherent vulnerability of republics to internal strife, corruption, and the ambitions of individuals. The American founding generation was well aware of these vulnerabilities and sought to build a system of government that would guard against them.

James Madison, often referred to as the “Father of the Constitution,” drew from Sallust’s writings when crafting the U.S. Constitution. In *The Federalist*, No. 10, he discussed the dangers of factionalism and the need for a strong central government to mitigate its effects. Sallust’s warnings about the dangers of internal strife and the consequences of unchecked ambition provided valuable insights into the design of the American system of government, which included a system of checks and balances to prevent the concentration of power.

### **Conclusion**

The writings of the Roman historian Sallust have left an indelible mark on American political thought and the development of the United States as a federal republic. His emphasis on the importance of virtue, his critique of political corruption and conspiracy, and his recognition of the fragility of republics have resonated with American leaders and thinkers throughout history.

Sallust’s enduring influence can be seen in the foundational documents of the United States, such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, as well as in the writings and speeches of American leaders from the Founding Fathers to modern statesmen. His timeless lessons on the need for moral virtue, the dangers of corruption, and the vigilance required to preserve a republic continue to shape American political discourse and inform the ongoing experiment in self-governance. Sallust’s words serve as a reminder that the lessons of history, even those from ancient Rome, remain relevant in the context of the American union and its enduring pursuit of liberty and justice for all.



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