

Publius Rutilius Rufus: Rome's 'Last Honest Man'

Banished for debasing the currency from his home city in what is now north-central Turkey, [Diogenes of Sinope](#) chose to beg in the streets of Corinth and Athens, live in a clay jar, and eschew wealth of any kind. The story is often told that he walked the streets with a lantern, looking in vain for an honest man. He often confronted people with disparaging hand gestures, including one that involved the middle finger. He is considered a founder of the ancient Greek school of philosophy known as Cynicism. In his 80s, he died in the same year as Alexander the Great (323 B.C.).

Diogenes was an oddball, to be sure, but we can still appreciate the notion of searching for honest men (and women). In our day, they seem ever more challenging to find. [A recent](#) Gallup Poll found that even those professionals rated highest for their honesty (nurses, doctors and pharmacists) have slipped in the public's perception. An even more disturbing poll from 2021 [found](#) that a majority of Americans now believe that truth is subjective and there are no moral absolutes, which suggests that an awful lot of people couldn't tell an honest man from a dishonest one anyway.

Before proceeding, allow me to confess. I'm [one of those men](#) who thinks about the Roman Empire every day. It speaks volumes to us across the centuries. Here's a snippet.

In the last decades of the Roman Republic, as its liberties crumbled and the dictatorship of the subsequent Empire loomed, honesty decayed with each successive generation—an omen we should think long and hard about today. Among the lessons of [the Roman experience](#) is this: Liberty is ultimately incompatible with widespread indifference [to truth](#). A society of liars succumbs to the tyrant who brings "order" to its

chaos and corruption.

In a book I strongly recommend, [*The Lives of the Stoics: The Art of Living from Zeno to Marcus Aurelius*](#), authors Ryan Holiday and Stephen Hanselman tell us about a man named Publius Rutilius Rufus (158 B.C.-78 B.C.). They regard him as “the last honest man” of the dying Republic. Though that description surely contains ample hyperbole to emphasize a point, Rufus’s exceptional honesty was indeed notable in his day because it was no longer the rule in a decadent age. As Mark Twain would note many centuries later, “an honest man in politics shines more than he would elsewhere.”

Rufus, the great-uncle of Julius Caesar (his sister Rutilia was Caesar’s maternal grandmother), built an illustrious career in the Roman military. Those under his command were known as “the best trained, the most disciplined, and the bravest” of the legions. He garnered enormous respect because of his Stoic virtues—courage, temperance, wisdom, and justice. In 105 B.C., he served in the highest political post in the Republic, the consulship. He was incorruptible, which meant he was a target of those who weren’t.

It had become a common practice in the late Republic for the government to hire private contractors to collect taxes. These “publicani” often extorted more from their victims than the taxes required because that’s the way the contracts were written. The government didn’t care what the publicani kept for themselves if it got its expected revenues. When Rufus attempted to stop the injustices this arrangement created, the publicani and their allies in the Roman Senate fought back. They arranged a sham trial with a pre-ordained verdict and charged Rufus with the very thing of which they themselves were guilty: *extortion and corruption*.

Historian Tom Holland in [*Rubicon: The Last Years of the Roman Republic*](#) writes that Rufus’s conviction was “the most notorious scandal in Roman legal history” and “an object

lesson in how dangerous it could be to uphold ancient values against the predatory greed of corrupt officials.” With utterly no evidence and all credible testimony to the contrary, the accusers claimed Rufus had extorted money from Smyrna in the Roman province of Asia (what is now western Turkey).

Another historian, Mike Duncan, [notes](#), “The charges were ludicrous as Rutilius [Rufus] was a model of probity and would later be cited by Cicero as the perfect model of a Roman administrator.”

As punishment for his trumped-up offense, Rufus was sent into exile but in deference to his past service, the court gave him the option of choosing where that would be. He chose Smyrna, the place he was charged with victimizing. When he arrived there, he was celebrated as the man who had tried to end the very practices of which he was wrongly convicted. Ryan Holiday and Stephen Hanselman describe what happened to Rufus as “a very old trick”:

Accuse the honest man of precisely the opposite of what they're doing, of the sin you yourself are doing. Use their reputation against them. Muddy the waters. Stain them with lies. Run them out of town by holding them to a standard that if equally applied would mean the corrupt but entrenched interests would never survive...Smyrna, grateful for the reforms and scrupulous honesty of the man who had once governed them, welcomed [Rufus] with open arms...Cicero would visit there in 78 B.C. and call him “a pattern of virtue, of old-time honor, and of wisdom.”

Some eighteen centuries later, George Washington would write, “[I hope I shall possess firmness and virtue enough to maintain what I consider the most enviable of all titles, the character of an honest man.](#)” Publius Rutilius Rufus embodied that sentiment proudly. He rebuilt his life and property, enjoyed

celebrity status in Smyrna, and never returned to Rome. He never cracked or compromised his integrity or became embittered. His conscience was clear, and far more important than the judgment of a stacked deck. As Holiday and Hanselman observe, “He had looked at himself and the corruption around him and decided that no matter what other people said or did, his job was to be good.”

This is essentially our job today—to be “good” in an increasingly dishonest world. Be the example that others need and must look to for redemption. Stay true to what you know to be right, no matter how unpopular it may be with the hostile mob. Go eventually to whatever reward awaits you with your head held high, as one who served noble ideals by remaining noble himself. No self-respecting, sovereign, and free individual should ever want his epitaph to be, “He knew what was right but for the sake of expediency, he failed to do it.”

It’s OK to shout “Amen!” It’s even *more* OK to *mean* it, and to *live* it.

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