Case Study 2: The Catilinarian Conspiracy

The Players
Marcus Tullius Cicero, b. 3 January 106 BCE in Arpinum. Educated in philosophy and rhetoric in Rome and Greece, served in the military under Pompey’s father, tried his first case in 81. Quaestor 75, praetor 66, supporter of Pompey, consul 63.
Lucius Sergius Catilina, patrician, served with Pompey the elder and Cicero in the Social War, lieutenant of Sulla, praetor 68, provincial governor of Africa, prosecuted but acquitted for repetundarum in 63. May have plotted against the government in 66/5. Defeated by Cicero for consul in 63, supported by Caesar and Crassus. Defeated in 62.
Publius Cornelius Lentulus Sura, undistinguished orator, supporter of Sulla, disgraced as quaestor 81, praetor 74, consul 70, praetor 63, co-conspirator of Catiline and head of urban conspiracy.
Quintus Fabius Sanga, senator 73, patron of the Allobrogian Gauls who reported the conspiracy to him, and he then informed Cicero.
Gaius Iulius Caesar, b. 100, connected to Marius by marriage, military success in Asia in the 70s, pontifex 73, military tribune, quaestor 69, pontifex maximus 63, praetor 62, powerful and important, supporter of Catiline.
Marcus Licinius Crassus, supporter of Sulla, praetor 73, conqueror of Spartacus 72-71, consul 70, censor 65, patron of Gallia Transpadana, fabulously wealthy, supporter of Catiline.
Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, b. 106, served with his father for Sulla, pro praetor in Sicily 82, triumphantator in 81, pro consule in Spain 77, took credit for vanquishing Spartacus, triumphantator 71, consul 70 with Crassus, command against pirates 67-64, founded colonies, annexed Syria, settled Judaea.

Background
Since their joint consulship of 70 BCE, Crassus had become increasingly jealous of Pompey’s spectacular, meteoric career. Crassus had substantial political influence, in part due to using his wealth, but this conqueror of Spartacus had nonetheless been overshadowed by Pompey. The return of Pompey from the East, Crassus must have believed, would threaten his own position, and so through a series of intrigues, all supported by Caesar, he manouevered for position. This all began when he, as censor, proposed the enfranchisement for Transpadane Gaul (“Gaul across the Padana (Po) River”), winning the support of these people and of Caesar, who had agitated for the same action on his return from Spain. Then, when the consuls for 65 were condemned for electoral bribery, and a second election was held, a certain L. Sergius Catilina wanted to stand. Catiline, as he is known today, a member of a poor patrician family, had served under Sulla in the Civil Wars, but was currently awaiting trial for extortion. Accordingly, his candidacy for the consulship was denied, and he probably plotted to kill the new consuls on Jan. 1 65. The scheme miscarried and the whole scandal was hushed up, but Crassus seems to have been partially involved, perhaps hoping to benefit by the results.
Catiline was acquitted with the help of Caesar and now prepared to stand for the consulship for 63, backed by Crassus. The Optimates wanted his defeat; along came Cicero, who aspired to influence and power, who supported Pompey and had the support of the Equites, but who was certainly a safer choice than Catiline. In a speech to the Senate he denounced Catiline and was elected, defeating him. In 63, for the consulship of 62, Catiline decided to try again, but knew he needed further support, and so he proposed to cancel all debts. This appealed to the discontented in Italy and to spendthrift nobles, but it antagonized the Senate and the Equites. Catiline also made a number of threats, prompting the consul Cicero to appear on election day with a bronze breastplate and a bodyguard. Two others (Murena and Silanus) were elected consuls, not Catiline.

Catiline, now desperate, planned a coup for Oct. 28, in Rome, in parts of Italy, and especially in Etruria. One week before the plans were implemented, Cicero got wind of the conspiracy and convinced the Senate of the danger, which then passed a senatus consultum ultimum backing the current consul Cicero. On Nov. 6th, on the Street of the Sickle-Makers, in the home of one of the conspirators, drastic steps were plotted. Cicero was to be killed the next morning, the city was to be torched and looted, and gladiators, herdsmen and the peasants were to take up arms and march from Etruria to Rome. But Cicero had an informant; he escaped assassination, summoned the Senate, and delivered the First Catilinarian Oration, denouncing Catiline to his face. Catiline rushed off to Etruria and joined his 10,000 armed supporters, and the Senate declared them all public enemies.

Cicero, with the help of Gallic informants, got documentary evidence against the conspirators in Rome and had them arrested. In the Senate, the debate raged as to their fate, with many led by Cicero calling for an execution, while Caesar called for life imprisonment (a particularly complicated proposal, since Rome had no prison per se, only the Tullianum used for temporary incarceration). If Caesar and Crassus had been part of the conspiracy at any time, they certainly weren't now, and even assisted Cicero in the prosecution. Cato the Younger's persuasive skills, added to those of Cicero, won the day, and the death penalty was enforced: Cicero had the five conspirators killed, and within a month Catiline's forces were defeated and Catiline was killed.

Cicero clearly saved his country from revolution, for had he been successful Catiline might have brought about widespread rioting and destruction. It was a temporary success, since Pompey and his army in the east were still to be reckoned with. Cicero was hailed as Pares Patriae, or “Father of the Country,” but as the crisis receded it was his order of execution, not his eloquence in four Catilinarian speeches, nor his courage, which were remembered, and people questioned the legality of his action.

Read the “First Catilinarian,” the first of four speeches by Cicero against Catiline and the conspiracy; Sallust’s historical account in his Catilinarian Conspiracy; and explore the (“auto”)biographical website on Cicero. Then consider the following questions and prepare responses for the classroom discussion:
• What is at stake in this conspiracy? What are the positions of Catiline, Cicero, and the other players in this sequence of events?
• How would you go about gaining control of the Roman Republic if you were in charge of the plot?
• How would you attempt to put down a coup d'état if you were consul?
• Is it justifiable to overthrow a government run by wealthy oligarchs, especially if you think they no longer work in the interests of the people?
• Is it justifiable for an elected official, such as a consul, to execute the conspirators en masse without individual trials, contrary to law and tradition, even if it is sanctioned by the Senate?