

A whistle-blower for all seasons

[Life](#)



**ASSIGN
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Whistle-blowing has had a long and venerable tradition in the history of politics. From Cicero and his Catiline Orations to Cynthia Cooper at WorldCom, whistle-blowers have existed for as long as there was political intrigue and power on the line.

For this essay, however, the focus will be on one particular famous historical whistle-blower; Sir Thomas More, a former chancellor to Henry VIII of England. This essay will attempt two things; to compare Sir Thomas More to recent famous whistle-blowers and to determine what makes an effective whistle-blower.

By way of background, in 1534 King Henry VIII of England sought an annulment from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, in order to marry Anne Boleyn. (Brigden) More resigned from the Chancellorship when the English Parliament enacted several acts designed to wrest authority over the English Church from Rome when the King's annulment was refused by the Pope. (Williams) He was eventually executed for his refusal to cooperate.

Sir Thomas More, as portrayed in Robert Bolt's play called *A Man For All Seasons*, is the penultimate man of conscience. In one of the more famous lines from the play, Sir Thomas answers Norfolk's pleas for fellowship on the matter of the Act of Succession by replying, " And when we stand before God, and you are sent to Paradise for doing according to your conscience, and I am damned for not doing according to mine, will you come with me for fellowship?" (Bolt)

This shows the esteem with which Sir Thomas More held the human conscience, and deemed that a man ought to live and die by the dictates of that conscience.

This particular trait is something he shares with modern-day whistle-blowers like Linda Lewis of the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the US Department of Agriculture, who blew the whistle on her agency's lack of preparedness in the event of a terrorist attack. She claimed that both More and Martin Luther were her inspirations when she made the decision to blow the whistle, quoting Martin Luther's "Peace if possible, but truth at any rate". (Andersen)

Sir Thomas More also had the advantage of a strong faith, which lent him transcendent moral ideals. He was "the King's good servant, but God's first", whose answer to Norfolk's questioning of the concept of Apostolic Succession[1] was, "But what matters to me is not whether it's true or not but that I believe it to be true". (Bolt) His faith was tied to his notions of conscience, and a violation of a transcendent moral principle was more intolerable than political and personal upheaval. Whistle-blowing can be a very isolating act.

A whistle-blower often breaches expectations of loyalty from the group he or she belongs to. (Bok) This leads to retaliation from the group the whistle-blower once expected to be safe in. However, a transcendent belief, be it in the form of ethics, religious beliefs, community allegiances, ontological security, economic security or political ideology, helps whistle-blowers identify with a higher authority and gives them the fortitude to go through with the act and withstand the strong pressure to conform. (Jasper)

More shares this trait with FBI whistle-blower Fred Whitehurst, who claimed that his religious faith sustained him in his decision to go against his superiors in a matter of evidence tampering. (Andersen)

[1] Apostolic Succession is the doctrine that all bishops of the Church are successors of the Apostles, with the Pope succeeding St. Peter.