Let us transport ourselves in thought back to the sinister winter of 1942–43. At the École Normale Supérieure on rue d’Ulm, one of the greatest French classicists of the age, perhaps the greatest, gives a course in which he develops a peculiar thesis, one already presented in February 1940 at the American Academy of Rome, in which he accuses a personage of the distant past, Cicero, of an “irreparable dishonor.” This course was published in two volumes in 1947, under the title “The Secrets of Cicero’s Letters” (Les Secrets de la correspondance de Cicéron). At a moment when political passions ran to extremes, Carcopino was unique in choosing to unleash his fullest indignation upon a man who had lived two thousand years before.

As it happens, Carcopino was not merely a historian of Rome: Recteur of the Académie de Paris and Director of the ENS in 1940, he was also named Secretary of State for Education and Youth on February 23, 1941, replacing Jacques Chevalier, whom the occupying authorities had deemed too clerical and Anglophile. Carcopino occupied this office until April 1942, at which time he was replaced by Abel Bonnard. The fact that “The Secrets of Cicero’s Letters” were conceived at the very heart of the Occupation can certainly not be ignored, and yet to date the link between these two events does not seem to have been adequately explored. By way of example, in the above-cited work by Pierre Grimal, Claude Carcopino and Paul Ourliac, the introduction contains the following lines, which appear immediately after their evocation of Carcopino’s ministerial career:

It is by the light of this experience that one must read ‘The Secrets of Cicero’s Letters,’ whose seeds may already be found in Carcopino’s previous works (notably his ‘Caesar’), but which may have never taken shape if not for his ministerial adventures. Attentive readers will not fail to be


This passage appears to be of great interest. In effect, it draws a direct relationship of cause and effect between Carcopino’s ascent into high office and his composition of the “Secrets”. In Ciceronian terms, one could say that political experience served as the proximate cause for his authorship. Yet our analysis of this cause forges an additionally surprising connection, namely that Carcopino’s personal encounters with these “Vichy portraits” had inspired his depiction of Cicero and his friends. We might thus infer that the classicist’s regard for Vichy was as severe as that which he brought to bear on Cicero shortly afterward. In the just-cited passage, I accept without reservation the authors’ first proposition, namely that Vichy influenced the writing of the “Secrets”. I dissent, however, from their second argument, or, more precisely, would reformulate it in the following manner: it was not in Carcopino’s critical distance from Vichy that the “Secrets” were born, but rather in his unconditional adherence to this regime. To support this interpretation, I will first examine the record of Carcopino’s actions in the government of Marshall Pétain. Following this, I will analyze the construction of his work on Cicero, and will finish by treating the question of money, an element which appears central to a correct interpretation of the “Secrets”.

As a non-historian, I do not pretend to bring new information to light that would unduly extend the boundaries of my examination for the purposes of this article. To this end, I have read the records, or at least the greater part of what has been published, of the administrative and ministerial actions taken by Carcopino, in utramque partem, and above all the Souvenirs de sept ans, a work which he himself published in 1953, and whose general line of defense can, it seems to me, be summed up in the following lines:

What has not already been said or written about the persecutions of the Vichy government against the Jews, the Freemasons, and the Communists? The truth is that, in final estimation, the government in which I served sought to mitigate the brutal application of the laws imposed by the Nazis

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3 J. Carcopino . . , op. cit. at iv.