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Analysis of Leaders from the Peloponnesian War

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A leader in nearly any society needs many characteristics to be effective for the people they rule and for the land they serve: an effective leader needs to be an eloquent speaker so as to inspire the people to serve the state and inspire loyalty; simultaneously, a leader needs to be open to opinions of others, accept a certain amount of opposition, and take criticisms and suggestions in stride; a leader must think for the good of the people and state in both the short and long term as opposed to exclusively the short-term; and a leader must lead by example, meaning they should not live extravagantly and should attempt to be humble. The Peloponnesian War witnessed the rise of three influential leaders of the time: Pericles of Athens, Alcibiades of Athens, and King Archidamus of Sparta; these men led their people through a war that lasted twenty-seven years and would have dire consequences for Greece.

Eloquence in speeches has been important in efficient leadership since before the Peloponnesian War; in fact, in Athenian democracy, eloquence in the Assembly could mean the difference between peace and war or whether or not a law was passed, as every citizen was given the opportunity to speak if they so desired (Perry, 42.) Pericles, a general in the Peloponnesian War for Athens, was able to sway those at the public funeral for the first of the fallen soldiers in the war to support the war, the people of Athens, and the army, inspiring patriotism and fervor throughout the populace of Athens (Thucydides, 144-151.) Alcibiades’s eloquence also served him well in convincing the Assembly to attack Sicily explaining that to not attack would embolden their enemies and potentially cause them to think Athens weak; his argument was so compelling that it caused a rival commander’s argument against going to war with to Sicily to backfire and further harden the Athenian resolve for war (419-425.) King Archidamus of Sparta spoke regarding waging war with Athens to the Spartan assembly, recommending that, instead of ignoring the Athenian aggression or meeting them immediately in the field, the Spartans wait and consolidate their power and money while helping their allies against Athens (83-84); the Spartans, however, were swayed by the arguments of Sthenelaids (86) and Sparta’s allies (73-77) in addition to the seemingly-haughty speech from the Athenian representatives (78-82.) All of the leaders were eloquent and confident in their speeches, even though only Alicbiades and Pericles were effective in gaining what they desired.

For a leader to be open to opinions, criticism and opposition takes time and experience, and to accept change takes wisdom and strength; in addition, a leader must reply appropriately to whatever criticisms and attacks they come under. Pericles faced much opposition and criticism during the Peloponnesian War during the plague that devastated Athens from the populous; he replied to them by attempting to guide their anger and
frustration at their situation at hand away from
him to the conflict with the Peloponnese (158-
9); Pericles was removed from his title of
general, only to be re-instated for a short time
before his death, after the Athenian Assembly
realized Pericles had been right to attempt to re-
direct their anger (163.)

King Archidamus was also criticized by
his allies, in addition to Sparta on the whole.
Archidamus invited delegates from the city-
states that were claiming Athenian aggression
to state their cases, and then Sparta would consider
what action to take. The Corinthian delegates
were the ones who mainly pointed out that the
Spartans were usually very wary when it came
to conflicts, and only became involved when it
could directly influence their state (73-77.)
Archidamus, after the foreign delegates had
taken a recess from the chambers, pointed out to
his fellow Spartans that to wage war against
Athens would be a massive undertaking that
would influence not just the present rulers, but
would likely involve the next generation of
leaders (82-83). In addition, Archidamus
believed that to charge head-first into battle
without proper knowledge and resources would
be suicide and he said that to delay and be
prepared is better than to take action only to be
later caught off-guard and destroyed (84-85.)
Archidamus then opened the floor to a vote as to
whether or not to go to war with Athens or to
wait a few years; in spite of his proposal being
defeated by an overwhelming margin,
Archidamus supported the decision of his
people and his allies, and led them during the
war. The decision to wage war on the
Athenians by Sparta not only influenced the
next generation of leaders as Archidamus
predicted, but began the rapid decline of the
Greek city-states, eventually leading to their fall
at the hands of Philip II of Macedonia (Perry,
44.)

Alcibiades, in much a similar manner to
Archidamus and Pericles, faced criticism from
his rivals. Unlike Pericles and Archidamus, the
attacks regarded Alcibiades’ character and
actions outside the Assembly; in his reply,
instead of merely attempting to persuade the
Assembly to attack Sicily and ignoring the
attacks on his personal life, he commenced
justifying his supposed extravagance outside the
Assembly, and began to speak of himself as
though he were a hero who deserved some extra
liberties.

“…[S]ince Nicias has made this attack
on me, I must begin by saying that I have a
better right than others to hold the command
and that I think I am quite worthy of the
position. As for all the talk there is against
me, it is about things which bring [honor] to my
ancestors and myself, and to our country
profit as well. There was a time when the
Hellenes imagined that our city had been
ruined by the war, but they came to consider it
even greater than it really is, because of
the splendid show I made as its representative at
the Olympic games, when I entered
seven chariots for the chariot race… and took
first, second, and fourth places…it is quite
natural for my fellow citizens to envy me for the
magnificence with which I have done
things in Athens…” (Thucydides, 419)
The impression Alcibiades gave to his rivals
after delivering this speech was that of one
looking to become a dictator and destroy the
democracy in Athens (419). Alcibiades’ rivals
used his extravagance against him, claiming that
he and other extravagant young men defaced
Hermae around Athens as an act against
democracy; Alcibiades denied the charges, and
set out for Sicily before he could stand trial
(426-427.)

An effective leader also holds the long-
term stability of the people and state above the
short-term success that one attains while in
power. Pericles and Archidamus both realized this about their states and worked toward that goal: Pericles realized that holding back a portion of the Athenian navy to defend from the Peloponnesian navy was more advantageous to the Athenian cause than would sending out the entire navy and not attempt to expand until after the war, even though his successors did the precise opposite (163). Archidamus, meanwhile, thought if Sparta and its allies were to have a chance against Athens, the Spartans would need to consolidate their power for another few years before being strong enough to defeat Athens as quickly as possible, even though the majority of the other Spartans did not share his sentiments (82-87.) Alcibiades, unlike Pericles and Archidamus, cared less for the good of the state; rather, he cared more for personal gain and glory in his command in the forces going to Sicily, as Nicias pointed out and Alcibiades, for the most part, confirmed the allegations (415-422.)

Finally, a leader must set an example for its people to follow, and not act as though he or she is better than any other person under their leadership. For any Spartan, the same rigorous training was undertaken by all men in the culture, even the king; this training made certain that the Spartans would fight, and potentially die, bravely and with honor for their state (Perry, 38.) Archidamus personally led the Spartan army around Attica, devastating the countryside while the Athenians were dealing with the plague (Thucydides, 151.)

Pericles, being a general of the Athenian army, also set an example for his troops to follow; he led his troops to what he believed to be a more tactical strategy in defending the territory they had taken from the Peloponnesian (101). Pericles also made attempts to leave some of the navy back to defend Athens as opposed to conquering while at war with Sparta; this would have likely saved the Athenians from their destruction had they done so (163.)

Alcibiades, unlike Pericles and Archidamus, did not lead by example very often. The examples Alcibiades set for his troops off the battlefield were abhorred by nearly everyone in Athens as he lived a grandiose and questionable lifestyle, for which he had drawn much negative attention. One of his fellow commanders and rivals, Nicias, pointed this out when attempting to dissuade Athens from attacking Sicily. The fact that Alcibiades did not attempt to hide his extravagance—indeed, to an extent he flaunted it—made him despised by many, and took away from the leadership quality he had in their eyes.

In analyzing Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War*, we encounter three leaders during that time who heavily influenced the outcome of the war: King Archidamus of Sparta, Pericles of Athens, and Alcibiades of Athens. The most impressive of the three aforementioned leaders was Pericles in that he was able to inspire the Athenian population to take up arms for the state, and fight to their last; some of what he advised the Athenians to do, such as not to expand while simultaneously fighting a war, was not heeded after his death, and likely resulted in the downfall of Athens, and thus he was not the most effective of the three. The most effective of the three leaders was King Archidamus of Sparta: in spite of not wanting to go to war immediately, Archidamus let the Spartan assembly and Sparta’s allies decide whether or not to wage war on Athens; when the assembly and Sparta’s allies voted for war, Archidamus led them to devastate Attica and defeat Athens. The victory came at a heavy cost, however, and left the Greek city-states both weaker and in more turmoil, leaving them vulnerable to outside invaders.
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