

# Athenian strategy in the Peloponnesian War

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In the last quarter of the fifth century B.C. (431–404) the Athenians and their allies fought a terrible and devastating war, at first against the Spartans and their allies, chiefly from the Peloponnesus, but ultimately also against many of their own rebellious allies and the almost unlimited financial resources of the Persian Empire of the Achaemenids as well. It was the “Peloponnesian War” from the point of view of the Athenians; the Spartans presumably considered it the “Athenian War.” But like so much of Greek history we see it from the Athenian perspective. Most of what we know about the war comes from Thucydides the son of Olorus, an Athenian contemporary who served as a general in 424 and was condemned and sent into exile for the rest of the war when a city for which he had partial responsibility fell to the enemy. His personal calamity was a boon to posterity, for his exile enabled him to travel about the Greek world and to talk with participants on both sides. The result was a history of unusual even-handedness and great profundity.

From the perspective of the fifth-century Greeks, the Peloponnesian War seemed as much a world war as the great war of 1914–1918 seemed to the Europeans of the time. Thucydides tells us that he began his history as the war began,

in the belief that it would be great and noteworthy above all the wars that had gone before, inferring this from the fact that both powers were then at their best in preparedness for war in every way, and seeing the rest of the Hellenic people taking sides with one side or the other, some at once, others planning to do so. For this was the greatest upheaval that had ever shaken the Hellenes,

extending also to some part of the barbarians, one might say even to a very large part of mankind.<sup>1</sup>

The war was a terrible turning point in Greek history, causing enormous destruction of life and property, intensifying factional and class hostility, dividing the Greek states and unsettling their relationships with one another, and ultimately weakening their capacity to resist conquest from outside.

Despite great misfortunes, errors of their own making, and the vast array of enemies gathered against them, the Athenians came remarkably close on several occasions to winning the war, or at least emerging with their independence and power intact. Nor was their final defeat inevitable. Thucydides indeed emphasizes how difficult they were to bring down:

Even after their defeat in Sicily, where they lost most of their fleet as well as the rest of their force, and faction had already broken out in Athens, they nevertheless held out for ten more years, not only against their previous enemies and the Sicilians who joined them and most of their allies, who rebelled against them, but also later against Cyrus, son of the Great King [of Persia], who provided money to the Peloponnesians for a navy. Nor did they give in before they destroyed themselves by falling upon one another because of private quarrels.<sup>2</sup>

What kind of state fought so hard yet lost the greatest war in the history of ancient Greece?

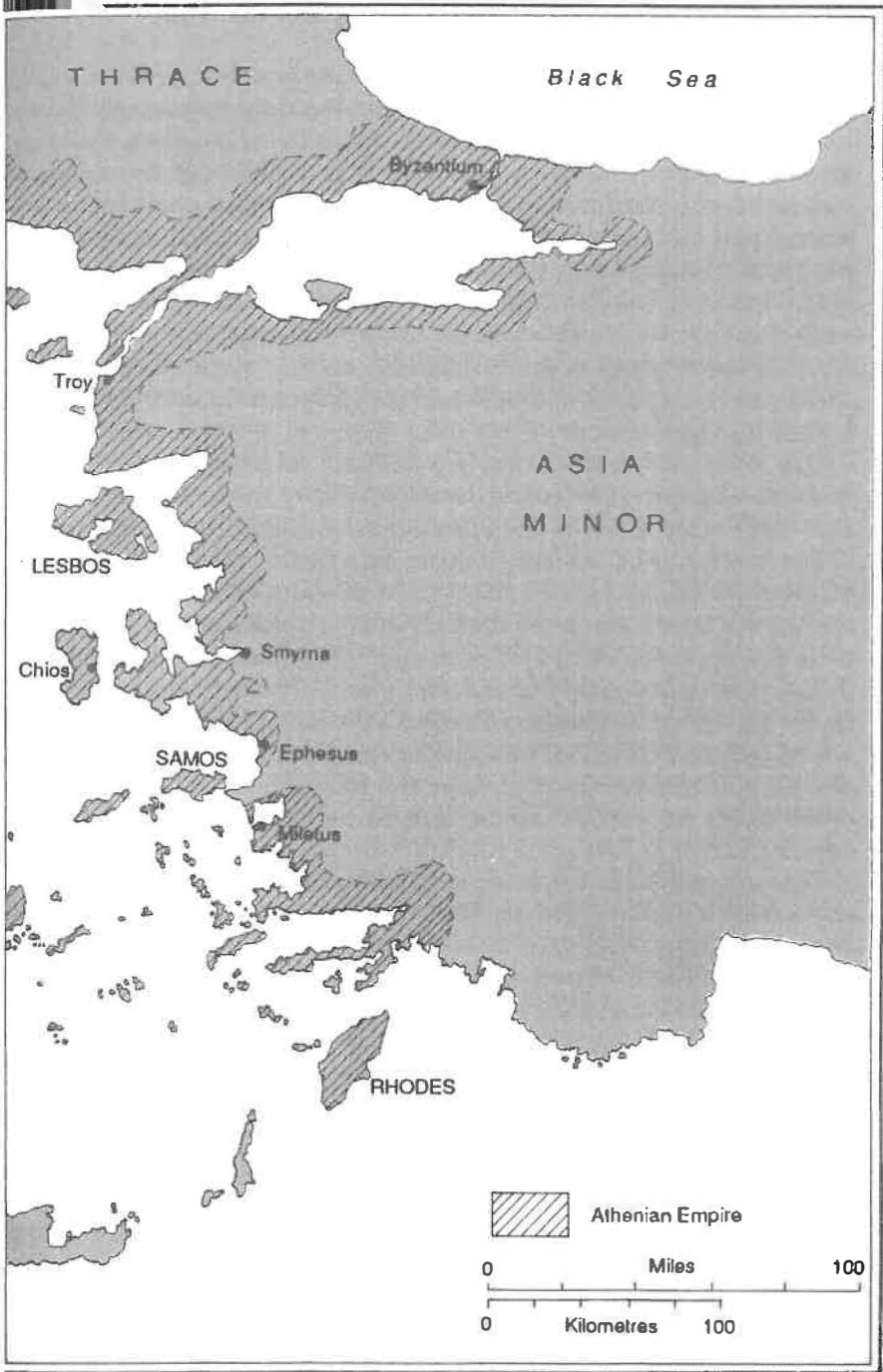
To understand the situation and character of the Athenian state, it is useful to think of it as the “Athenian Imperial Democracy,” with significance connected to each part of the designation. Athens had a unique history that helped shape its character long before it became a democracy and acquired an empire. It was the chief town of the region known as Attica, a small triangular peninsula extending southeastward from central Greece. Attica has an area of about 1,000 square miles, but much of it is mountainous and rocky and unavailable for cultivation. The rest was hardly first-rate farmland; early Attica was relatively poor even by Greek standards. This proved a blessing when invaders from the north swept down and occupied the more attractive lands of the Peloponnesus, but regarded Attica as not worth the trouble of conquest. The Spartan conquerors of the richer lands of the southern Peloponnesus enslaved the far more numerous natives, whom they called helots, and lived off their labors without working the soil themselves. But they paid a price: their state became a single-minded military academy and armed camp, isolated, suspicious of contact with the outside, and ever-fearful of a helot uprising. The Athenians, on the other hand, claimed to be autochthonous, to have sprung from their own soil and to have lived in the same place since before the birth of the moon. They were free to go their way without the burden of oppressing a discontented underclass.

<sup>1</sup> 1.1.2. References are to Thucydides unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> 2.65.12–13.



**Map 2.1.** Classical Greece/Athenian Empire, ca. 450 B.C. *Source.* Adapted from Kagan, Ozment, and Turner, *The Western Heritage*, Volume A: To 1527, Fourth Edition (New York: Macmillan, 1997), 76-78.



## *Kagan*

Another secret of the rise of Athens was the early unification of the region under Athenian control. Unlike the Thebans who constantly fought for control of Boeotia on the northern frontier of Attica, the Athenians did not become entangled in quarrels and wars with neighboring towns. All the communities of Attica were part of the Athenian city-state, and all their free, native-born inhabitants were Athenian citizens on an equal basis. The absence of intense pressures, internal and external, may help explain Athens' relatively easy-going, nonviolent early history and its emergence in the fifth century as the first democracy in the history of the world. By mid-century, the democratic constitution had basically reached the completion of its development toward the full and direct participation of all adult male citizens in their own government.

The sovereign in Athens was the assembly (*ekklesia*), which made all decisions on policy – foreign and domestic, military and civil. It met no fewer than forty times a year in the open air, overlooking the marketplace and beside the Acropolis. All male citizens were eligible to attend, vote, make proposals, and debate. At the start of the war, about 40,000 Athenians were eligible, but attendance at the assembly rarely exceeded 6,000. This was the body that approved treaties of peace and declarations of war. All strategic decisions were first proposed, discussed, and debated in the open before thousands of people, a majority of whom had to approve every detail of every action. For any expedition, the assembly voted on its target and purpose, the number and specific nature of ships and men, the funds to be spent, the commanders to lead the forces, and the specific instructions to those commanders.

The most important offices in the Athenian state, among the few filled by election rather than by lottery, were those of the ten generals (*strategoi*). Because they commanded divisions of the Athenian army and fleets of ships in battle, they had to be military men; because they needed to secure election for a one-year term with the possibility of reelection without limit, they had to be politicians. In the fifth century, most generals had skills in both areas, although some were stronger in one respect than the other. Although these men could and did impose military discipline while on campaign, they were not very powerful in the city. At least ten times a year, they faced a formal opportunity for complaint against their conduct in office, and at the end of their term they had to make a full accounting of their behavior in office, both military and financial. On each occasion, they were subject to trial if accused of misconduct, and liable to serious punishment if convicted. Thucydides was not alone in suffering harsh treatment from a dissatisfied people.

The ten generals together did not make up a cabinet or a government; the assembly was the government. Sometimes, however, a general would gain so much political support and influence as to become the leader of the Athenians in fact, if not in law. Cimon attained such stature for the seventeen years between 479 and 462, when he appears to have been general each year,

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to have led every important expedition, and to have persuaded the Athenian assembly to support his policies at home and abroad. After Cimon's departure, Pericles achieved similar success over an even longer period. For three decades before the war, he seems to have been a general each year, to have assisted the election of some of his associates, to have conducted those campaigns he thought necessary, and to have gained the support of the Athenians for his domestic and foreign policies. It is important to note, however, that he never had any greater formal powers than the other generals and never tried to alter the democratic constitution. He was still subject to the scrutiny provided for in the constitution and required a vote in the open and uncontrolled assembly to take any action. He did not always get what he wanted and, on some occasions, his enemies persuaded the assembly to act against his wishes, but Thucydides' description of the Athenian government on the eve of the war was that it was a democracy led by its first citizen. Pericles was influential not because of any hidden power or the control of armed force, for he had none. The Athenians followed his lead because of his reputation for intelligence, wisdom, ability, honesty, and patriotism, because of his remarkable talents as a public speaker, and because of the success and popularity of his policies and leadership. Thucydides introduces him into his history as "Pericles son of Xanthippus, the leading man in Athens at that time and the ablest in speech and in action."<sup>3</sup> Thucydides went too far in saying that Athens in Pericles' time, though a democracy in name, was becoming the rule of the first citizen.<sup>4</sup> In fact, it always remained a thoroughgoing democracy in every respect. But in the crisis leading to war, in the adoption of a strategy to fight it, and into the second year of its conduct, the Athenians invariably followed the advice of their great leader.

The power and prosperity of the Athenian democracy depended on its command of its great maritime empire, centered on the Aegean Sea, the islands in it, and the cities along its coast. Beginning as the Delian League, a voluntary alliance of Greek states that invited Athens to take the lead in continuing the war of liberation and vengeance against Persia, it gradually became an empire under Athenian command functioning chiefly for the advantage of Athens. Over the years, almost all the members gave up their own fleets and chose to make a money payment into the common treasury instead of contributing their own ships and men. The Athenians used the money to increase the number of their own ships and to pay the rowers to stay at their oars for eight months each year, so that the Athenian navy became by far the biggest and best fleet ever known. The imperial revenue provided a considerable surplus beyond the needs of the navy, and the Athenians used it for their own purposes, including the great building program that beautified and glorified their city and gave work to its people. It also

<sup>3</sup> I.139.4.

<sup>4</sup> 2.65.7.

allowed them to accumulate a large reserve fund. The navy protected the ships of their merchants in their prosperous trade around the Mediterranean and beyond. It also gave the Athenians access to the wheat fields of the Ukraine and the fish of the Black Sea with which they could supplement their inadequate home food supply and even replace it totally, using imperial money if forced to abandon their own fields because of war. Once they completed the walls that surrounded their city and connected it to the fortified port at Piraeus, as they did in mid-century, the Athenians were invulnerable. They could choose a strategy unavailable to any Greek state, then or before. They could avoid all major land battles against a numerically and tactically superior enemy, stand behind their walls, leave their lands undefended, and maintain themselves indefinitely while striking the enemy from the sea. Pericles persuaded the Athenians to employ this plan when they entered the Peloponnesian War.

To understand Pericles' goals and the strategy that he chose to achieve them, we need to examine the origins of the war. Between 461 and 445, with lapses and interruptions, the Athenians fought a war against the Spartans and their Peloponnesian allies that modern scholars call the First Peloponnesian War. For a good part of that period, the Athenians had control of territory on the mainland that extended from central Greece to the Isthmus of Corinth. While they held it, they could bottle up the Spartans in the Peloponnesus, interrupt the trade of Sparta's allies, especially its chief naval ally, Corinth, and themselves remain protected from attack from any direction. Rebellions in this Athenian land empire, however, opened the road into Attica to the Peloponnesian army, and Pericles was able to avoid a major land battle only by negotiating the Thirty Years' Peace. That peace was quite satisfactory to Pericles and most Athenians, for it recognized the Athenian Empire and divided the Greek world into two spheres of influence, the Athenians controlling the Aegean and the Spartans the mainland. A unique clause in the treaty guaranteed a serious effort at "peaceful coexistence" by providing for compulsory arbitration in case of future disagreements. Pericles' long-range goal was to maintain this peace.

The great war came, very much against Pericles' wishes, when Corinth attacked the neutral island of Corcyra (modern Corfù), and the Corcyraeans asked the Athenians to join them in an alliance against Corinth. The treaty specifically permitted neutrals to join either side, but an alliance with Corcyra against Corinth posed obvious problems. The knowledge that Corinth and Corcyra had the only other sizeable fleets in Greece persuaded Pericles and the Athenians to accept. If the Corinthian and Corcyraean fleets united under a hostile command, the combined force could challenge Athens' control of the sea and therefore its security. The Spartans were not eager to go to war, for they knew that the Athenians had not formally broken the peace, and they were reluctant to be drawn into a major war over quarrels that did not concern them directly. Pericles counted on the Spartans to be sensible and

understand that Athens had no designs on them or their allies but was acting defensively. As the crisis wore on, the Corinthians convinced the Spartans that Athens was expansionist by nature and represented a permanent danger and that as a result they must destroy the Athenian empire.

Pericles did not want war, yet he took a number of actions that angered and frightened the Peloponnesians and helped the advocates of war carry the day in Sparta. He supported the Athenian alliance with Corcyra and interfered with the autonomy of Potidaea, an Athenian ally, fearing that it might rebel because of its traditionally close relationship with Corinth. Both actions angered Corinth. He imposed an embargo on Megarian trade with Athens and its empire to punish Megara for helping Corinth against Corcyra and to deter other Peloponnesian states from becoming involved in the quarrel. The angry Megarians joined the chorus of those demanding that Sparta lead the Peloponnesians against Athens. Pericles rejected all Spartan demands and insisted on the letter of the treaty, the submission of all differences to binding arbitration. The Spartans never asked Athens to break off the treaty with Corcyra; at one point they even offered peace if the Athenians would only withdraw the Megarian decree. The decree had no intrinsic importance to Athens, and many Athenians wanted to accept the Spartan offer. Why did Pericles refuse? What threat made him willing to fight an unwelcome war over “a scrap of paper” rather than yield?

Pericles knew that the Spartans had accepted the existence of the Athenian Empire with the greatest reluctance. From its earliest days, a faction in Sparta had resented Athenian power and wanted to destroy it. Normally, this aggressive faction was in the minority, but from time to time, especially when circumstances made Athens seem vulnerable, it used Athenian actions, however innocent in intention, to frighten the Spartan majority into war. It had succeeded on two previous occasions in the last thirty years, and had come close once. For Pericles, the Thirty Years’ Peace, especially its arbitration clause, provided a way to prevent a repetition of the threat. Throughout the crisis, however, the Spartans ignored their treaty obligations:

It has long been clear that the Spartans are plotting against us, and it is even clearer now. The treaty states that differences between us must be submitted to arbitration . . . but they have never themselves asked for arbitration and do not accept it now that we offer it. They want to resolve their complaints by war instead of by discussion, and now they are here, no longer requesting, but already demanding.<sup>5</sup>

That was what troubled Pericles. If the Athenians accepted Spartan demands under threat of force, they would set their city back a half century to a time when Sparta was the unique and unquestioned leader of the Greeks. Athenian power and independence would be at the mercy of the fluctuations of Spartan politics. The Thirty Years’ peace guaranteed Athenian equality

<sup>5</sup> I.140.2.



with Sparta and the division of Greece into spheres of influence. That arrangement rested on the principle of mutual noninterference and provided carefully for relations with neutral states and, most importantly, for the arbitration of differences. If the Athenians gave way to the threat of war now, they would abandon their claim to equality and open themselves up to blackmail whenever the Spartans chose. Pericles therefore refused to rescind the Megarian decree. This is how he explained his views to the Athenians:

Let none of you think that you are going to war over a trifle if we do not rescind the Megarian decree, whose withdrawal they hold out especially as a way of avoiding war, and do not reproach yourselves with second thoughts that you have gone to war for a small thing. For this “trifle” contains the affirmation and the test of your resolution. If you yield to them you will immediately be required to make another concession which will be greater, since you will have made the first concession out of fear.<sup>6</sup>

This was a classic rationale for rejecting appeasement, and admirable in its courage and resolution. But were Pericles' fears justified? In terms of the immediate crisis, no. The specific grievances between Athens and Sparta were not intrinsically important. On the one hand, had the Athenians withdrawn the Megarian decree the crisis would presumably have passed without war. But on the other, Pericles was right about the persistence of an implacably hostile faction in Sparta. Had Athens made the required concession, it might have calmed the fears of the normally cautious and pacific majority for a time, but it might also have led to a harder Spartan line in future conflicts. Pericles believed that he had discovered the one strategy that could guarantee success and convince the Spartans to abandon threats and war. He was certainly right in believing that he was the only one who could persuade the Athenians to adopt it and execute it. He refused to yield, in large part, because of the unique opportunity to set the Athenian Empire and Spartan-Athenian relations on a permanent and sound basis. The availability of such an apparently promising strategy may have helped bring on the war.

Pericles, convinced that the Spartan decision to fight was an aberration, adopted a strategy meant to persuade the Spartans of their mistake and to restore peace on the basis of the status quo ante. He envisaged a world in which the Athenians and the Spartans, each realizing that they had no way of imposing their will on the other, would respect the integrity of the other.

A successful strategy must rest on a clear understanding of the aims of a war and an accurate assessment of the resources available to both sides. It must seek to employ one's own strength against the enemy's weakness, make use of the experiences of the past, and adjust to changes in conditions, both material and psychological. Sound strategy insures in advance that if the first expectations meet with disappointment, an alternate plan is ready. Rarely, however, have states or statesmen embarked upon war in such a fashion.

<sup>6</sup> 1.140.5.

Pericles' strategy did not aim to defeat the Spartans in battle, only to convince them that war with Athens was futile. His strategic goals, therefore, were entirely defensive. He told the Athenians that if they "would remain quiet, take care of their fleet, refrain from trying to extend their empire in wartime and thus putting their city in danger, they would prevail."<sup>7</sup> The practical plan to achieve Pericles' goals went as follows: the Athenians were to reject battle on land, abandon their fields and homes in the country to Spartan devastation, and retreat behind their walls. Meanwhile, their navy would launch a series of commando raids on the coast of the Peloponnesus. This strategy would continue until the frustrated enemy agreed to make peace. Pericles meant the naval raids and landings to annoy and to suggest how much damage the Athenians could do if they chose. The strategy was not to exhaust the Peloponnesians physically or materially, but psychologically. Pericles meant to convince the Spartans, the primary enemy, that they could not win a war against Athens. A modern scholar puts it well:

[Pericles] must first prove that the existence of Athens and of the Athenian Empire could not be destroyed and then that Athens, too, could harm her enemies. . . . It was a reasonable calculation that the nerve and will-power of her opponents might well be exhausted before the treasures on the Acropolis, and that they might admit that the power and determination of Athens were invincible.<sup>8</sup>

No Greek state had ever attempted such a strategy, for no state before the coming of the Athenian imperial democracy ever had the means to try it. The Athenians were in a position to use such an approach in the latter part of the First Peloponnesian War but did not do so, perhaps because Pericles was not yet politically secure enough to persuade the assembly. His task was not easy, for this unprecedented strategy ran directly against the grain of Greek tradition. The most powerful force in the shaping of Greek culture was the epic tradition represented in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Centuries of poetry, tales, wars, and athletic contests reinforced this tradition, which placed bravery in warfare at the summit of Greek virtues. By the seventh century, the hoplite phalanx, a closely ordered and highly disciplined block of heavily armed infantrymen, had become the main military force of the Greeks. It depended on the discipline, courage, and fighting spirit of the ordinary citizen. Willingness to fight, bravery, and steadfastness in battle became the essential characteristics of the free man and the citizen. Pericles' strategy of passivity, therefore, ran directly counter to Greek tradition.

Most Athenians, moreover, were farmers whose lands and homes were outside the walls. The Periclean strategy required them to look on while the Spartans destroyed their houses, crops, vines, and olive trees. In the face of

<sup>7</sup> 2.65.7.

<sup>8</sup> F.E. Adcock, "The Archidamian War, 431-421 B.C.," *Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 5 (Cambridge, 1940), p. 195.

these facts, as well as the power of tradition and its cultural values, it is hard to understand, even in retrospect, how Pericles convinced the Athenians to adopt his strategy. Part of the explanation lies in the uniquely powerful political position he had achieved by 431. No formal constitutional changes had occurred for twenty years, but Pericles' talents, his continuity in office, and his success in defeating challengers gave him unprecedented influence. In 443, he drove the leader of the chief opposition faction into exile, and in the years that followed no effective organized political group challenged him. Pericles was probably the only man with the imagination to conceive a plan that ran counter to such deep and strong prejudices and certainly the only one with the ability to put it into effect. For such deeds, Hans Delbrück awards him a place "among the greatest generals in world history." His greatness lay in conceiving the plan, implementing it decisively by yielding all of Attica instead of taking half measures, but most of all, in putting the plan through a democratic assembly and insuring its implementation by the force of his personality: "The fulfillment of this decision is an act of generalship that may be placed on a level with any victory."<sup>9</sup>

Pericles had reason to believe that his proposed strategy was the best one available and that Athenian resources were adequate to make it succeed. Meeting the enemy on land would have been foolish, if for no other reason than the Peloponnesians' great advantage in numbers. At the beginning of the war, the Athenians could field an army of 13,000 infantrymen of an age and condition to fight a pitched battle and had another 16,000 able to man the border forts and the walls surrounding and connecting Athens and Piraeus.<sup>10</sup> Plutarch tells us that the army that invaded Attica in 431 numbered 60,000.<sup>11</sup> He undoubtedly inflated that number, but Pericles himself admitted just before the war that in a single battle the Spartans and their allies were a match for all the other Greeks put together.<sup>12</sup> Recent history, moreover, had shown that intelligent Athenians recognized the relative weakness of their army. During the First Peloponnesian War, they had fought bravely but lost the Battle of Tanagra in 457, despite the advantage of superior numbers, and they had suffered heavy casualties. When the Peloponnesian army invaded Attica in 446, the Athenians had made a truce and abandoned their land empire rather than fight. That memory must have helped the anti-Athenian party in Sparta convince their fellow citizens to declare war again. If they invaded Attica during the growing season, the Athenians would never hide behind their walls and allow the Spartans to ravage their land and homes. Either they would yield without a battle, as they had in 446, or they

<sup>9</sup> Hans Delbrück, *Geschichte der Kriegskunst*, Vol. 1, *Das Altertum*, (Berlin, 1920, reprinted 1964), pp. 125-26.

<sup>10</sup> 2.13.6-7.

<sup>11</sup> *Pericles* 33.4.

<sup>12</sup> 1.141.6.

would come out to fight and be destroyed. In either case the war would be short and victory certain.

Pericles went to war to prove the Spartan “hawks” wrong. He made this point quite clear to the Athenians, saying: “If I thought I could persuade you I would urge you to go out and devastate your own property to show the Peloponnesians that you will not take orders from them to save it.”<sup>13</sup> He believed that once the Spartans saw the Athenians’ willingness to make the necessary sacrifices, avoid land battles, and follow his unprecedented strategy, they would also see the futility of war against Athens and negotiate a peace. The resulting agreement, though no different in substance from the Thirty Years’ Peace, would be secure and lasting, because the Spartans would have recognized Athenian invincibility.

To carry out his strategy, Pericles had resources that surpassed those of any previous Greek state and dwarfed those of his opponents. Apart from the subject-states of their empire, which supplied money payments and rowers for the fleet, the Athenians had a number of free allies who provided their own warships and crews, as well as some infantry, cavalry, and money. The power and hopes of Athens rested on its magnificent navy. In its dockyards lay at least 300 seaworthy warships as well as some others that the Athenians could repair and use in case of need. Athens’ free allies – Lesbos, Chios, and Corcyra – could also provide ships, perhaps over 100 in all. Against this armada, the Peloponnesians could send about 100 ships, but the skill and experience of their crews were no match for the Athenians, as the first decade of the war proved repeatedly.

Pericles knew that the key to naval warfare, and therefore to his strategy, was money to build and maintain the ships and to pay their crews. Here, too, Athens held a vast advantage. In 431, the annual income of Athens was 1,000 talents, of which 400 came from internal revenue and 600 from tribute and other imperial sources.<sup>14</sup> Although about 600 talents was available for the cost of the war each year, that amount was not enough to sustain the Periclean plan. The Athenians would need to dip into their substantial capital. At the beginning of the war, the Athenians had 6,000 talents of coined silver in the treasury, another 500 in uncoined gold and silver, and 40 talents worth of gold plates on the statue of Athena on the Acropolis that they could remove and melt down in an emergency.<sup>15</sup> The Peloponnesians could not match this extraordinary wealth. The Spartan king spoke for most when he said, “we have no money in the public treasury nor can we easily raise money by taxation.” The Corinthians were better off than the others, but they had

<sup>13</sup> I.143.5.

<sup>14</sup> A talent represented a specified weight in silver. It is impossible to give a modern monetary equivalent, but it may be helpful to know that one talent was the cost of paying the crew of a warship for a month, that there were 6000 drachmas in a talent, and that one drachma was a good day’s pay for a skilled craftsman in Athens.

<sup>15</sup> 2.13.4–5.

no reserve fund, and Pericles justifiably told the Athenians that “the Peloponnesians have no money, either public or private.”<sup>16</sup>

Even the wisest and best-prepared strategy is not likely to succeed unless those who employ it carry out its design faithfully. Pericles’ great challenge, as Delbrück pointed out, was to get the Athenians to follow the plan. The first Peloponnesian invasion was purposefully leisurely, in the hope that the Athenians would regain their senses and yield before seeing their lands destroyed. So long as the invaders pushed no further than they had come in 446, the Athenians held back, thinking the enemy might turn away, as before. But when they came close to the city, visibly laying waste to the land, the Athenians could no longer bear it. Thucydides describes their reaction:

Naturally, it seemed to them terrible to see their land ravaged in full view. The young men had never seen such a thing, and the older men not since the Persian War. It was the general opinion, and especially among the younger men, that they should not stand about and watch but go out and put a stop to it. . . . The city was irritated in every way, and they were angry with Pericles. They completely forgot the warnings he had given them in advance, abused him for being a cowardly general who would not lead them out to battle, and held him responsible for all their troubles.<sup>17</sup>

The leader of his bellicose opponents was Cleon, a politician who had criticized Pericles for some time and would emerge as the leader of the Athenian “hawks” after his death. The comic poet Hermippus gives us an idea of the tone of these attacks in a play probably performed in spring 430 that addressed Pericles as follows: “King of the Satyrs, why won’t you ever lift a spear but instead use only dreadful words to wage the war, assuming the character of the cowardly Teles. But if a little knife is sharpened on a whetstone you roar as though bitten by the fierce Cleon.”<sup>18</sup>

It is a tribute to Pericles’ courage and determination that he held fast to his policy in the face of such pressure, and proof of his extraordinary influence and leadership that he managed to prevent the Athenians from abandoning it at once. All male Athenian citizens of military age participated in both civilian and military decision-making; the modern distinction between civilian and military authority did not then exist in Athens. This sometimes had disadvantages, but the two-sided character of the office of general assisted Pericles’ efforts to maintain his chosen strategy despite the instinctive reaction against it. Thucydides describes the scene:

Pericles saw that they were very angry at the situation in which they found themselves and that their thinking was not at its best. He was confident that his decision not to go out and fight was correct, so he prevented the calling of an assembly or any other meeting, fearing that if the people came together they

<sup>16</sup> I.80.4; I.141.3.

<sup>17</sup> 2.21.3.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted by Plutarch in *Pericles* 33.4.

would make a mistake by acting out of anger instead of using their judgment. He watched over the city and kept it peaceful, so far as was possible.<sup>19</sup>

During a brief but intense, perhaps critical, period, normal political debate and discussion ceased. No law was passed; no emergency powers were granted to Pericles or to the board of generals as a whole. The assembly held regular meetings that did not depend on the actions of the generals, of whom Pericles was just one in ten, with no greater formal power than the others. How was he able to put politics aside long enough to protect his strategy?

The Spartan siege of Athens forms part of the answer, and strategic necessity gave the generals more power than usual. The citizens were under arms, guarding the walls; an assembly meant leaving the city walls undefended, and if the soldiers stayed at their posts the assembly would be peculiarly unrepresentative. These circumstances represented a good reason for canceling the regular meetings, and Pericles' personal influence – his unofficial but powerful position as recognized leader – would have done the rest. No doubt he prevailed on the other generals, some of whom were his political associates, to see the matter his way, and against their combined recommendation no official would have dared call the citizens to assembly. In Roman terms, Pericles achieved his purpose not by *imperium* but by *auctoritas*.

Pericles had selected a strategy, he had the political means to hold the people to it, and he seemed to have the resources to carry it out. So impressive a judge as Thucydides was certain that it was the right strategy and that it deserved to succeed:

Pericles lived two years and six months after the beginning of the fighting, and after he died his foresight in regard to the war was acknowledged even more. He said that if the Athenians would remain quiet, take care of their fleet, refrain from trying to extend their empire in wartime and thus putting their city in danger, they would prevail. . . . Pericles had more than sufficient reasons at that time for his personal forecast that Athens would win through quite easily in the war against the Peloponnesians alone.<sup>20</sup>

Thucydides attributes the failure of the Periclean strategy to his successors, who “did everything contrary to his plan in every way.”<sup>21</sup> But Pericles' strategy remained intact for two years after his death. Even more to the point, in retrospect we can see that it had already failed while he was alive. In the second year of the war the Athenians, against the opposition of Pericles, sent an embassy to Sparta to ask for terms of peace. We are not told what terms emerged, but evidently the Athenians thought them too harsh, for they rejected them and continued fighting. The fact remains, however, that the Spartans could have offered terms good enough for the Athenians to accept while falling short of what Pericles sought. By Pericles' definition, the offer-

<sup>19</sup> 2.22.1.

<sup>20</sup> 2.65.6–7; 13.

<sup>21</sup> 2.65.7.

ing and acceptance of any such terms would have meant the loss of the war. The very request for terms and the rejection of Pericles' counsel, moreover, shows that his fellow citizens took a negative view of his strategy. His persistence in it cost him his position of power and much more; in their disappointment and anger, the Athenians deposed Pericles from office, put him on trial, and imposed on him a heavy fine. All of these actions flowed from and were evidence of the failure of his strategy.

Why did the strategy fail? Part of the answer lies in an unforeseen and – given the state of medical knowledge at the time – unforeseeable disaster: the plague. In 430, the second year of the war, a terrible plague fell upon Athens. Nothing like it had ever occurred before, and modern scholars and physicians continue to debate its identity without agreement. With the entire population of Attica crowded into the walled area, the pestilence was especially deadly. Before running its course, it carried off one-third of the Athenian population. No doubt the plague did great harm to the Periclean strategy by weakening the will of the Athenians and encouraging the Peloponnesians to keep fighting. But after negotiations failed, the Athenians' will to fight held, and the Spartans gave no evidence that their determination ever weakened. Doomed from the start, the Periclean strategy was already unraveling before the outbreak of the plague.

To evaluate the plan, we need to know how long Pericles expected the Spartans to fight. Those who regard the outcome of the Archidamian War (431–421) as justification for his strategy do not generally raise this question, but they reason implicitly that a war of ten years was not outside his calculations. This notion rests, in part, on Pericles' speech to the Athenians on the eve of the war. The Peloponnesians, he says, "have had no experience with wars overseas or extended in time; they only wage brief wars against each other because of their poverty."<sup>22</sup> The great majority of the Peloponnesian soldiers, all but the Spartans themselves, farmed their own lands; they could not stay away long and had to bear the costs of an expedition from their own funds. Such men would risk their lives rather than their property, "for they are not sure that they won't use up their funds first, especially if the war lasts longer than they expected, which is quite likely."<sup>23</sup>

Pericles rightly argued that the Peloponnesians lacked the resources to launch the kind of campaign that would have endangered the Athenian Empire, but nothing prevented them from continuing to invade and devastate Attica every year. These invasions lasted no longer than a month, and the soldiers' food represented the only cost. The important question was, how long could the Athenian treasury hold out at the annual rate of expenditure required to sustain the Periclean strategy? Some idea of average annual cost is possible by examining the first year of the war, when Pericles was firmly in

<sup>22</sup> I.142.3.

<sup>23</sup> I.141.5–6.

control and his strategy applied to the letter. It was as unadventurous a year as any, and Athens was still in good fighting trim. When the Peloponnesians invaded Attica in 431, the Athenians sent 100 ships around the Peloponnesus. A squadron of thirty ships sailed to protect the crucial island of Euboea. Another seventy ships, already blockading Potidaea, brought the total to 200 Athenian ships in service for the year. A ship at sea cost a talent per month, and eight months was the usual period that ships remained at sea (although the blockade probably required the ships at Potidaea to stay the year round). These estimates would result in an expenditure of 1,600 talents for naval expenses. The forces on land required additional expenditure, with Potidaea consuming the greatest portion. No fewer than 3,000 infantry participated in the siege there, and sometimes more; a conservative average is 3,500. The soldiers received one drachma a day and one for a retainer each day, so that the daily cost of the army was at least 7,000 drachmas, or one talent and one-sixth. If we multiply this figure by 360, a round number for a year, we arrive at 420 talents. Other military costs certainly arose but simply the naval expenses and the cost of the troops at Potidaea required over 2,000 talents. Two other calculations, based on different kinds of data, supply a similar figure.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, Pericles must have expected to spend about 2,000 talents a year to carry on the war. Three years of such a war, then, would cost 6,000 talents. In the second year of the war, the Athenians voted to set aside 1,000 talents from their reserves for use only "if the enemy should make a naval attack against the city and they should have to defend it," and assigned the death penalty to anyone who might propose using it for any other purpose.<sup>25</sup> A usable reserve fund of 5,000 remained; if we add three years of imperial revenue, 1,800, we get 6,800 talents. Pericles, therefore, could maintain his strategy for three years, but not for a fourth.

Pericles could calculate with much greater precision than can we; he could hardly have expected a war of ten years, much less the twenty-seven it ultimately lasted. He wanted to force a change of opinion in Sparta, the true decision-maker in the Peloponnesian League. That hope was not unreasonable in view of the reluctance with which the Spartans went to war in the first place, the long delay between their vote for war and their first action, their attempts to negotiate a peace in the interim, and the reluctance with which Sparta's king went to war.<sup>26</sup> To persuade the Spartans to consider peace required the assent of only three of the five annual officials in Sparta called ephors. To get them and the Spartan assembly to accept peace, the Athenians

<sup>24</sup> For these calculations and a fuller discussion of the cost of the war, see Donald Kagan, *The Archidamian War* (Ithaca and London, 1974), pp. 35–40.

<sup>25</sup> 2.24.1.

<sup>26</sup> These matters are discussed in Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca and London, 1969). See especially, pp. 286–342.



needed merely to help restore the natural majority that kept Sparta inside the Peloponnesus most of the time.

In light of these facts, Pericles' plan seemed to make excellent sense. The Spartan King Archidamus had warned his people that they had mistaken expectations about the character of the coming war, that the Athenians would not fight a land battle and be defeated, and that the Spartans had no other strategy available at that time. They did not believe him. Pericles aimed to prove to the Spartans that their king had been right. His main tactical problem was the defensive one of restraining the Athenians and preventing them from offering battle in Attica. The offensive naval actions were deliberately unimpressive, intended only to demonstrate that a lengthy war would damage the Peloponnesians. Offensive actions would, in fact, conflict with the plan. Such actions, while unable to bring about victory, might enrage the enemy and prevent the reasonable policy of Archidamus from winning the upper hand. But a policy of restraint at home and abroad would likely bring the friends of peace to power in Sparta sooner or later.

Pericles might have expected such a change in Spartan opinion to come about quickly, possibly after one campaigning season. Perhaps it would take two years of similar actions, surely not more than three, for it would be unreasonable for Sparta to continue to beat its fist against the wall of the Athenian defensive strategy. The plan did not work. The first year brought signs of trouble. Sparta showed no signs of yielding, and Potidaea held out stubbornly, draining the Athenian treasury beyond expectation and dangerously cutting Pericles' margin for error. The next year the plague almost brought disaster. Even before it struck, Pericles had decided to increase the pressure with a major attack on the Peloponnesian city of Epidaurus. He had not changed strategy but merely intensified it to speed the education of the Peloponnesians. When Pericles died, he "left the defensive war as his testament."<sup>27</sup>

Pericles might not have adhered to the same strategy as the war dragged on and discredited his expectations. He was an intelligent and resourceful leader, and he might soon have seen what was necessary and done it. His error, though serious, was common. He expected the enemy to see reason when punished and when the futility of further fighting became clear. In our own time, the failures of strategies based on aerial bombardment, superior firepower, and naval supremacy have shown that the enemy does not always calculate rationally (by our standards of rationality) or suffer psychological collapse, but often becomes more determined as punishment continues or increases. When policymakers are not remote aristocratic professionals but citizens of a state, public opinion is a force, and passion and hatred of the enemy often obliterate rational considerations of self-interest. Sparta and

<sup>27</sup> M.H. Chambers, "Thucydides and Pericles," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 62 (1957), p. 86.

Athens were preeminently such states. Small powers in our own century have held out beyond prudence against vastly superior enemies; in the war between Athens and Sparta, where the two sides were roughly equal, stubborn resistance and sacrifice were even more likely. The Periclean strategy failed on that account.

However one judges Pericles' strategy, his death in fall 429 left a terrible void. No towering figure stood ready and able to exercise the enormous influence he had held. "Those who followed him," said Thucydides, "were more equal with one another," and so not able to provide the unified, consistent leadership needed in war. The choices available to Athens in 429 were theoretically three: (1) to seek immediate peace; (2) to adopt a more aggressive strategy, running risks to try to defeat Sparta quickly; (3) to continue the policy of Pericles, avoiding risks, wearing down the Spartans, and working for a negotiated peace on the basis of the status quo ante bellum. Each view had adherents, but the failed negotiations of 430 had totally discredited the peace party. The Athenians were not willing to make peace on Sparta's terms if, in fact, the Spartans had offered any. It seems likely that the peace party was in disgrace, for no leader appeared willing to associate his name with its policy. Cleon led the aggressive faction, but unlike his competitors he had never been a general. His lack of experience as a military leader hampered his attempt to move Athens to a more aggressive strategy. Even more important, the still-raging plague and a depleted treasury further undermined Athens' military strength and morale. The leadership of the moderate faction fell to Nicias, a capable, experienced, cautious, and unimaginative general who clung tenaciously to the Periclean strategy, which held sway without deviation until 427.

Most generals elected in spring 427 continued to adhere to the old strategy, but the election of Demosthenes signaled that some Athenians wanted a change. The new man soon proved himself the most aggressive and imaginative Athenian general in the Archidamian War, the inventor and executor of campaigns that departed completely from the strategy of Pericles. But the shift to a new strategy was gradual and came only as circumstances forced it upon the Athenians. The old strategy had already produced a crisis in 428 when Mytilene, the major city of the island of Lesbos, an autonomous ally of Athens, launched a rebellion with Spartan and Boeotian support. This worst of Athenian nightmares, a revolt in the empire, required the dispatch of an expensive expedition to besiege the island just as the treasury neared exhaustion. To pay for the operation the Athenians imposed on themselves the first direct tax of the war, perhaps the first in their history. The siege lasted until 427, and to relieve it a Peloponnesian fleet entered the Aegean and reached the coast of Asia Minor. For a moment, the enemy penetration threatened to touch off rebellions throughout the empire. However, the Spartan commander, not up to the challenge, panicked at the approach of an Athenian fleet and abandoned Mytilene to its fate.

The episode nevertheless revealed the dangers of the original strategy. Four years of defensive warfare had worn down Athenian resources to the point where the Spartans were willing to risk a naval expedition in the Aegean. A greater Peloponnesian effort coupled with better leadership at this moment might have proven deadly for Athens. By summer 427, most of the ingredients that would produce Athenian defeat more than twenty years later were already at hand. Athens was short of money, part of its empire was in revolt, the undefended coastal cities of Asia Minor were ready to rebel, and Persia stood poised to join the war against Athens. The Spartans, as Thucydides said on a later occasion, were the most convenient of all people for the Athenians to fight.<sup>28</sup> The next time, however, they might find more courage and an abler leader.

In the same year, a civil war in Corcyra threatened Athenian control of that important ally. Failure to act was leading to dangerous defections and threats of collapse. That realization may help explain why the Athenians became more adventurous in 427. They sent the general Eurymedon with a fleet to help the friends of Athens at Corcyra and then to sail on to Sicily in answer to a request for help from Athenian allies there. Syracuse, the island's chief city, was a colony of Corinth and friendly to the Peloponnesian cause. Athens' allies feared a Syracusan attempt to gain control of the whole island, and the Athenians worried that their Peloponnesian enemies would benefit from Sicily's wealth and power.

In 426, even the cautious Nicias carried out punitive raids against the island of Melos, a Spartan colony that had helped the parent city financially, and Boeotia, whose forces had joined in the ravaging of Attica. Both expeditions represented mild escalations within the Periclean strategy. In the same year, Demosthenes took a small fleet around the Peloponnesus on what the Athenians must have intended as a similar mission: to assist the friends of Athens in western Greece and do as much damage to the enemy as was possible without risk. The allies northwest of the Gulf of Corinth urged an attack on the island of Leucas, a Corinthian colony strategically located on the route to Corcyra, Italy, and Sicily. Leucas was a sensible and obvious target, but with some persuasion, Demosthenes decided instead to defend the port at Naupactus by attacking the barbaric Aetolian tribes that threatened it. The Messenians of Naupactus were also allies, and their city was a valuable port on the gulf, but Demosthenes made his decision for other reasons. His bold imagination conceived a plan that might change the course of the war in one stroke. He would land on the north shore of the gulf, move rapidly eastward through Aetolia, gather allies in central Greece, and attack Boeotia from the rear. At the same time, an Athenian army would attack Boeotia's east coast. A variety of mishaps caused the plan to go awry, and Demosthenes found himself fighting a campaign in mountains and forests

<sup>28</sup> 8.96.5.

against natives who knew the territory. The Athenians lost 120 men in the fiasco, and Demosthenes chose to stay in Naupactus rather than face his angry countrymen at home.

Although modern scholars have often criticized him, perhaps unfairly, Demosthenes had good reason to fear an accounting for his actions. An analogy with a more famous military disaster, the Gallipoli campaign of 1915, and its equally famous author, Winston Churchill, helps illuminate the question. On that occasion, as in 426, a great war between powerful alliances had reached deadlock. Each side had tried its original strategy, and each side had failed. Unable to hit on a better idea, each had lapsed into a war of attrition. Churchill, dissatisfied with that situation, thought a better solution might be available. His thoughts seem appropriate to our problem:

Nearly all the battles which are regarded as masterpieces of the military art, from which have been derived the foundation of states and the fame of commanders, have been battles of manoeuvre in which very often the enemy has found himself defeated by some novel expedient or device, some queer, swift, unexpected thrust or stratagem. In many such battles the losses of the victors have been small. There is required for the composition of a great commander not only massive common sense and reasoning power, not only imagination, but also an element of legerdemain, an original and sinister touch, which leaves the enemy puzzled as well as beaten. It is because military leaders are credited with gifts of this order which enable them to ensure victory and save slaughter that their profession is held in such high honor.<sup>29</sup>

At the strategic level, Churchill was such a leader. He conceived a plan to capture Constantinople, put Turkey out of the war, and so outflank the enemy. The plan failed not because of poor conception but because of poor execution. Had it succeeded, it might have shortened the war considerably, and at least it would have opened a route to Russia that might have kept that country in the war longer.

Was Demosthenes also such a leader? Was the Aetolian campaign the rash, imprudent blunder its critics claim, or was it a brilliant maneuver that would have left the enemy “puzzled as well as beaten”? The answers lie not merely in the failure of the plan. Churchill has set down the general principles that guided him in World War I. They seem helpful in analyzing the strategy of the Archidamian War as well:

1. The Decisive theatre is the theatre where a vital decision may be obtained at any given time. The main theatre is that in which the main armies or fleets are stationed. This is not at all times the Decisive theatre.
2. If the fronts or centres of armies cannot be broken, their flanks should be turned. If these flanks rest on the seas, the manoeuvres to turn them must be amphibious and dependent on sea power.

<sup>29</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis II, 1915* (London, 1923), p. 21.

3. The least-guarded strategic points should be selected for attack, not those most strongly guarded.
4. In any hostile combination, once it is certain that the strongest Power cannot be directly defeated itself, but cannot stand without the weakest, it is the weakest that should be attacked.
5. No offensive on land should be launched until an effective means – numbers, surprise, munitions, or mechanical devices – of carrying it through has been discovered.<sup>30</sup>

Let us test Demosthenes' Aetolian expedition against these principles:

1. No main armies were arrayed against each other in the field. For Sparta, the main theater was the soil of Attica; for Athens it was the territory of Sparta and its allies that the Athenians ravaged in the hope of wearing out the enemy's will to continue the war. Neither turned out to be the decisive theater.
2. There were, of course, no fronts to break through, but the main targets of each side had proven by 426 as invulnerable as the two armies entrenched across western Europe in 1915. The Aetolian campaign was amphibious, making use of the superior mobility of sea power to land an army at a vulnerable point.
3. The western border of Boeotia was a "least-guarded strategic point."
4. The Spartans were not susceptible to direct defeat; the Boeotians, though not the weakest of Sparta's allies, were certainly weaker than Sparta, especially in the west. Their defeat would have made it difficult, if not impossible, for Sparta to execute its annual invasions of Attica. Athenian control of central Greece would have prevented the Spartans from sending an army overland to disrupt the Athenian empire north of the Aegean, as they were able to do in 424. A successful attack on Boeotia would therefore remove every means available to Sparta for hurting Athens; the Spartans would recall Athenian successes in the First Peloponnesian War and be more inclined to negotiate a peace.
5. Demosthenes counted on surprise. He had every reason to think it would be effective. The Boeotians would never expect an attack from the seemingly safe west.

Demosthenes' plan was in fact brilliant, but he had conceived it hastily and executed it sloppily. The main problem was timing; the plan required speed for success, but that very speed prevented the careful preparation needed for a tricky, coordinated operation. Another problem was Demosthenes' unfamiliarity with the terrain and with the tactics of lightly armed guerrilla forces. He perhaps deserves blame for pushing ahead in the face of many uncertainties and even after things began to go wrong. But the legerdemain of which Churchill speaks is not the hallmark of cautious generals afraid to

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.50.

run risks, nor do states frequently win great wars without such generals. Finally, Demosthenes was risking very little, for Athens lost only 120 marines. Such a price, though regrettable, was not excessive in light of the great rewards victory would have brought. Demosthenes, moreover, was that rare soldier who could learn from his mistakes. He used what he had learned to good advantage in the future.

Demosthenes stayed at Naupactus when his term of office came to an end. The Messenians there still held him in high regard, despite his failure, and so did Athens' other allies north of the gulf. When the Spartans led a Peloponnesian army into that territory, Athens' Ambracian allies sent for Demosthenes, though now a private citizen, to lead them. Using a joint force of heavy infantry and lightly armed men and the tricks of fighting in wooded and mountainous country that he had learned, he laid a trap for the Peloponnesians, ambushed and routed them, and destroyed Spartan influence in the region.

Rehabilitated and elected general again in spring 425, Demosthenes launched a campaign that changed the course of the war. An Athenian fleet headed west to Corcyra and Sicily. With great difficulty, he persuaded its commanding generals to place him with a small force of soldiers and only five ships at Pylos, at the southwestern tip of the Peloponnesus, in Messenia. He must have noticed this place on previous voyages and asked his Messenian friends from Naupactus about it. It was naturally suited to his plan, which was to build a permanent base on the coast from which the Messenian enemies of Sparta could ravage Messenia and Laconia, receive their escaped helot countrymen, and even, perhaps, stir up a helot rebellion. The plan clearly departed from previous Athenian strategy, and the commanders of the fleet greeted it with scorn. They only agreed to put in to Pylos when a storm forced them; at the first opportunity they hurried on to Corcyra. Demosthenes built his little fort and waited. When the news reached the Spartans, they recalled the army from its annual invasion of Attica, brought back their fleet from Corcyra, and sent an army to attack the fort. Without a blow being struck, Demosthenes' novel action had already forced Sparta onto the defensive.

The Spartans soon found that the Athenian fort was strong and well located. To help with the assault, they landed a force on the island of Sphacteria, just south of Pylos, stretching across the mouth of the Bay of Navarino. This deployment proved to be a serious mistake, for the Athenian fleet, returning from Corcyra at Demosthenes' request, sailed into the harbor and defeated the Peloponnesian navy, imprisoning the Spartan force on Sphacteria. Inhabitants of the twentieth century, accustomed to casualty lists in the millions, may marvel that so tough a military state as Sparta would ask for peace merely to recover 420 prisoners, although at least 180 of them were Spartiates from the best families. But this number represented fully one-tenth of the Spartan army. In a state that practiced a strict code of eugenics, killing

imperfect infants, whose separation of men from women during the most fertile years guaranteed effective birth control, whose code of honor demanded of its soldiers death rather than dishonor, and whose leading caste married only its own members, we may readily understand that concern for the safety of even 180 Spartiates was not merely sentimental but extremely practical.

It is impossible to exaggerate the stunning effect and importance of this naval victory. Once convinced that they could not rescue their men, the Spartans immediately asked for a truce while they sent envoys to Athens to negotiate a general peace. Thucydides ascribed the outcome of Demosthenes' plan chiefly to chance, but more than chance was involved. Demosthenes conceived and executed the entire campaign with a keen eye for the special opportunities offered at Pylos and Sphacteria. He could not have been confident that the Spartans would occupy Sphacteria and run the risk of encirclement. If the Athenians could occupy Pylos and damage and embarrass the Spartans by launching raids from it and receiving escaped helots, that would still distract them from their offensive operations, damage their prestige, and cause them concern. Yet one might imagine that they would find the Athenian occupation of a permanent base in Messenia unendurable. Initiative and daring provoke the enemy to make mistakes; a foe is much less likely to err when unchallenged and in possession of the initiative. And credit for the victory must go to the general who devised and executed the plan that forced the enemy to make a mistake.

The Spartans offered peace on the basis of the status quo, and most scholars believe that the Athenians should have accepted. They have deemed it a Periclean peace, but did the Spartan proposal deserve that title? Pericles' aims were largely psychological. He did not hope to render the Spartans incapable of making war on Athens but to make them unwilling to do so. He sought to convince them that they did not have the power to defeat Athens, but the tenor of their speech shows just the opposite. They blamed their troubles on a mistake, which they could reverse at any time. From the Periclean point of view, the Spartans had learned nothing useful. A peace that returned the Spartan prisoners in exchange for nothing but promises of good will for the future certainly raised the questions that one modern scholar has asked: "What guarantee would such a peace give that Sparta would not begin the war again at an opportune time? Was that a goal that would have been worth such a vast sacrifice? And would Athens, and especially, would its allies then be again in a position and be willing to make these sacrifices a second time?"<sup>31</sup>

Nicias nevertheless favored peace. Cleon opposed it, arguing that so long as they held the Spartan prisoners they could have peace whenever they wanted, and he insisted on a peace that would protect Attica from invasion.

<sup>31</sup> K.J. Beloch, *Die Attische Politik seit Perikles* (Leipzig, 1884), p. 23.

His terms included the surrender and removal to Athens of the Spartans on Sphacteria, and the forfeit of both of Megara's ports. The Spartans, of course, refused, and the Athenians followed Cleon's advice and rejected the Spartan offer.

When Nicias proved unable to capture the men on the island, Cleon took on the assignment and, in collaboration with the brilliant Demosthenes, forced the Spartans to surrender and brought the prisoners home in triumph. The victory at Pylos gave the Athenians the whip hand. So long as they held the prisoners, Attica was free from invasion, for they threatened to kill the hostages if a Spartan army entered Attica. The surrender of the prisoners, moreover, was a terrible shock to Spartan self-confidence and prestige. "In the eyes of the Greeks this was the most unexpected event in this war, for they believed that the Spartans would never hand over their arms because of starvation or any other compulsion but would hold on to them as long as they could and then die."<sup>32</sup> Cleon and his associates took advantage of the situation and tripled the imperial tribute, something that Athens could not have dared to do before. This revenue raised permitted the Athenians to continue fighting and even to strive for a decisive victory.

Pylos and Sphacteria finished the Periclean strategy. Cleon's and Demosthenes' definition of victory was not psychological, but tangible. They wanted to control Megara and Boeotia and thereby to recover the invulnerability Athens had enjoyed at the height of its power after it secured Boeotia in 457 when the Peloponnesians left the area following the victory at Tanagra.<sup>33</sup> In 424, Demosthenes conceived daring and innovative plans to achieve these objectives. They involved collaboration between opponents of the regime in the enemy cities and Athenian forces approaching under cover of surprise, and depended on careful coordination and timing. Both came close to success, but ultimately failed. The Megarian venture failed because a Peloponnesian army under the great Spartan general Brasidas happened to be in the neighborhood at the wrong time. Characteristically, Demosthenes' losses were light, despite his failure. The Boeotian venture misfired because the timing went wrong. Even then, the cost should have been low, but one of the Athenian generals, who could and should have avoided battle, fought instead at Delium and suffered a rout with heavy losses.

These reversals did great harm to Athens' new aggressive strategy, and Brasidas applied the coup de grace when he marched an army north to the Thracian region of the Athenian Empire and captured a number of imperial cities, especially the strategically critical town of Amphipolis. These misfortunes deflated the Athenians, and they agreed to a one-year truce in spring 423 in the expectation of negotiating a lasting peace. Peace proved impossible to achieve, and when the truce ran out Cleon took an army north to

<sup>32</sup> 4.40.1.

<sup>33</sup> N.G.L. Hammond, *A History of Greece to 322 B.C.*, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1967), p. 294.



## *Kagan*

recover the lost territories. In the battle to recover Amphipolis, both Brasidas and Cleon perished. That removed the most aggressive leaders in each city, the men Aristophanes called “the mortar and pestle of war.” The Athenians were weary of war, while the Spartans had been making peace offers ever since 425. Nicias, with Cleon gone and the aggressive strategy discredited, negotiated a peace for fifty years on the basis of the status quo ante bellum, with a few exceptions. To many it seemed to fulfill Pericles’ goals after ten long years of fighting, although it had taken a sharp departure from his strategy to get there.

In fact, the peace was a delusion from the first. It far from satisfied even Periclean requirements, for the Spartans never acknowledged their inability to defeat Athens. To the contrary, when the Athenians dragged their feet in the negotiations, the Spartans threatened to invade Attica, regardless of the fate of the prisoners. The Athenians had yielded in the face of threats. The Spartans, however, in their desperation to get peace, had betrayed their allies. The peace terms left Megara’s port and Corinthian territories in Athenian hands and required the Boeotians to return the Athenian fort of Panactum. The disgruntled allies of Sparta therefore worked to renew the fighting. They hoped to involve two significant Peloponnesian states, Elis and Mantinea, both engaged in serious quarrels with Sparta. A major reason for the Spartans’ eagerness for peace had been the expiration of their treaty with Argos in spring 421. The Argives had refused to renew it and were making ready to challenge Spartan leadership in the Peloponnesus again. Their ambitions were a further threat to the preservation of peace. At this moment the Athenians were convenient opponents for the Spartans: the Peloponnesian League was in turmoil, the Argives were fresh and eager to challenge Sparta, and the Athenians could cause havoc at will by launching raids from Pylos and the sea. But the Athenians were tired, and the aggressive faction was leaderless for the moment. Athens therefore made peace.

The futility of the peace should have been immediately apparent, for the Spartans never sincerely intended to restore Amphipolis, a provision that the Athenians regarded as essential. Sparta and Athens could not have made peace in 421 without the promise of Amphipolis’s restoration, and the peace could not last without the fulfillment of that promise. No Athenian politician, not even Pericles at his strongest, could have compelled the Athenians to restore Pylos until Amphipolis was again in Athenian hands. Unless both things happened, it was only a matter of time until the peace collapsed.

Alcibiades, Pericles’ charismatic and ambitious young nephew and ward, quickly emerged as the leading rival to Nicias and as the champion of those who wanted to resume the war. Argos had moved ahead to form its own alliance, a “third force” that included Mantinea and Elis. Alcibiades wanted Athens to join them in a quadruple alliance of democratic states to destroy Sparta’s position in the Peloponnesus and thus eliminate its power to threaten Athens. The success of the new strategy would make possible a major

victory in a land battle against Sparta with little risk to the Athenians themselves, for the great majority of the soldiers would come from the three Peloponnesian democracies fighting against the Spartans and the remaining Spartan allies. The diplomatic part of Alcibiades' strategy worked perfectly. In summer 418, the Spartans fought their opponents without the aid of their Corinthian and Boeotian allies and with only a small numerical superiority. Alcibiades later boasted that "without great danger or expense to the Athenians, the Spartans had been compelled to stake their hegemony on a single battle."<sup>34</sup>

Incredibly, however, Alcibiades was not part of the battle that crowned his strategy. In the volatile politics of post-Periclean Athens, he failed to win reelection as general for the very year in which his plans came to fruition, while Nicias and his associates, who opposed the plan, shouldered the responsibility for its execution. Athens sent only 1,000 infantry and some cavalry; its navy remained idle. If the Athenians had sent 3–4,000 more infantrymen, as they easily could have, the odds would have swung heavily against the Spartans. If they had made naval raids on the Peloponnesus in the days before the battle, they could have compelled the Spartans to reduce the size of their forces at Mantinea. Even so, the battle was a near thing, and the allies almost ended the war and Spartan power. But they lost their chance with the battle.

Neither Nicias nor Alcibiades emerged from the episode with enough credit to gain the upper hand, and the "phoney" peace dragged uneasily on as the frustrated Athenians cast about for a new policy. That was the situation when ambassadors from Athens' Sicilian allies arrived in 415 to ask for help against the menace of Syracuse and its satellites. "If the Syracusans, they said, who had depopulated Leontini, were not punished and, after destroying their allies who were still left, took power over all of Sicily there was the risk at some time in the future . . . they might send [the Peloponnesians] help with a great force and help destroy the power of Athens."<sup>35</sup> Athens' previous involvement in Sicily had ended in 424 when the Sicilian Greeks agreed among themselves to a kind of Sicilian Monroe Doctrine, rejecting the interference of foreign states in their affairs and politely sending the Athenians home.

The Athenians had no compelling reason to go to Sicily in 415. They could easily have ignored the appeals of their small, far-off allies had they chosen. The threat of Syracuse's gaining control of the entire island and using its power to help the Peloponnesians in a renewal of the war was only a future possibility that required no immediate action. Some Athenians – though how many is hard to say – saw Sicily as a kind of El Dorado. If they could conquer the island and add it to the empire, they would solve Athens' financial

<sup>34</sup> 6.16.

<sup>35</sup> 6.6.2.

problems and enrich the Athenian people. Nicias of course opposed an expedition; Alcibiades strongly favored it. He now equalled the popularity and influence of his older rival, the rich and pious Nicias, a distinguished, if careful, general who had never lost a battle and whom the Athenians revered as a favorite of the gods. Alcibiades appears to have sought to surpass the position and achievements of his guardian and uncle, Pericles. A brilliant success in Sicily seemed the road to preeminence in Athens.

His plan was characteristically clever and not risky. He asked for only sixty warships, the same number deployed in Sicily in 424. He would take these ships to southern Italy and Sicily and use his diplomatic skills to win over the cities there to an alliance against Syracuse. With his ships and their men, they could either defeat Syracuse in battle or take the city by siege. With Syracuse under control, no one could prevent the Athenians from having their way in Sicily. An objective evaluation reveals little of value for Athens in Alcibiades' plan. Even if Syracuse fell, as was entirely possible, Athens would still need to gain and keep control of a large island far from Attica with a considerable population. In winter the sea route was unsafe, so rebellions would be easy, and Athens did not have the numbers to maintain an adequate garrison. At the same time, Alcibiades' plan contained little danger for the Athenians. The Sicilians would do most of the fighting, and the Athenians could sail home if the plan failed. In the worst case, even the loss of sixty ships and their full crews, while serious, would have had little strategic consequence. In no way could this original plan have produced the Sicilian defeat that actually occurred.

It was the astonishingly inept political maneuvering of Nicias that led to disaster. Defeated in the first vote, he devised a stratagem to reverse the decision. This time he tried to deter the Athenians from their purpose by magnifying the size of the forces needed for success and safety. The tactic misfired, and the people voted for everything Nicias had specified. A modest expedition at small risk suddenly became a major campaign with vast forces, the destruction of which would bring disaster. Alcibiades, as the chief advocate for the campaign, was to command. But the assembly, suspicious of his youth and impetuosity, also chose the reluctant Nicias as his colleague. Since the two men disagreed and could check each other, the Athenians appointed still a third general to break a tie: Lamachus, a bold and experienced soldier but a much lesser figure with no political support.

This "troika" set off for Sicily, stopping at Rhegium at the toe of Italy. Things began to go wrong at once. Rhegium was important to Athenian success; it was an old ally and strategically located for attacking Messina (modern Messina) across the strait. Alcibiades counted on it to be the main base of operations in that region and to help bring other Italian cities into the alliance. Nicias' misconceived ploy in the Athenian assembly, however, had destroyed the prospects for Alcibiades' plan. The vast size of the Athenian

## *Athenian strategy in the Peloponnesian War*

force frightened the Italians and Sicilians more than Syracuse did. The Rhegians refused to allow the Athenians into their city.

The three generals now met to consider their next step. Nicias, who was against the campaign from the first, in essence proposed a show of force and a swift return home. Alcibiades thought such an expedient disgraceful. Instead, he suggested a scaled-down version of his original strategy. He would use his diplomatic talents to win over the Greek cities of Sicily and even the native Sicilians to supply soldiers and food. With them as allies, the Athenians could attack Syracuse. Lamachus proposed that they sail at once and attack Syracuse directly. Thucydides endorsed that plan as the best, and there is no reason to disagree; a swift assault might well have taken the city from the unprepared Sicilians. Lamachus, however, had no chance. Nicias wanted to do nothing, and the thought of an attack on Syracuse undoubtedly appalled him. Alcibiades had his own plan and would consider no other. Unwilling to accept Nicias' feeble plan, Lamachus reluctantly supported Alcibiades.

It does not seem likely that the plan would have worked in the new circumstances, but it became a lost cause when a ship arrived ordering Alcibiades to return to Athens to stand trial. Before the fleet had sailed, Alcibiades stood accused of involvement in a terrible religious profanation, but he had faced no action at the time. After his departure, however, his political enemies engineered his recall to stand trial. Rather than obey, he fled to Sparta, where he was to do his countrymen considerable harm.

After Lamachus died in battle, Nicias, who disliked the entire mission, assumed sole charge when it was already too late to give up the campaign. His dilatory management of the siege of Syracuse caused its failure and allowed the Peloponnesians to send help that proved decisive. Sick and discouraged, he asked for reinforcements in the hope that the assembly would refuse and recall him and the army. Instead the Athenians redoubled their bet and sent all the help requested along with Demosthenes. But it was too late, for the Athenian position had become untenable. Demosthenes tried to persuade Nicias to withdraw while there was still time to save the forces, but Nicias delayed out of fear of his reception at home. Finally, he decided to leave, but an eclipse of the moon made the superstitious general keep his army where it was until escape became impossible.

Thucydides calls the Sicilian expedition "the greatest action of all those that took place during the war and, so it seems to me, at least, the greatest of any which we know to have happened to any of the Greeks; it was the most glorious for those who won and the most disastrous for those defeated. For the losers were beaten in every way and completely; what they suffered was great in every respect, for they met with total destruction, as the saying goes – their army, their ships, and everything were destroyed – and only a few of many came back home."<sup>36</sup>

Almost everyone thought that the Sicilian disaster would bring the immediate defeat of Athens. At the instigation of Alcibiades the Spartans established a permanent fortress in Attica that denied the Athenians their farms and the revenue from their silver mines, and forced them to stand guard at their walls without relief to meet unexpected raids. Thus the Spartan presence acted as a constant drain on the Athenian treasury and on their energy, nervous as well as physical. Even more serious, a wave of rebellions broke out in the empire following news of the defeat in Sicily. These upheavals deprived the Athenians of revenue and drained the treasury even more by forcing them to man ships to put down the rebellions. Finally, the Persian Empire joined the fray, making an agreement with the Spartans to supply money to build a fleet large enough to defeat Athens. In 411, an oligarchic coup took control of Athens, and extremists almost betrayed the city to Sparta before the Athenians overthrew them and restored the democracy.

The last phase of the war was almost entirely naval, as the Spartans took the offensive and moved onto the Athenians' favored element, the sea. To win, they needed to destroy the Athenian navy, but that task was not easy. Despite their current poverty and the intense pressures on them, the Athenians put down almost all the rebellions and regained control of the seas. They defeated the Peloponnesian navy time after time and forced the Persians to replace the losses repeatedly. The Athenians aimed to hold out and keep destroying enemy fleets until either the Spartans or the Persians gave up. Twice the Spartans offered a peace on the basis of the status quo, and the Athenians might have been wise to accept one of these offers. But they had lost all trust in the Spartans after the collapse of the Peace of Nicias in 421, and instead they sought a decisive victory. At last the Spartans found a brilliant admiral in Lysander, while the Athenians lost the services of their ablest naval commanders because of internal political quarrels. In 405, Lysander destroyed the last Athenian fleet at Aegospotami and won the war.

The terrible consequences of the war give rise to the question of whether it might have been avoided or if its course and outcome might have been different. The answers to such questions are not available to the historian in a professional role, but the search for them is irresistible to anyone of normal curiosity and with the hope that history may reward its devoted students with a degree of understanding and even wisdom.

A careful study of Athenian strategic decisions, both political and military, produces a sense of several lost opportunities. Beginning in reverse order, with the last phase of the war, the decision of the Athenian commander Phrynichus to refuse battle with the Spartan navy off Miletus in 412 lost a chance to stamp out the rebellion of Athens' allies before it had spread too far and reached the Hellespont, before the heavy involvement of the Persians, and before the Spartans had found an effective leader in Lysander. The opportunity was great enough to justify considerable risk. But in fact the risk

was not unduly great; not surprisingly, the Athenians later blamed Phrynichus and removed him from office.

During the last phase of the war, the Athenians lost another opportunity when the Spartans offered peace twice. Had they accepted, they certainly would have averted defeat in 405, and the death of the Persian king the next year might well have removed the threat to Athens for a long time. Why did the Athenians refuse? Most students of the period blame the demagogues and the foolishness and volatility of the democracy, but demagogues existed in Athens in 421 and the city was no less democratic, yet the Athenians made peace when they were much less hard-pressed. It was precisely the failure of that peace, and the disappointment and suspicion it caused, that helps to explain the Athenians' refusal to accept subsequent Spartan offers.

The advocates of peace in 421 allowed their eagerness to stand in the way of an objective assessment of reality and of sound policy. Had they insisted on the fulfillment of commitments and on actions rather than words, they might have compelled the Spartans to meet their obligations, thereby establishing the basis for a lasting peace. Failing that, at least they would not have sacrificed Athenian interests for no return and destroyed the basis for negotiation in the future. At the time, their desperate longing for peace at almost any price undermined later prospects for negotiation and, still more, for a victorious peace.

In fact, at one point at least the Athenians appear to have had a chance for a complete victory that would have rid them of Sparta's perpetual suspicion and envy. They could have defeated the Spartans at Mantinea in 418 if they had sent a larger army and used their fleet and the Messenians posted at Pylos to distract the enemy. The Athenians failed to do these things in part because the culmination of the strategy of alliance with the Argive group came at a time when the opponents of that strategy held power. Nicias and his associates were in command, however, because most Athenians felt uncomfortable with a strategy of engagement on land against Sparta.

The Peloponnesian War was a classic confrontation between a great land power and a great naval power. Each entered the war hoping and expecting to keep to its own element and to win a victory in a way that conformed to its strength at a relatively low cost. Within a few years, events showed that victory was not possible in that way for either side. To win, each had to learn how to fight successfully in the other's domain. The Athenian disaster in Sicily gave the Spartans the chance to win by making an alliance with Persia and, after many failures, they won the war by destroying the Athenian fleet. There was no other way. To win a true victory rather than a Periclean standoff, the Athenians would have had to find a way to beat the Spartans on land. Sparta's failure to meet its obligation to restore Amphipolis turned the Athenians toward a strategy that could win the war by defeating Sparta on land in the Peloponnesus, but Pericles' strategy, which Nicias continued, had

become Athens' natural policy. Democratic Athens could not long sustain a more aggressive strategy that involved fighting on land but did not produce an immediate victory, especially after it had grown accustomed to war at low risk and low cost in lives. By the time Alcibiades' new strategy reached its crisis, the old forces under Nicias again held sway; men who shared Nicias' views were the generals, and they carried out the new aggressive strategy without boldness or conviction, glad to escape disaster as the new policy failed. After the defeat at Mantinea, Nicias and his associates returned gladly to a simulacrum of peace, but real peace remained an illusion. The only question was where and when the war would break out again.

The old strategy could not win even the limited victory that Pericles had sought, much less a victory that would deprive the enemy of the capacity to fight, which Spartan determination had made necessary. For that, the Athenians would have needed to take the offensive, fight a major battle on land, and find a way and a time to win it. But they shrank from such a commitment. Such a response is understandable in a state that had come to think of itself as an invulnerable island. It had developed a way of fighting that avoided much of the danger and unpleasantness of hoplite battle. This style of war allowed the Athenians to concentrate their forces quickly and attack an unprepared enemy; it permitted them to strike others without danger to their own city and population. Success in this style of fighting made it seem the only one necessary, and defeats with great losses on land made the Athenians reluctant to risk other land battles.

Pericles carried the traditional strategy to its extreme by refusing to use the army even in defense of Attic soil. This approach left him with no hope of disabling the enemy but only of punishing the Spartans and their allies to a greater or lesser degree and discouraging them from continuing the fight. The nature of the enemy made "the Athenian way of warfare"<sup>37</sup> inadequate, and Pericles' strategy was a form of wishful thinking that failed.

For a state such as Athens in 431, satisfied with its situation and capable of keeping the enemy at bay, the temptation to avoid the risks of offensive action was great, but it contained dangers. It encouraged the mental rigidity we might call "the cult of the defensive."<sup>38</sup> Such a cast of mind may induce leaders to apply a previously successful strategy or one supported in general theory to a situation where it is inappropriate. It has other disadvantages as well, including a limited capacity to deter potential enemies from provoking a war. Deterrence by standing behind a strong defensive position and thereby depriving the enemy of the prospect of victory assumes the enemy possesses a high degree of rationality and a strong imagination. When the Spartans invaded Attica in 431 they must have thought they risked little. Even if the Athenians refused to fight, even if they persisted in that refusal for a long

<sup>37</sup> I adapt the term from B. Liddell Hart, *The British Way of Warfare* (London, 1932).

<sup>38</sup> I adapt the term from "the cult of the offensive," which in the view of some modern scholars dominated European military thought in the years before World War I.

time, both of which seemed unlikely and unnatural, the Spartans would risk little more than time and effort. In any case, their own lands and city would remain safe. Had the Athenians possessed the obvious capacity to strike Sparta at its most vulnerable point, Pericles' strategy of deterrence might have achieved success.

Once the war started, the "cult of the defensive" dissuaded the Athenians from taking the measures needed for victory. They lost their best opportunity in 418, only to make a much greater investment and undertake greater risks in the Sicilian expedition three years later. A connection may exist between the two events. Perhaps the outcome of the battle of Mantinea discredited the cautious traditional policy, encouraging a bolder, more aggressive spirit that the Athenians then inappropriately applied to a peripheral campaign of marginal importance. After the disaster in Sicily, they could only try to hold out until Spartan incapacity and internal divisions led to some kind of acceptable peace. Even then, distrust of the Spartans and confidence in their own naval superiority led the Athenians to reject a peace that would have averted defeat. But Athens had exhausted the treasury on which its naval power relied, and political quarrels had denied the Athenians their best commanders. The Spartans, however, with the support of Persian money and the shrewd leadership of Lysander, learned how to fight at sea well enough to win. The great irony is that the swift, aggressive, innovative Athenians – as the Corinthians compared them to the Spartans before the war – proved less able to adjust to a different way of fighting than the slow, traditional, unimaginative Spartans. The Athenian experience in the Peloponnesian War suggests that during times of war, when open debate must precede decision-making and when the persuasion of relatively uninformed majorities is often required, democracies may find it harder to adjust to the necessities of war than less open societies. Perhaps that lesson is what Thucydides had in mind when he connected the Athenian defeat with the death of Pericles, who alone among Athenian politicians could persuade the people to fight in a way contrary to prejudice and experience.