



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Leadership Books: The Classics

By Mary Pat Campbell

I previously assessed¹ an early edition of Peter Drucker's *The Effective Executive*. Although a half-century-old, it has already proven lasting value. If new editions of a business book are being produced (now in e-book format), it obviously has staying power over many other works that are on the best-seller lists one week, and then remaindered the next month. If a book has proven its worth by holding readers' attention for decades, how about works that have held sway for millennia?

I speak, of course, of the classics. And I'm referring to works from particular cultures and time periods – specifically, Greco-Roman literature spanning time from about 800 B.C. to 400 A.D. The time period is fairly long, but the most notable works were not distributed evenly in time. For example, an extremely fertile period for literary works came from the 5th century B.C. in Athens, which saw the likes of Pericles, Herodotus, Thucydides, Aeschylus, and Socrates. This century was bracketed by the Persian Wars and the Peloponnesian Wars, which first saw the Athenian rise to power ... and just as quickly, its collapse. Similarly, during the reign of Augustus, the first of the Roman emperors, there was a flowering of Roman literature. Howdy!

One may wonder what the great works of literature from these time periods have to do with business, as many are focused on subjects such as war. But consider how Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* has been adapted to issues regarding business and management, strategy and tactics. Similarly, many of the great works coming from these times and places focused on leadership – what makes for great leaders, and what explains leadership failures.

I have picked three great works from this period to cover. To be sure, none of these are explicitly laid out similarly to Machiavelli's *The Prince* or Sun Tzu's work. It does require some reflection to derive any kind of general principles from these works. Most of the time, the actions of the particular leaders being profiled, or the actions they're taking, are put within the larger context of the situations in which they find themselves. Most of the time, we are given contrasting visions of leadership within the same work, such as the characterizations of Alcibiades and Nicias in Thucydides' account of the Sicilian Invasion by Athens. We are to come to our own conclusions on these men, given the actual results of their particular decisions.

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WHY THE CLASSICS?

As with the long-lasting Drucker books, these works have obviously proved their worth throughout the ages. While many great works perished in the burning of the Library at Alexandria, in addition to the general ravages of time on papyrus, those found the most valuable were the most widely and frequently copied. That which was uninteresting, uninstructional, useless, or dated disappeared over the centuries, helping to keep such persiflage off reading lists. However, there's more than just high quality that makes them valuable for studies of leadership. Two aspects jump out:

1. We know how things resolved (mostly)

One of the issues with books like *Good to Great* and *Built to Last* is that companies are being captured in media res. We may know the beginning and the progression of the story of these companies, but we don't know the conclusions. Some of the findings being drawn from these stories may simply be the pinnacle for these companies before their falls. As Herodotus put words in the mouth of the famous Athenian Solon: "Count no man happy until he is dead." Likewise, count no company successful until you have seen it run its course. We have seen fairly venerable companies collapse overnight due to fatal decisions.

With the leaders and societies being described in these classics, we know they are long gone. To be sure, they influenced many later societies, but neither Imperial Rome nor Hellenistic Greece remains. Some treat events contemporaneous with the writers, and some detail actions from centuries before. Either way, we can place these works in the larger timeline and see the extent to which achievement and failure is captured within them.

Of course, there are often disputes about the historicity of these works, and what really were driving causes. Why did the (Western) Roman Empire collapse, anyway?

2. We're not emotionally invested

Well, I assume this is the case. If you're one to start bar brawls over whether Julius Caesar was maliciously assassinated or whether it was a necessary action on the part of Brutus and others ... this section is not about you.

The problem with many contemporary works on leadership, using modern examples, is that we may have various emotional responses to the people and companies involved. Yes, generally not to the level of bar brawls, but enough such that it clouds our abilities to assess the situation fairly.

I may not be able to be fairly critical of Steve Jobs, as the halo effect from all the fun I've had with Apple products since 1987 has made me far from impartial. Likewise, I may not be able to appreciate the finer points of Bill Gates as I recall the horror that was Vista.

But I have no particular emotional tie to people such as Themistocles, Pericles, Xerxes, Leonidas, Vespasian, Augustus and so forth. I can appreciate positive and negative accounts of each of these people. I am not wedded to a particular perspective with respect to them, so if I read an account that contradicts a prior view, I won't necessarily dismiss it out of hand because I want the result to be a certain way.

The distance in time and geography helps, which makes it a more abstract exercise.

Enough of why you should read these works. Let's consider what you should read.

LEADERSHIP PROFILES: PLUTARCH'S LIVES OF THE NOBLE GREEKS AND ROMANS

The easiest work to connect to leadership is Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*. Written in the late 1st century A.D., Plutarch takes several famous Greeks and Romans and pairs them up, first

writing a profile of each man and then writing an analysis making a head-to-head comparison of the two for most pairings.

The pairings are not accidental – Plutarch attempts to pair each with someone of equal stature. For example, Alexander the Great is paired with Julius Caesar, both to represent great conquerors untimely cut down (in one case by disease, in the other, by assassins). The legendary founder of Rome, Romulus, is paired with the legendary founder of Athens, Theseus.

Let me pick a particular pairing to give you a flavor of Plutarch’s work: the Athenian leader Themistocles and the Roman five-time dictator Camillus. Both men ended exiles from their homelands, but for different reasons, and before exiled were extremely effective commanders of their cities.

While Leonidas, the stalwart Spartan king who held the pass at Thermopylae, is the favorite with respect to Greek leaders of the Persian Wars and, most recently, of the movie *300*, let us remember that he died in his efforts. Valiantly, to be sure, and holding off the Persians as others prepared to deal with them, but ultimately Leonidas and his followers did not survive. They were not the ones who effectively ended the Persian threat against the Greek mainland. That was for the far-seeing Themistocles (who also always made sure to take care that he was protected in the event of failure).

First, there was the stroke of luck in a major silver strike for Athens. But more than that, rather than plowing that money into public buildings or a windfall for the citizenry, Themistocles convinced the citizens of Athens that money should be spent on building up a navy. This navy was crucial in the actual defeat of the Persians.

One of Themistocles’ main issues in his piece of the Persian Wars, especially after Leonidas’s defeat and the destruction of Athens by the Persians soon after, was keeping the ships of other Greek city-states with the Athenian fleet at Salamis. He used every

persuasive tool in his kit, including outright bribery, to keep everyone from leaving Attic Greece to the Persians and hiding out in the Peloponnese. He threatened that the Athenians themselves would take their massive fleet with them to start a New Athens somewhere else on the Mediterranean. He held the Greek forces together for a time, but he knew that the various admirals were restive, and could bolt at any moment.

He came up with a ruse, sending one of his most trustworthy servants to Xerxes. He sent the message to the Persian potentate that the Greeks were readying to flee, and that Xerxes should take advantage of the weakness by bottling up the Greeks and barring their escape. Love and kisses, Themistocles.

This ruse prevented the retreat of the allies, but also allowed Themistocles to take advantage of the geography. The Greek ships backed up, feigning retreat from the advancing Persian fleet, as a large crescent starting to envelop the Persian forces clustered in the middle. As the Greek ships almost backed up to the surrounding shore, the signal to attack went up. Due to the narrowness of the straits leading out to the open sea, the Persians couldn’t flee effectively and had their own ships colliding with each other.

There was an absolute rout of the Persians that day. Themistocles wanted to chase the Persians and utterly destroy them, but even in war the Athenians were democratic and he was overruled. The other Greek leaders had no interest in bottling up Persians in the Greeks’ backyard. They were very happy to see Xerxes and crew hightail it back to Persia. Themistocles, realizing an opportunity to make friends where others would not, sent another letter to Xerxes, this time claiming that he was the one to convince the Greeks to let the Persians go back home. “Don’t forget who your friend is. Smooches, Themistocles.”

This would come in awfully handy years later when Themistocles himself was booted from Athens with that peculiar Athenian institution of ostracism. Ostracism was a substantive process whereby those

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a bit too big for their britches would be officially exiled from the city for 10 years, as the result of popular vote. Due to the hidey-hole he had built himself by pretending to be Xerxes' best pal, Themistocles ended his days as a local leader in the Persian Empire himself. He wouldn't be the only Athenian who ended up working for the Persians due to exile. Themistocles' adventures are detailed not only in Plutarch, some 600 years after the fact, but also Herodotus, who flourished within decades of the events described. While obscure from the distance of millennia later, it seems that Themistocles got himself the reputation of being extremely fond of self-dealing and abusing the power he achieved.

Camillus, the Roman dictator paired with Themistocles in Plutarch's account, was much less wily. Of course, this is the characterization that comes to us from Plutarch. Part of Plutarch's program is to show how crafty those sneaky Greeks were, and how the Romans improved on that model. However, Plutarch shows that Camillus, like Themistocles, overreached after his particular triumphs.

A quick digression on the Roman office of dictator: during the time of the Roman Republic, during which Camillus lived, dictators would occasionally be elected, for the limited period of up to six months and for a particular purpose, almost always involving a war. Camillus was a particularly successful general, and his dictatorships were granted for concluding particular military actions.

However, Camillus also overreached his power, similar to Themistocles, and ultimately was exiled from Rome. This is one of the very few pairings for which we don't have Plutarch's commentary of a head-to-head comparison, but the connection is clear.

The lesson Plutarch brings with these two is that achievement in one area (war) does not mean one can overreach one's position elsewhere (here, the city at peace). People's patience will be stretched only so far, and even powerful leaders can find

themselves toppled when they test the limits of their popularity.

Similar work: *Twelve Caesars* by Suetonius. Far less high-minded than Plutarch, Suetonius does a tabloid review of Julius Caesar and the first 11 emperors of Rome (including those four who were emperor within the same year). The gossip passed on by Suetonius became the foundation for Robert Graves' novel *I, Claudius*, but it also details the leadership strengths and weaknesses of each man in turn.

EXCELLENT TALES, ACCESSIBLE TO ALL

For all the reasons I detail above, close reading of these works are likely to be both edifying and entertaining. All are available, for free, in e-book format (via Amazon's Kindle store, the Gutenberg project, and MIT's Internet Classics Archive, to name a few free sources). Translations appropriate for our current English usage are coming out all the time. With resources such as Wikipedia, one can look up unfamiliar names while reading and get broader context. Indeed, many e-readers have built-in lookup functions for the very purpose. There are free audio book editions at sites such as www.librivox.org.

If anything, we suffer from a surfeit of information due to its sheer cheapness. We merely have to pay for it in time. So if you're going to spend some of your precious time, why not spend it on some of the best? ●

END NOTES

- ¹ *Editor's Note: Watch for Mary Pat's review of two more important classics in the next issue of The Stepping Stone.*