



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Leadership Books: The Classics, Part 2

By Mary Pat Campbell

In the August 2012 issue of *The Stepping Stone*, I laid out a case for how some of the great classics still speak to business issues we face today. Here are some additional works that bear review, and why.

HISTORY: THUCYDIDES' HISTORY OF THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR

While Plutarch lived well after the people he profiled, many by centuries (and some, such as Romulus or Theseus, may never have existed), Thucydides lived through the events he detailed in his history of the Peloponnesian War. This war, which occurred off-and-on over a few decades, was between Sparta and Athens. Thucydides made a detailed chronological account, and had a hand in some events himself. Interestingly, while he had been an Athenian general at one point, he also had a period of exile due to failure and spent time talking with the other side of the war as well.

There are several famous incidents and people covered by Thucydides in his accounts, but I will concentrate on one specific incident, the Sicilian Invasion, which signaled the beginning of the end for Athens.

After the Athenian victory against the Persians as noted in the prior article, they consolidated and

expanded their power among various smaller, weaker Greek city-states. Sparta did likewise, but Sparta was less expansionist than Athens. In Thucydides' telling, war between Sparta and Athens was inevitable.

While Thucydides does detail military action, he spends most of his time relating arguments between various sides in public assemblies, and not only in Athens. A theme comes up frequently, stated by particular representatives of Athens:

We're powerful, and we're going to use that power to benefit ourselves. All entities operate in their self-interest. Do not talk to us of justice. Might doesn't make right, but it does make for results.

Returning to the Sicilian Invasion, this seems a side excursion for the Athenians. This occurred during a negotiated peace with Sparta, so it wasn't officially a part of the war with Sparta. However, the great city of Syracuse on Sicily was an ally of Sparta, and when Athens invaded, Sparta responded.

Two particular leaders are profiled with respect to this excursion: Alcibiades and Nicias. Both of them were Athenian generals... at least at first. Alcibiades argued for invasion. Nicias argued against, and kept



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shooting himself in the foot with regards to the invasion. After arguing that such an invasion would be pointless, and that they had defense issues at home, Nicias pointed out that they would need to send lots and lots of men and ships, and spend lots and lots of money to be successful.

“Great!” Said the Athenian citizenry. “Here’s some money! Let’s go!”

The expedition was launched, with Nicias and Alcibiades sharing command. Read Thucydides for the complicated story of why Alcibiades had to defect to the Spartan side soon after launch. The result: the man who hated the expedition had to lead it, and the one who wanted it went to the other side, and started giving advice—extremely effective advice.

Alcibiades is notorious for lots of reasons, some of which were detailed in Thucydides and some in Plutarch. None denied that he gave excellent military advice, and those who did not listen to him did so to their detriment. Sure, don’t trust the guy with your wife, but he knew what he was talking about in winning battles.

Alcibiades had a very simple piece of advice to the Spartans with respect to backing the Syracusans against the Athenians: send a Spartan general. They did. And the Syracusans (and that general) prevailed. Nicias ended up being executed for his failure, as the Athenians were completely routed.

Thucydides, ominously, did not finish his work. It cuts off mid-sentence. But the upshot is the Athenians ultimately lost the war.

Throughout the work, the Athenians argued realpolitik and used their massive power to that end, crushing all who stood in their way. They killed all the men, and sold the women and children into slavery in the cities they defeated. They were very lucky the Spartans did not behave the same when they themselves were subjugated. The Spartans would not

destroy those who protected the Greeks against the Persians... but they also would not allow them to be militarily powerful any longer.

Thucydides talks about the uses of power, and the effectiveness of power surgically applied, as with the solitary Spartan general sent to Syracuse. While he doesn’t reach a conclusion, knowing the ultimate result, we see the limits of the use of power, as with the leaders paired in Plutarch¹.

Similar work: *The Histories* by Herodotus. Thucydides makes veiled barbs at Herodotus in his own work, for some of the shortcomings that led later people to label Herodotus “The Father of Lies” (as opposed to his other, well-known sobriquet: “The Father of History”). While Thucydides focused on the Peloponnesian War that ended the 5th century BC, Herodotus mainly focuses on the Persian Wars that began it. Famous ancient leaders, not only Greek, are profiled. Herodotus takes the view that what comes up must come down – particularly in the fortunes of men.

EPIC: THE ILIAD BY HOMER

While the prior categories of work at least purport to be historical (though rough edges may have been smoothed and a lot of stories “improved”), in the category of epic, the literal truth is not the point. The Iliad, one of the most renowned of epics of history, and the vade mecum of Alexander the Great, has long been seen as commentary on the glory, or lack thereof, of war.

Though in the very first line we hear the poem is to be centered on the wrath of Achilles, there are two very different visions of leadership presented to us. No, Achilles is not one of these leaders. Indeed, for most of the epic, Achilles eschews his duties and when he does finally spring into action, it’s as a singular war machine. We do not see Achilles leading men. He is almost always acting on his own behalf.

Rather, the leadership I speak of is of the opposing generals: Agamemnon and Hector. Agamemnon is



shown as a poor leader, originally alienating his best fighter, Achilles, in an attempt to regain face after a direct rebuke by the gods. The action of the epic starts because Agamemnon has offended Apollo by not returning the daughter of one of the gods' priests. Achilles argues the girl must be returned, and when a god-sent plague forces Agamemnon's hand, he decides he will put Achilles in his place by taking away Achilles' own "war prize": the woman Briseis.

Keep in mind that Agamemnon is not Achilles' king. Indeed, the "heroes" of the Iliad are all leaders of their own cities, and Agamemnon is merely first amongst equals. Egotism abounds among the Greek warriors, and Agamemnon's rank-pulling nearly ruins the Greeks' efforts at Troy. Achilles has a goddess as a mother, and thus can exact concrete revenge for his wounded pride. The result is that things go very badly indeed for the Greeks, as their best warrior had been unnecessarily insulted.

How often do we see similar actions within corporations, when various executives, who need to cooperate to be effective, decide to play status games of this sort? The particular situation that comes to mind is the Eisner/Katzenberg fight at Disney, which ended

with cash for Katzenberg as well his own barbs shot at Disney when he co-founded Dreamworks. Such incidents aren't isolated.

Even beyond the initial event, we see Agamemnon relenting, sending three emissaries to Achilles to try to convince him to re-enter the fray. He uses Odysseus to bribe Achilles with material goods, and Odysseus uses additional cynicism to encourage Achilles to show up the rest of the force. There is Ajax, the second-greatest warrior (who, past the events of the Iliad, has ego problems of his own), to tempt Achilles with visions of war glory. Finally, there is Phoenix, an old man and foster father to Achilles, to try to persuade via sentimentality. All three fail in persuasion.

When Achilles returns to battle, Agamemnon has no hand in it. It is entirely due to the slaying of Achilles' bosom pal Patroclus by Hector, the Trojan Prince. Throughout the Iliad, Agamemnon is seen mainly as an ineffective leader of men.

In contrast, Hector, the crown prince of Troy and main war commander of Trojan troops, is shown as very effective in leading the Trojans. Hector is never

Egotism abounds among the Greek warriors, and Agamemnon's rank-pulling nearly ruins the Greeks' efforts at Troy.

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shown to be whining (as Agamemnon does in the funeral games of Patroclus). Hector verbally slaps his brother, Paris, upside the head for not defending the city. Before Achilles re-enters on the Greek side and ultimately kills him, Hector is shown rallying troops to push to the Greek ships to destroy them. The only reason Hector fails, ultimately, is because the judgment of Zeus is against Troy.

So in this final profile of leadership, we see that good leaders can fail and poor leaders prevail, simply due to good fortune. The Greeks were never much for happy endings.

Similar Work: *The Aeneid* by Virgil. Best-remembered of the Roman epic is the affair of Aeneas and Dido, the Queen of Carthage. But she kills herself a third of the way into the work – Aeneas’s adventures in Italy comprise most of the work. One sees Aeneas’s careful decisions as a leader, in judging fairly amongst funeral games (a role Achilles played in the Iliad at Patroclus’s funeral) as well as being effective in gathering allies once on Italian soil. Ultimately, too, Aeneas prevails due to the support of fate. Not quite the uplifting tale one might hope for.

EXCELLENT TALES, ACCESSIBLE TO ALL

As I mentioned in Part 1, 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). There are also free audio book editions at sites such as www.librivox.org.

If you’re going to spend some of your precious time reading, why not spend it on some of the best? ●

END NOTES

¹ Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*; see the August 2012 issue of *The Stepping Stone* for more information.