

THE MORALITY TEST

An Ancient Perspective On Personal Virtue and Patriotism in Public Life

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THIS PAPER FOLLOWS THE LIFE OF ALCIBIADES OF ATHENS, THE BRILLIANTLY SUCCESSFUL GENERAL IN THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR, WHOSE DISSOLUTE PRIVATE LIFE AND LACK OF PATRIOTISM MADE HIM A SINISTER FIGURE IN ATHENS. HAVING NEITHER LIVED A VIRTUOUS LIFE NOR MADE IT CLEAR THAT HE WOULD SUBORDINATE HIS INTEREST TO THE CITY, ALCIBIADES FAILED TO GAIN THE TRUST OF THE DEMOCRATIC POPULACE OF ATHENS. WHEN SUSPICIOUS CITIZENS RECALLED HIM FROM THE BATTLEFIELD, ALCIBIADES TURNED TRAITOR AND FOUGHT FOR SPARTA, EFFECTIVELY RUINING ATHENS' CHANCES FOR VICTORY. GIVEN THIS EXAMPLE, THIS PAPER ARGUES THAT THE PRIVATE LIVES OF PUBLIC FIGURES ARE RELEVANT TO THEIR POSITIONS AS LEADERS OF THE STATE. THE ABILITY FOR A COMMUNITY TO TRUST AND RESPECT ITS LEADERS IS OF PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE AND MUST BE PROTECTED BY THE APPOINTMENT OF VIRTUOUS AND PATRIOTIC LEADERS TO PUBLIC POSITIONS.

In the sordid aftermath of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, Americans engaged in an intense debate over the private lives of their public figures. Republicans condemned presidential philandering as unbecoming the integrity of the office while Democrats defended the president's right to privacy in his personal life. In the wake of the attacks on September 11, 2001, scholars increasingly scrutinized the effects of President Clinton's infidelity, wondering if the scandal distracted his attention from more important matters.ⁱ A second political vignette sets Charles Wilson before the Senate as a nominee for Secretary of Defense. As the leader of General Motors, some senators questioned where his loyalties lay, leading to his now infamous response: "What is good for the country is good for General Motors



IN THE WAKE OF SCANDAL, LEWINSKY ATTEMPTS TO ESCAPE THE PUBLIC EYE

and vice versa"ⁱⁱ (it was the vice versa they were worried about). These stories raise the questions: Did President Clinton have a responsibility to be virtuous in his private life? Should the motives of a well-qualified candidate like Charles Wilson be an important factor in appointment to public service? The implications of these questions have been debated for centuries. This essay looks to one of the great historical works of antiquity, Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, for guidance. By looking at the impact of the personal conduct and private motivation on the public life of the great Athenian general Alcibiades, we can come to a fuller understanding of the importance of private

virtue and an unmitigated patriotic spirit for public figures.

As the man boasting the most remarkable deeds, the most versatile character, and the most compelling relationship to his city, Alcibiades and his actions dominate the second half of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Irrepressible, he is a figure both of limitless ambition and eminent ability; he has youth, beauty, and eloquence on his side and is not afraid to use them. Yet, in the midst of all his gifts and abilities there are ominous rumblings about his character—his dissolute private life, shallow roots, and insatiable desire for greatness—that must give pause. He has all of the eloquence and charisma of his predecessor, Pericles, without the restraint that made Periclean Athens so stable. He has little respect for the laws of the city and feels no desire to submit his personal glory before that of Athens. Within the Athenian democracy, these qualities make him a sinister figure. Through his words and deeds, in addition to the force of his character, Alcibiades bodes ill for Athens, bringing to fruition Thucydides' initial warning that the great military expedition to Sicily "failed not so much through a miscalculation of the power of those against whom it was sent, as through the fault in the senders in . . . choosing rather to occupy themselves with private squabbles."ⁱⁱⁱ

This is not to say that the failure of the Sicilian expedition is the fault of Alcibiades. He called for the deployment of the vast majority of the Athenian military might to the conquest of a foreign territory largely irrelevant to the Peloponnesian War, and his final goals stretched throughout most of the known world. Plutarch says of him:

He possessed the people with great hopes, and he himself entertained yet greater; and the conquest of Sicily, which was the utmost bound of their ambition, was but the mere outset of his expectation . . . Alcibiades dreamed of nothing less than the conquest of Carthage and Libya, and by the accession of these conceiving himself at once made master of Italy and Peloponnesus, seemed to look on Sicily as nothing more than a magazine for war.^{iv}

These ambitions, however, are not in and of themselves sinister. According to Pericles, they are actually the *foundation* of Athenian greatness—“forcing every sea and land to be the highway of [Athens’] daring.”^v Thucydides implies that under the leadership of Alcibiades, this bold expedition would have succeeded.^{vi} What is important to notice, however, is how Alcibiades fails to gain the trust of the people. Even as the head of a project the people “fell in love with,”^{vii} he failed to get the public to fall in love with him because his character impeded his legitimacy as a public figure. Unable to gain the public’s trust, his ambition roused suspicion in the Athenian people.

Alcibiades’ ambitious project required his sharp mind and military ability, but his licentious private life prevented their full use. Athens recognized his ability but was loath to trust him due to its disgust with his lifestyle and fear of his personal ambition. The liberality with which Alcibiades lived life was famous in ancient times. Plutarch says of him:

With all these words and deeds, and with all this sagacity and eloquence, he intermingled exorbitant luxury and wantonness in his eating and drinking and dissolute living . . . The sight of all this made the people of good repute in the city feel disgust and abhorrence, and apprehension also, at his free living and contempt of law, as monstrous in themselves, and indicating designs of usurpation.^{viii}

Thucydides sums up Alcibiades’ private life and its effect on public feeling saying, “his habits gave offense to everyone and caused them to commit affairs to other hands and thus before long ruin the city.”^{ix} Instead of investing their trust in his leadership, the “people of good repute” whose sensibilities Alcibiades so offended allowed his enemies to recall him from the Sicilian expedition, to answer trumped up charges of impiety and thereby deprive their armies of the dynamic leader the expedition so required.

Alcibiades’ private excess unnerved Athens, but it was the self-focused nature of his ambition that ultimately led them

to reject him. Unlike Pericles, who subordinated himself to the laws and the interest of Athens, Alcibiades holds himself above them. Strauss says of Pericles in relation to his contemporaries, “His superiority is obvious, unambiguous, not like the ambiguous superiority of Themistocles and Alcibiades. Pericles justly occupies the center of the triptych the out figures of which (Themistocles and Alcibiades) are superior to him only by nature but not by law.”^x Indeed, Alcibiades has a different vision of greatness than that of Pericles. Instead of “feeding his eyes upon [the



A PORTRAIT OF ATHENIAN GENERAL ALCIBIADES

power of Athens] from day to day, till love of her fills your hearts,”^{xi} as Pericles says, Alcibiades feasts his eyes on himself. He is only concerned in the glory of the city when it also corresponds to his own glory. In his speech to the Athenian assembly he brags of his Olympic victories, saying, “This is no useless folly, when a man at his own private cost benefits not himself only but his city: nor is it unfair

that he who prides himself on his position should refuse to be upon an equality with the rest.”^{xii}

This refusal to be on equal terms is a crucial difference between Alcibiades and Pericles. Alcibiades’s character would never allow him to do as Pericles had at the beginning of the war where:

Finding that the invasion was to take place, [he] conceived the idea that Archidamus, who happened to be his guest-friend, might possibly pass by his estate without ravaging it. This he might do either from a personal wish to oblige him, or acting under instructions from Sparta . . . He accordingly took the precaution of announcing to the Athenians in the assembly that, although Archidamus was his guest-friend, yet this friendship should not extend to the detriment of the state, and that in case the enemy should make his houses and lands an exception to the rest and not pillage them, he at once gave them up as public property, so that they should not bring him into suspicion.^{xiii}

Here Pericles recognized that he must give up his own private property in order to protect himself from possible public backlash. In order to continue to offer his valuable leadership to the city, he has to put its interests before his own. Alcibiades refuses to do this. What Athens does in recalling him is not fair, but it is a direct result of his failure to take precautions with his lifestyle so that he won’t be taken into suspicion. Alcibiades is a poor leader not simply because of his sins of commission, but also for his sins of omission, namely his inability to qualify his personal greatness with any sense of the common good or restraint. Strauss says of the situation, “The Sicilian expedition surpasses everything undertaken by Pericles; whereas Pericles stood for love of the beautiful qualified by thrift, the Sicilian

expedition, being in the style of Alcibiades . . . was inspired by love of the beautiful on the level of lavishness.”^{xiv} Without the thrift in public or private life, Alcibiades became a lightning rod for suspicion of the Athenians.

Some might say Alcibiades is the archetypal Athenian with his incredibly quick mind and limitless ambition. This view, however, fails to take into account the fact that he cares first of all about himself. His megalomania foreshadows a situation where Athenians, jealous of his renown, will conspire against him. Having not taken his precautions or made it clear that he will subordinate his interest to the city, he has failed to ensure that he would be in charge of a project so ambitious that it needs a man of exceptional ability at its head. This alone makes the Alcibiades a sinister figure for Athens. Even more ominous, however, is his shallow commitment to Athens as a city. When his honor and position are usurped by the intrigues he fails to guard against, he lashes back at his own city. In a fit of vengeful, defeated egoism, he fails to follow the examples of the defeated Nicias and Demosthenes who lay low in the face of an angry Athenian populace and instead betrays his friends and family to their bitter enemy, the Spartans. His versatility allows him to access power wherever he goes. This trait, which Plutarch describes as “peculiar talent and artifice for gaining men’s affections, that he could at once comply with and really embrace and enter into their habits and ways of life and change faster than the chameleon,”^{xv} marks the height of his danger to Athens. His exceptional abilities and silver tongue led democratic Athens to embark on projects that require his leadership at the same time as his outrageous lifestyle and selfish ambition prevented the citizenry from fully trusting him. When slighted by these citizens, Alcibiades, incapable of passively bearing offense,^{xvi} actively opposed his city. This demonstrates what Strauss characterizes as post-Periclean politics: “After

“Alcibiades is a poor leader not simply because of his sins of commission, but also for his sins of omission . . .”

Pericles there was no longer among the leading men that perfect harmony between private interest and public interest . . . the concern with private honor and private gain prevailed.”^{xvii} Alcibiades acts first for private gain and glory, and then is a traitor to his own city to satisfy his jilted private honor. He says that “love of country is what I do not feel when I am wronged,”^{xviii} fulfilling Pericles prophesy that “A man possessing [knowledge of the proper policy and the ability to expound it], but no love for his country, he would be but a cold advocate for her interests; while were his patriotism not proof against bribery, everything would go for a price.”^{xix} For Alcibiades, this price is his personal greatness.

The reaction of the Athenians to Alcibiades’s raucous behavior demonstrates how private life, when lived immoderately, can spill over into public policy. As Machiavelli says, a good leader must “guard against . . . being contemptible and hated,” for against this leader it “is difficult to conspire, difficult to mount an attack.”^{xx} Within a democratic system like Athens, this is particularly important because one’s mandate comes from the people. If, as Plutarch says, Alcibiades’ behavior inspires contempt in the good citizens of Athens, he cannot hope to continue living his debauched lifestyle with no repercussions. As we see, he fails to recognize this and leaves himself open for conspiracy. His lack of patriotism compounds the problem. Not only does he destroy the Athenian military by failing to win the trust of his constituents, but he actually switches sides and opposes Athens in armed military engagements. For these reasons, the story of Alcibiades provides a cautionary tale about the types of men we should look for to be our leaders. The destruction he brings upon himself and the catastrophic losses his project brings to Athens underscore the necessity of integrity in public figures and the danger leaders with ulterior motives pose to their countries.

ENDNOTES

i. This contention is implied by the 9/11 report which states: “At the time [when Al Qaeda was on the public agenda because of air strikes on terror camps], President Clinton was embroiled in the Lewinsky scandal, which continued to consume public attention for the rest of that year. 9/11 Report (117)

ii. Charles Wilson. January 15, 1953. *Nominations*. Confirmation hearing before the Senate Committee on Armed Services. Quoted in Platt (1989)
 iii. Thucydides (II.15.10-11)
 iv. Plutarch (270)
 v. Thucydides (II.41.4)
 vi. Strauss says of Thucydides, “He is quite sure that the success of the Sicilian expedition depended decisively on Alcibiades’s participation in it.” Strauss (204)
 vii. The word here is actually *eros* or erotic desire. The project became the object of Athenian desire; they lusted after it. Thucydides, Loeb Library (226)
 viii. Plutarch (269)
 ix. Thucydides (VI.15.4)
 x. Strauss (219)
 xi. Thucydides (II.43.1)
 xii. Thucydides (VI.16.3-4)
 xiii. Thucydides (II.13.1)
 xiv. Strauss (205)
 xv. Plutarch (275)
 xvi. A point borne out in the fact that Alcibiades opens of each of his speeches with a complaint.
 xvii. Strauss (192)
 xviii. Thucydides (VI.92.4)
 xix. Thucydides (II.60.6)
 xx. Machiavelli (65, 72)

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