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## Thucydides' political judgement

MALCOLM HEATH

After reporting the death of Pericles Thucydides gives an assessment of his leadership, adding by way of contrast some comments on the situation which developed in Athens subsequently (2.65.7-13). These comments provide an analysis of Athens' defeat in the war which many scholars have found hard to reconcile with Thucydides' own narrative. One recent commentator sets out the problem thus:<sup>1</sup>

Here Thucydides seems to trace Athenian defeat to a single cause, a lack of unity which began after Pericles' death... This single explanation is open to a variety of objections: the great victory of Sphacteria (4.31-41) was won after Pericles' death; according to Thucydides' own account of the expedition to Sicily, the witch-hunts which led to the recall of Alcibiades (6.60-1) did not in themselves contribute greatly to the disaster; and the years of Athens' worst internal discord (411-407), were also years of great military success.

Dover observes that the passage contains no hint 'that the critical moment in the defeat of Athens was a single great naval battle in the Hellespont, won by a talented Spartan commander over the fleet which had itself achieved a great naval victory at Arginousai the previous summer', and remarks that throughout the chapter Thucydides 'pursues relentlessly the theme of political disunity in the post-Periklean period, and by its end the theme had distorted his judgment'.<sup>2</sup> How are we to explain this preoccupation, with its distorting influence?

Four closely related points stand out in Thucydides' analysis:

- (i) Pericles' successors pursued projects which would bring honour and profit to the individual if they succeeded, but which would damage the city's war-effort if they failed; they did this out of private ambition and for private gain.
- (ii) Pericles' unique position meant that he could speak his mind to the people; his successors, because they were competing with each other for political influence, had to say what the people wanted to hear.
- (iii) The Sicilian expedition was defeated primarily because the Athenians at home did not provide adequate support to those in the field; this was a result of private quarrels in pursuit of political pre-eminence.

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Rusten, *Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War, Book II* (Cambridge 1989) 212. See further A.W. Gomme, *JHS* 71 (1951) 70-80 = *More Essays in Greek History and Literature* (Oxford 1962) 92-111, and *HCT* II 191-2, 195-6; P.A. Brunt, *REG* 65 (1952) 59-96, H.D. Westlake, *CQ* 52 (1958) 102-10 = *Essays on the Greek Historians and Greek History* (Manchester 1969) 161-73; E. Lévy, *Athènes devant la défaite de 404* (*BEFAR* 225, Paris 1976) 37-39. Thucydides' judgement on Sicily is defended by W. Liebeschütz, *Historia* 17 (1968) 289-306, W.E. Thompson, *Historia* 20 (1971) 141-51; but see most recently K.J. Dover, *HCT* V 423-7, and (n. 2).

<sup>2</sup> K.J. Dover, *PRIA* 81 (1981) 237; the present note pursues the aim stated on p. 283: 'It is for us... to render his irrationalities intelligible.'

(iv) Even after the defeat in Sicily, Athens contrived to hold out against an apparently overwhelming coalition of opposing forces, until internal dissensions brought it down; in other words, the city defeated itself.

Each of these points can be paralleled in fourth-century political oratory.

An instructive illustration can be found in Demosthenes 4, the *First Philippic*. Demosthenes begins this speech by drawing two conclusions from the difficulties in which the Athenians find themselves in their war against Philip. First, he uses the situation to discredit his opponents. If they had given the right advice, the issue would not have to be debated again; the very fact that the question has come up shows that 'the usual people' have been misleading the assembly. But—secondly—this is a source of encouragement. If the reason for Athens' difficulties is that they have been doing the wrong things, then clearly if they start doing the right things, their problems will be over. This encouraging thought provides one side of an equivocal presentation of Philip: on the one hand he is a model of energy and enterprise, and the Athenians should try to emulate him; on the other his successes are due to Athenian negligence, and he is not really so formidable an opponent. These points are made in the opening section of the speech (1-12). Later in the speech Demosthenes takes up the attack on his opponents with which he began (44-7). He imagines a heckler asking what opening there is for an attack on Philip, and replies that a way will be found if the effort is made; but the Athenians will get nowhere if they just sit at home listening to the politicians insulting each other and exchanging recriminations. At once Demosthenes goes on to stress the importance of supporting the commanders in the field: there is no point, he says, sending out a general equipped with nothing but a mandate and the hopes expressed on the speaker's platform; they must be [159] given them adequate resources. This juxtaposition is surely significant: it is implied that the political rivalries mentioned are to blame for the failure to give support. What Demosthenes says about generals dispatched with a mandate and wishful thinking is clearly mocking in tone, and Demosthenes' approach to his audience is aggressively satirical at various other points in the speech: consider his mocking mimicry of Athenian gossip (10-11), his description of the phoney war (25-6), or the famous comparison of Athens with a barbarian boxer, who always defends himself where he has just been hit (40). At the very end of the speech Demosthenes makes explicit the *ethos*, or rhetorical persona, which this satire has implied, and claims credit for it 51, cf.38). He says that he has never spoken just to please his audience (πρὸς χάριν): he always speaks his mind frankly; and that is because his sole concern is with the interests of the city—he does not count the possible cost to himself.<sup>3</sup> The implication is that his opponents, the politicians whose squabbles are distracting from the war-effort, tell the assembly just what it wants to hear, because they are more concerned with their own advancement than with the city's welfare.

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<sup>3</sup> This is, of course, a pose: it seems from 5.2 that the assumption of critical outspokenness was a common tactic, and one which could win popular esteem; 21.202-4 shows how the pose could be undermined by an opposing speaker.

In sum, Demosthenes portrays Athens as a city that is being defeated by her own mistakes rather than by her enemy's strengths; this is at least in part because the Athenians are failing to give adequate support to their commanders in the field, which is in turn due to political conflicts within the city; the politicians involved in these conflicts are merely flattering the people, and have their own personal advancement in view rather than the public good. This portrait exactly matches that found in Thucydides 2.65. Other parallels can be cited:

(i) Private gain vs public interest: Dem. 3.26, 29; 5.12; 8.53 (bribery), 66, 71; 9.2; Isocr. 8.124-8; 12.140.

(ii) Flattery vs *παρρησία*: Dem. 1.16; 3.3, 12-13, 21-6, 32; 6.5, 27, 31; 8.34, 68-9; 9.3-4; Aesch. 2.177; Isocr. 8.3-5; 9-11; 12.140.

(iii) Political rivalries: Dem. 2.25, 29-30; 5.3; 8.1, 69, 71; 9.2, 63-4; 19.298; Aesch. 2.75, 176; Lys. 2.65; cf. Thrasymachus DK 85B1.

(iv) Self-defeat: Dem. 1.9; 2.4; 9.5; Lys. 2.65; Plato *Menexenus* 243d.

It seems legitimate to describe these motifs as commonplaces of fourth-century political oratory.

There is always the risk in using fourth-century evidence to throw light on Thucydides that rhetorical practice may have changed in the intervening period. In this case, however, the speeches in Thucydides offer some evidence that the motifs we have identified were at home in later fifth-century oratory.<sup>4</sup> Pericles tells the Athenians that they have more reason to fear their own errors than the enemy (1.144.1), in this echoing the Corinthians (1.69.5). Cleon attacks speakers who strive to give pleasure and cause harm to the state while they themselves prosper (3.40.3), and those who are led by gain (*κέρδος*) to speak speciously, thus putting the city in danger while they reap the benefits (3.38.2-3; cf. 3.82.8); and he condemns the assembly's addiction to pleasing words (3.38.4-7, 40.2). Diodotus too refers to those who speak insincerely, indulging their audience in order to win prestige (3.42.6). Nicias claims that Alcibiades is seeking command with a view to recovering personal expenses at the risk of the state's loss (6.12.2; 6.15.3-4 seems to endorse this view of Alcibiades' motives). Outside Thucydides, there is an intriguing pre-echo of the *First Philippic* in the reply given in Aristophanes *Frogs* 1443-50 to the question, 'how can we save the city?': Demosthenes, as we have seen, argues that if the Athenians have been doing one thing and it has led to defeat, then doing something else will result in success; Aristophanes' Euripides argues that if the Athenians have been trusting one set of people and are in trouble, then trusting another set will be their salvation.

[160] If the hypothesis of continuity in rhetorical practice is accepted, then it may help us to understand Thucydides' misleading preoccupation in 2.65. Thucydides was an Athenian *strategos*, a political as well as a military post. He was himself politically active, therefore, and it is reasonable to assume that contemporary political practice was a major formative influence on his thinking;

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<sup>4</sup> As, indeed, they would have been even earlier: most of our motifs are already present, explicitly or implicitly, in Theognis 39-52.

that was where he had learnt to think politically.<sup>5</sup> It is natural that he should look at and interpret events using those patterns of thought and explanation which political debate had made familiar to him.

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<sup>5</sup> It is striking that Simon Hornblower's *Thucydides* (London 1987), which 'tries to put him in his fifth-century intellectual context as a whole, in all its inchoateness and variety' (p.viii), has virtually nothing to say about political practice, as distinct from political theory.