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Infectious nationalism: Pericles and public health crises

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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills

Jason Schlude on “Infectious Nationalism: Pericles and Public Health Crises”

MARCH 16, 2020



A powerful state sits on the verge of a public health crisis. An infectious disease threatens to ravage its population. Meanwhile, its principal leader addresses the public. Some hints are dropped suggesting its international outlook, but the main theme is something different: our state is the greatest in the world, the teacher of the world, immune to failure.

This was the circumstance 2,450 years ago in Classical Athens. Pericles, Athens’ most powerful general and politician, the famed promoter of democracy, principal driver behind the Parthenon, addressed the Athenian people in his eulogy over their recently deceased fellow citizens. They did not die from disease but from battle in the first year of the Peloponnesian War, the lengthy war fought between Athens (and its Delian League) and Sparta (and its Peloponnesian League) in 431-404 BCE.

The speech comes to us through the historian Thucydides, an Athenian participant in that conflict, who produced a history of the war that we still recognize as a masterpiece of historical analysis. The speech, often called “[Pericles’ Funeral Oration](#),” remains one of the most famous political speeches of all time. In Thucydides’ version (2.34-46), Pericles does not call out particular individuals among the dead for praise, as one might expect. Instead, the lion’s share of the speech is an ode to Athenian life—as compared to that of other Greeks—and a justification for the sacrifice made by the brave men of Athens. In this form, it is a sweet swig nationalism. As Pericles outlines, the Athenians were lovers of freedom, dedicated defenders of their city and empire, a people who respect law and active democratic citizenship, the “school of Greece.” For Pericles, Athens was no imitator; it was the model.

As political descendants of the Athenians, we cannot help but pause over certain descriptions in the speech that many of us, as participants in our own democratic experiment, would happily apply to ourselves. But there are unpleasanties here, too—as Thucydides readily recognizes, and these apply to us as well.

The same Athenian men who cherished freedom, law, and democracy would rob their allies of their independence of action, even to the point of devastating rebellious (read: neutral) lesser states such as Melos; faced with the Melians refusal to abandon neutrality in the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians killed their men and then enslaved their women and children (Thucydides 5.84-116). This was a brutal consequence of blind nationalism.

The damning verdict of Thucydides can be seen in other ways, too. Immediately after Pericles’ celebration of Athens, Thucydides recounts an infectious disease that began its onslaught on the city of Athens only months later (2.47-54). It arrived around the same time a Spartan army returned in the spring of 430 BCE to besiege Athens for a second season. Holding out in its walled city, the Athenians found death from the plague everywhere. Their society initially tried to cope, its members caring for one another, until order and solidarity eventually broke down, with many Athenian citizens avoiding one another and selfishly indulging in life while it still lasted.

The disease’s cruel symptoms worked from the head down to one’s intestines, assaulting the body till it eventually gave out, according to the historian, who carefully documented it for future recognition by his readers. Thucydides knew what he was talking about; he himself suffered but survived it. Pericles, on the other hand, perished from the plague. Constructing his narrative in this way, Thucydides wished for his reader to see Athenian folly. Its single-minded nationalism led

it into conflicts that isolated it, leaving it to suffer on its own.

The craftsmanship and insight of Thucydides is arresting. The precise circumstances of our present moment are of course different from 2,450 years ago. The U.S. is not engaged in a conflict on the scale of the Peloponnesian War. This is not to say that we are without conflicts driven by national interests. We are nearly 20 years into our war in Afghanistan. The better comparison is our tension with emergent China, [but this has not yet burst into armed conflict](#). Furthermore, the corona virus is not the plague—though in facing what may be the greatest public health crisis in a generation, it would be judicious to reserve final judgments. Nor is there a speech from the present U.S. administration like the oration.

Still, President Trump expressed sentiments in his [press conference on February 26](#) that find parallels in Thucydides. One wonders if, coming off the nationalistic high of the public funeral, Athenians initially faced the plague with similar confidence. Were they convinced of their intellectual superiority? Were they certain they could handle it unilaterally? Did they receive calls for assistance, similar to those acknowledged by President Trump, only to primarily focus on Athenian interests, trying to limit who could enter the city? American interests are absolutely vital, but if the president’s initial assessment is accurate, and his tendency is to eschew robust international aid and to pursue reactive wall-building as the main remedy instead, one wonders whether this is another instance in which extreme nationalistic interest is self-harming.

The evidence so far available is less than heartening. Not long ago the Trump administration [proposed more than \\$3 billion in cuts](#) to U.S. contributions to global health programs, including shrinking by half its contributions to the World Health Organization. There have been simultaneous, ad-hoc boosts in funding to organizations like USAID, but nothing yet on a scale as to offset this dramatic overall reduction. [The recent House bill passing \\$8.3 billion](#) will help, allocating \$1.3 billion for the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development. Still, the crisis widens and deepens.

Our world is a global system, and we need to see beyond ourselves more than the President is inclined. Stronger international collaborations would pay off. So also would a good dose of humility in face of the corona virus.

What can we as citizens do in this situation? This is, of course, a moment to pull together—but to pull together at all levels of community: neighborhood, city, state, nation, and world. We must not fall prey to extreme forms of nationalism that encourage international antagonism and division.

We will find greater success in the common cause that binds us all at the present moment, wherever we call home on our globe: helping one another to limit the spread of disease, develop medical solutions, and support all community members in these hard times. Fear and suffering are without borders—hope and goodwill should be, too.

Jason Schlude

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