Global Engagement at the United Nations: Lessons from Ancient Greece for our Modern Times

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Global Engagement at the United Nations: Lessons from Ancient Greece for our Modern Times

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The present political moment in America is rife with irony. One example, revealing a battle for America’s soul, involves two speeches recently delivered at the opening of the 73rd United Nations General Assembly. In the first, Secretary-General António Guterres invoked the famed ancient Athenian historian Thucydides. In this address, which cautioned against nationalism and
encouraged international collaboration, he noted the danger of current “shifts in the balance of power.” Guterres continued, “In assessing the Peloponnesian War in ancient Greece, Thucydides said, and I quote, ‘It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this installed in Sparta that made war inevitable.’”

In other words, Guterres (in agreement with Graham Allison, author of Destined for War) sees the present through the lens of the war fought between Sparta and Athens, traditionally dated from 431 to 404 BCE. At that time, Sparta was at the pinnacle of power in Greece; it relentlessly trained its youth as ground soldiers and created a militarized state that led the successful defense of Greece against Persian invasion in 480 BCE. Yet Athens at that moment threatened to surge beyond Sparta. It was largely the Athenian navy that won the Battle of Salamis for Greece in the same year, paving the way for Greek victory and control of the Aegean Sea in subsequent years. This upset the balance of power, in Thucydides’ view, and produced the Peloponnesian War between Sparta’s Peloponnesian League and Athens’ Delian League. For Allison, and presumably Guterres, America is Sparta, and China is Athens. They fear that the emergence of China as an outstanding global power, and the aggressive response of the U.S. to it, will lead to war.

Yet President Trump’s speech ironically flipped this analogy. In contrast to Guterres’ speech, its flavor was distinctly nationalistic. Trump praised America’s recent accomplishments: its strong economic growth and enhanced security. He rearticulated his America First policy: “We will never surrender America’s sovereignty to an unelected, unaccountable, global bureaucracy. America is governed by Americans. We reject the ideology of globalism, and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism.” And he encouraged other countries to adopt a similar policy: “We are standing up for America and the American people. And we are also standing up for the world … I honor the right of every nation in this room to pursue its own customs, beliefs, and traditions.” Trump offers up his America as a shining example of self-interest.

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While Guterres suggests America is Sparta, Trump paints the U.S. as an underdog, victimized, returning to greatness. For him the U.S. is Athens. In fact, his speech finds its parallel in Thucydides: the public eulogy over the first Athenians to die in the Peloponnesian War, delivered by Athenian statesman Pericles in 431/0 BCE. In his speech, more a eulogy for Athens, Pericles remembers their “inheritance of a land that is free,” and he states, “We have a form of government which does not emulate the practice of our neighbours: we are more an example to others than an imitation of them. Our constitution is called a democracy because we govern in the interests of the majority, not just the few. Our laws give equal rights to all in private disputes … We are tolerant in our private dealings with one another, but in all public matters we abide by the law” (2.36-37; transl. Martin Hammond, Oxford 2009).

Pericles emphasizes Athenian freedom, self-determination, democracy, and equality under the law. Such themes find their counterpart in Trump’s remarks: “In America, we believe in the majesty of freedom and the dignity of the individual. We believe in self-government and the rule of law. And we prize the culture that sustains our liberty—a culture built on strong families, deep faith, and fierce independence.” Pericles’ pride in Athens also leads him to present it as a model: “I declare that our city as a whole is an education to Greece” (2.41). The parallels are clear.
There are differences, too. Trump seems to underscore international collaboration. He notes, “I have forged close relationships and friendships and strong partnerships with the leaders of many nations in this room.” And key to this process is the independence of each state. “Sovereign and independent nations are the only vehicle where freedom has ever survived, democracy has ever endured, or peace has ever prospered. And so we must protect our sovereignty and our cherished independence above all.” Insofar as this is true, Trump’s America is unlike Pericles’ Athens, which brutally exercised its power, bending allies and neutral parties to Athenian will. The classic example is the island of Melos, a neutral state in the Peloponnesian War. In 416 BCE Athens, now dominated by the politician Alcibiades, demanded that Melos join the Delian League. When the Melians refused, the Athenians besieged them, killed all surviving adult men, and enslaved their women and children. In short, the Athenians made good on their claim: “the dominant exact what they can and the weak concede what they must” (5.89). This was brutal realpolitik.

But this difference is illusory. Trump calls for a “principled realism.” This seems to suggest the U.S. has a pragmatic policy of collaboration with other countries, informed by some ethical code. Yet Trump’s speech says nothing of action on the basis of ethics. He celebrates the U.S. withdrawal
from the Human Rights Council and rejects the International Criminal Court. The only principle at play is American self-interest. “Moving forward, we are only going to give foreign aid to those who respect us and, frankly, are our friends.”

This remains the realpolitik of the past. Our needs trump all else. We will fulfill them through our might. This is our right. While Trump speaks of a country of faith, there is no morality here. Trump’s America is much like Pericles’ Athens. This resulted in a decades-long war for Athens—and they lost. And should we think this impossible, we should remember, too, that the unthinkable happened to Athens: the Spartans, who fought Persia in 480 BCE, allied with Persia against Athens. The Persians bankrolled the Spartan fleet that choked Athens into submission. What unlikely alliance may work against U.S. interests in the future? China and Russia? China and Europe?

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Despite Trump’s claim that states, concerned solely for their own interests, can produce global cooperation, we know that is unlikely. Do we teach our children that they should support their family, religious community, city, state, and country only when they stand to gain? Surely, while as citizens we are dedicated to our country’s well being, we cannot really believe that naked self-interest on a global scale will strengthen the bigger community of which we also are part. Our failure to recognize and insist on this fact will almost certainly make our world less peaceful and safe—and we will suffer for it.

Jason Schlude is Associate Professor of Classics at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University in Minnesota. He is an ancient historian, archaeologist, and essayist. Recently he published “The Politics of Consumption: From Trimalchio and Gatsby to Trump and Beyond (https://activisthistory.com/2018/06/27/the-politics-of-consumption-from-trimalchio-and-gatsby-to-trump-and-beyond/)” in The Activist History Review. He will be a Gey Scholar at the Gey Research Institute in 2019. He can be contacted at jschlude@csbsju.edu.

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