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Democracy and the Problem of Individual Leadership

27. Pericles the foremost citizen

When the Peloponnesian War broke out, in the Spring of 431, Pericles had been the dominant figure in Athenian politics for about three decades, during which he had served almost uninterruptedly in the board of *strategoi*. In the course of those long years the Athenians had strengthened their control of the Aegean Sea and the grip on their allies. Upon entering the conflict with Sparta, naval dominance and imperial revenues were the Athenians' main assets: Pericles envisaged the impending war as a struggle between two extremely different powers in terms of military capability, political organization and socio-economical conditions. Also, he realized the epochal importance of this conflict, and its extraordinary implications for the life of the cities of Greece. Upon entering the conflict, Pericles, the undisputed leader of Athens, was faced with the task of persuading his fellow-citizens of the deep-reaching consequences of naval imperialism, and of the need to rethink completely their understanding of war and conflict **[a]**. Relying on their unassailable naval superiority and on the financial revenues stemming from empire, the Athenians should drag the Spartans into a long, transmarine war, using their fleet to launch raids against the shore of Peloponnese to destabilize the social and political situation in the heartland of Sparta's power, and avoiding at any cost engaging the enemy land forces. To carry out this plan it was essential that the Athenians resisted the temptation of expanding their empire. Also and most crucially, Pericles advised the Athenians to abandon the rural districts of Attica, which were to become the targets of the raids of the enemy hoplites, and seek refuge within the walls of the city of Athens. Pericles' plan was as daring and innovative as it was inevitably controversial: as soon as the Athenians began to see the Peloponnesian troops lay waste to the land of Attica, Pericles became the object of harsh criticism,

as the man responsible for what appeared as a suicidal strategy, and for his refusing, although he was one of the generals, to take the infantry onto the field and repel the enemy. In the second year of the conflict, the outbreak of the pestilence in the overcrowded city could not but deteriorate the situation [**b**].

The criticism to which Pericles was subject after the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War highlights one of the most important themes in the history of Athenian democracy, namely the difficult balance between the principle of popular sovereignty, demanding that any magistrate be subject to the supreme authority of the *ekklesia*, and the personal ascendancy of charismatic leaders. Owing to his extraordinary charisma and ability to understand and direct the feelings of the *demos*, Pericles was able to contain the inevitable excesses of popular rule and give a coherent direction to the affairs of Athens. Thucydides famously went so far as to say that under Pericles, viz. in the most flourishing years of the history of democratic Athens, the city was a democracy by name, but in fact was ruled by its foremost citizen. The death of Pericles would result in a steady decline of the city's political personnel [**c**].

[a] Thuc. 1.140–3: Athens and Sparta at the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, two different kinds of power

'Athenian citizens, my opinion is the same as it always was: we must not give in to the Peloponnesians. I am aware that the spirit that inspires men as they are persuaded to undertake a war does not remain the same once they are engaged in it. For as the circumstances change so does our judgement. Now I see that I have to give you the same or almost the same advice that I have given you in the past, and I demand that those of you who will find my arguments persuasive support the resolutions that we take as a community even if we do not meet with success, or they should not to take credit for our wise deliberations if we meet with success. For sometimes the course of events follows a path as inscrutable as that of the human mind and this is why when things do not turn out as we expected we blame it on bad luck.

'Now, it was already clear before that the Spartans were contriving against us, and now it is as clear as ever. The treaty says that we should submit our mutual differences to an arbitration, and that in the meantime each party should keep what they have. Yet the Spartans have never made any such offer to us, nor would they accept an arbitration if we were to offer them one. Instead, they want to settle their remonstrations not by diplomacy, but war, and so here they are, dropping the tone of expostulation and adopting that of command. They

order us to raise the siege of Potidaea, leave Aegina independent, and revoke the decree about Megara. Then they give us an ultimatum, ordering us to leave the Greeks independent. None of you should think that, if we refuse to revoke the Megara decree, we would be going to war for an insignificant matter, which is chief among their complaints, and say that there will be no war if we revoke it. Nor should you leave any sense of guilt longer in your hearts as if you were going to war for a minor issue. For this minor issue contains the warranty and trial of the resolution which you are going to take. If you acquiesce to them on this point, you will have to acquiesce on bigger issues, as though you had been frightened into submission. On the other hand, a firm refusal will make them understand in the clearest terms that they should rather treat you as equals. So make up your mind here and now whether you should submit to the Spartans before you get harmed, or, if we are to go to war, as I think we should, you should do so with the determination of never acquiescing on any matter big or small, without fearing that your possessions are in danger.

'As for the war and the resources of each side, listen to me carefully, and make up your minds that we are not at all in a position inferior to theirs. For the Peloponnesians till their own land and have no financial resources, either public or private. They have no experience of protracted or transmarine warfare, and owing to their poverty can only engage on minor conflicts against each other. Powers of this kind cannot afford to man ships or send out armies too frequently, for they cannot stay away from their homes and need to provide the funds for these campaigns themselves. Besides, they have been kept away from the sea.

'The costs of war are better supported through capital accumulated over time than taxes levied under the pressure of circumstances, and farmers as a class of men are usually more willing to risk their own bodies than their possessions; for while they are confident that they can survive the dangers of war, there is no guarantee that they will not exhaust their properties, particularly if the conflict lasts for longer than they expect, as seems the case with the present conflict.

'In a single pitched battle, the Peloponnesians and their allies can take on the whole of Greece, but they are unable to sustain a war against a foe different in character from what they are, for they do not have a common council to prompt steady and vigorous resolutions. Also, they have all equal rights of vote, but do not belong to the same race, and so they pursue each their own interests without ever accomplishing anything substantial. For, while some of them want to take revenge against a particular enemy, others are more interested in avoiding damage to their properties. They are always slow to assemble and when, after

some long interval, they finally meet, they spend very little time addressing issues of common interest, and most of it to their particular concerns. None of them think that any harm may come from his personal neglect, as they assume that it is always somebody else's duty to take care of this or that for him. And since each of them is of this opinion, they don't realize that their commonwealth is in fact perishing.

'But the most important thing is that they will be hindered by their lack of money, for the slowness with which it will come to them will cause delay, but the opportunities of war never wait for long. And we should not be afraid lest the enemy may build a fort in our territory or use their fleet against us: in the first case, building a city large enough to rival another one is difficult even in time of peace, much more in a hostile country for which we have provided fortifications to guard it from the enemy, and in the course of a conflict. And even if they manage to build a fort in Attica, they may be able to cause some damage to our territory with their incursions, or to incite desertion, but this will not prevent us from sailing to their territory and building strongholds here, or retaliating with our fleet, because it is in the fleet that our strength lies. In fact, we can draw more advantage from our experience of naval warfare for our operations on land than them from their experience of land warfare for their naval operations. Nor could they easily acquire the art of seamanship. Consider this: you began to exercise it in the aftermath of the Persian Wars, and still have not yet brought it to perfection: how could a population of farmers and not sailors ever achieve anything of note if we'll prevent them from getting any practice by constantly keeping an eye on them with the deployment of a large fleet? Trusting that numbers can compensate for lack of expertise, they might risk an engagement if they are faced by a small fleet, but if they find themselves blocked by a large one, they will remain quiet, and this lack of practice will make them more maladroit and consequently more timid.

'Seamanship, like everything else, is an art that requires complete commitment, and cannot be taken up and practised occasionally as a pastime. Also, if they try to lay their hands upon the treasuries of Olympia and Delphi and try to turn our mercenary rowers away from us with the promise of higher pay, that would be a serious problem, but only if we were not as good rowers as they are and the metics were not also serving in our fleet. In fact this makes a match for them, and, most importantly our steersmen and sailors are citizens, and they make better crews than the rest of Greece could ever put together. As for our mercenaries, none of them would prefer to run the risk of being defeated and exiled from his fatherland, for the sake of a few days' extra pay.

'This is I think a fairly exhaustive account of the situation of the Peloponnesians. We Athenians are free from the faults which I have criticized in them, and have other advantages which our foes cannot match. And if they invade our territory with their army, we shall sail against theirs, and it will be clear that the destruction of the whole of Attica will not be the same as that of even a small portion of Peloponnese. For they will not be able to acquire other land if not by means of a pitched battle, while we have plenty of land both on the islands and on the mainland. The rule of the sea is a great thing indeed. Just consider this: would we be more secure from assaults if we were islanders? For the future, this is how we should consider ourselves at the best of our possibilities. Leaving behind our land and houses, let us guard the city and the sea. And even if we lose our land or our homes, we should not let our resentment against the Peloponnesians drive us to engage them in a pitched battle, because their land forces are far superior to ours. If we come out victorious we would still have to fight against them again in a position of inferiority, and if we are defeated we would lose our allies, on whom our strength lies. For they would not remain quiet a day if they see that we don't have enough troops to send against them. We should not mourn the loss of land or our houses, but that of our men. For land and houses do not provide us men, but it is men that provide us those things. In fact I would have told you to go and raze down your houses, had I known that I could persuade you to do so, and show the Peloponnesians that you will not submit to them for the sake of your material possessions.'

[b] Thuc. 2.59–60: Mounting criticism against Pericles' leadership

After the second invasion of the Peloponnesians, the Athenians changed their spirits, for their land had now been laid waste twice, and the combined evils of war and pestilence were pressing on them. They accused Pericles of having persuaded them to go to war and held him responsible for all their misfortunes. So they became eager to come to terms with the Spartans, and even sent ambassadors to them without however accomplishing anything. The Athenians were now completely despondent, and all their anger was turned against Pericles. When he saw that they were so exasperated by the situation and behaving exactly as he had foreseen, Pericles, who was still a general, summoned an assembly, with the purpose of pouring confidence into the Athenians and guiding them from this anger to a milder and calmer mood. So he came forward and spoke as follows:

'I was expecting this wave of indignation against me, for I know its causes. I have summoned this assembly expressly for this reason, to give you some reminders, and to complain that you are unreasonably angry towards me, or frightened by your sufferings. I am convinced that a flourishing state is more beneficial to private citizens than individual prosperity while the state is suffering. For even when a private citizen is doing well, if the city is ruined he will be ruined with it. On the other hand, a prosperous state always provides opportunities of salvation for struggling citizens. Since the state can assist the struggling citizens, but the citizens cannot assist the state, it is the duty of all of us to defend it, while now you are so afflicted by your domestic grievances that you have forgotten about the common safety, and blame me for having advised you to go to war, and yourselves for having approved my advice. If you are angry with me, you are angry with the man who, I think, knows better than anybody else what should be done in the interest of the city, and how to expound it, a man who loves his city and is incorruptible. Besides, a man who has this knowledge, but does not know how to explain it clearly, may as well not have any idea at all. If he has both the policies and the ability to explain them, but no love for his country, he could not give his advice with the same affection. And if he has love for the country, but this love is not incorruptible, then everything would be up for sale. Therefore if you thought that I was even blandly distinguished for these virtues when you followed my advice and went to war, you should not accuse me now of having harmed you.'

[c] Thuc. 2.65.1–10: Pericles' Athens, a democracy only by name?

Such were the arguments used by Pericles as he tried to release the Athenians from their anger and to divert their thoughts from their current sufferings. As a community, he succeeded in persuading them, and so they gave up the idea of sending to Sparta, and devoted themselves to the war with renewed energy. As individuals, however, they were still grieving over their misfortunes, for the populace had been deprived of the little that they had, while the richer citizens had lost their beautiful properties, residences and the magnificent buildings that they had in country. And worst of all, they had war instead of peace. The Athenians in fact did not desist from their anger against Pericles until he was given a fine. Soon afterwards, however, as is the way with the populace, they elected him general again and entrusted all their affairs to him. This they did because they were now less concerned about their domestic problems, and had realized that he was the best man for the needs of the state.

As long as Pericles was the leader of the city during the peace, he pursued moderate policies and kept Athens safe. Under his guidance the greatness of the city reached its height, and even when the war broke out, he seems to have made a right assessment of the city's power. Pericles lived for two years and six months after the outbreak of the conflict, and after his death his foresight in relation to the events of the war became even better known. For Pericles promised them that if they remained quiet, exposing the city to no hazards during the war, they would come out victorious. But the Athenians did the very contrary: driven by personal ambitions and private interests, they adopted policies damaging both to themselves and to their allies even in matters apparently unrelated to the conflict. And the success of these policies would have conferred honour and benefits only to some private citizens, but their failure would have meant certain disaster for the whole country in the course of the war. The reason for this was that Pericles, owing to his rank, ability, and undisputed integrity, exercised a form of individual control over the multitude, while formally respecting its liberty; to put it in one word, he led them instead of being led by them. For Pericles never sought power by dishonest means, or resorted to flattery, and enjoyed so high a reputation that he could freely contradict them and cause their anger. Whenever he saw them arrogant and confident in spite of the circumstances, with his words he would astound them to fear. On the other hand, if they were seized by panic, he was able to restore at once their confidence. In short, the government of Athens, a democracy by name, under Pericles' guidance became a rule of the foremost citizen. But the successors of Pericles were more on a level with each other and, each of them striving for supremacy, gave in to the populace and committed the government of the city to their whims.

This, as was to be expected in a great and imperial state, led to many blunders: one of these was the Sicilian expedition, which failed not so much through a wrong assessment of the power of those against whom it was sent, but because those who had approved the expedition failed afterwards to consider the requirements of the troops. Instead, they gave themselves to personal slanders about the leadership of the populace, which affected the conduct of the campaign, and for the first time brought about civil unrest at home. The Athenians lost most of their fleet and other forces in Sicily, and civic unrest had broken out at home: still, for ten years they stood their ground against the enemies against whom they had been fighting since the outbreak of the war and, in addition to them, the Sicilians, and most of their allies, who revolted in great numbers, and finally Cyrus, the son of the Great King, who gave money to the Peloponnesians to maintain the fleet, and they did not give in until they

fell victim to their own internal quarrels. So abundant were the resources upon which Pericles based his forecast of an easy Athenian victory over the sole forces of the Peloponnesians.

28. Democracy, demagogues and adventurers: The cases of Cleon and Alcibiades

Pericles was an exceptionally charismatic leader who was able to control the passions of the Athenian masses and to address their decisions towards the common interests of the *polis*. After his death, however, politicians of a very different stamp came onto the scene: a new breed of mediocre aspiring leaders took to court the basest instincts of the masses to attain power and wealth, with little or no consideration for the common good. These were the so-called demagogues **[a]**.

Cleon was arguably the first and foremost of these demagogues. A vocal opponent of Pericles and his policies, Cleon rose to prominence after his death by fiercely opposing any suggestion of appeasement with the Spartans. Although his family had noble roots, Cleon was the son of a tanner, who cleverly managed to turn the relative modesty of his upbringing to his political advantage. A clever public speaker, Cleon courted the support of the Athenian people by affecting a rough and unpolished demeanour and rhetorical style. Thucydides presents Cleon as the 'most violent' of the Athenians: in 427 this demagogue urged his fellow-citizens to put to death the whole of the male population of Mytilene, who had dared to revolt against Athens. Thucydides portrays him as he addresses the assembly. The speech which Cleon delivers is an eloquent manifesto of his radical, ruthless views on democracy and empire **[b]**. The policies of Cleon and the demagogues were a frequent target of satire in Aristophanes' early plays. In *Knights* (424) Cleon is directly portrayed as a greedy, heinous Paphlagonian slave at the service of Demos, an old Athenian man. Cleon is Demos' favourite slave and abuses this position to extort and retaliate the other members of the household, Nicias and Demosthenes **[c, d]**.

The first phase of the war between Sparta and Athens dragged on for ten years. In 422, Cleon of Athens and Brasidas of Sparta, the main advocates of war in their cities, both found death in the course of the same engagement at Anphipolis. Some months later, in the spring of 421, the Peace of Nicias, so named after the main Athenian negotiator, was finally signed, but the two great cities were not to remain at peace for too long. In Athens, one of the most vocal

opponents of the peace agreement with Sparta was the young and flamboyant Alcibiades, a scion of the noble house of the Alcmaeonids and former pupil of Socrates. Alcibiades was a man of extraordinary talents, fascination and ambition: this was an extremely dangerous mix, which contributed to polarizing public opinion in favour or against him. One of the most prominent and controversial figures in the years between the Peace of Nicias and the end of the war with Sparta, Alcibiades came to be seen as a man who believed himself to be greater than the *polis*, and used its institutions to serve his own interests and ego.

Having been excluded from the negotiating team that discussed the peace with the enemy, Alcibiades began to pave his way to prominence and power by following a different and autonomous foreign policy, and using his personal international connections to foster an alliance between Athens and Argos, Sparta's main rival in Peloponnese [**e**]. Some years later, in 415, as the city was still recovering from the first phase of the conflict, Alcibiades persuaded the Athenians to embark upon an over-ambitious campaign against the Sicilian town of Syracuse, which was an ally of Sparta. The plan was in blatant contradiction with the strategy laid out by Pericles at the outbreak of the war, and became the topic of heated debate in the city. What is certain, the plan greatly appealed to the adventurous spirit and fascination for the exotic of the younger Athenian generations. The debate on the campaign therefore sparked a sort of clash between generations, in which the experienced Nicias tried to urge the Athenians to follow the most cautious path and abstain from a potentially catastrophic enterprise, while Alcibiades appealed to the adventurous and bold spirit of the Athenians, a spirit which he claimed to embody to the utmost, as witnessed by his many sporting victories and the splendour of his public displays [**f**].

The build-up to the Sicilian campaign was marred by scandal and controversy. The night before the fleet was to set out, someone mutilated the phallic portraits of Hermae scattered around Athens for good luck. The episode was associated with the blasphemous parodies of the Eleusine Mysteries performed in the houses of the Athenian *jeunesse dorée*, which had been lately brought to light, and for Alcibiades' adversaries it was very easy to persuade public opinion that he was involved in those crimes, and that those actions were part of a conspiracy to overthrow democracy, of which Alcibiades was suspected of being the ringleader [**g**]. These suspicions followed Alcibiades as he set sail to Sicily with the biggest fleet ever prepared by the Athenians. So, to avoid the consequences of the hostility mounting against him, Alcibiades defected to Sparta,

where he would gain a prominent role as a military advisor to the enemies of his fatherland. But that was not the end of his wanderings. Having fallen into disgrace with the Spartan king Agis, Alcibiades sought refuge in Persia at the court of the satrap Tissaphernes, then he re-joined the Athenian troops at Samos at the time of the coup of the Four Hundred. After a string of naval victories in the Aegean and a triumphant return to Athens, Alcibiades fell into disgrace again with his fellow-citizens following a maladroit engagement with the Spartans at Notium (407), and witnessed the disaster of the Athenian fleet at Aegospotami as an exile from his estates in the Thracian Chersonese.

[a] [Arist.] *Const. Ath.* 28.1–3: Popular leaders and demagogues

As long as Pericles was the leader of the people, the affairs of the city went better, but after his death they became much worse. For then, for the first time, the people chose a leader who was not esteemed by the upper classes, while in former times it was the respectable citizens who continued to have the leadership of the people: Solon was the first and original leader of the people; the second was Pisistratus, who was a man of nobility and repute. After the tyranny was overthrown, Cleisthenes, a scion of the house of the Alcmaeonids, became the leader of the people, having no adversaries, for the faction of Isagoras had been banished. After this Xanthippus was the champion of the people, and Miltiades of the upper orders, and after them Themistocles and Aristides. After them, Ephialtes was the leader of the people, and Cimon, son of Miltiades, of the notables. And then Pericles of the people and Thucydides, a relative of Cimon's, of the others. After the death of Pericles, Nicias, who died in Sicily, was the leader of the notables, and Cleon, son of Cleanaetus, held the leadership of the people. Cleon seems to have done the most to ruin the people by means of his angry outbursts, and was the first to have resorted to shouting and abuse on the speaker's podium, and to gird up his cloak before addressing the people, while others spoke in an orderly manner. After these, Theramenes son of Hagnon was the leader of the others and Cleophon the lyre-maker of the people: he was the first to introduce the two-obol allowance. He went on to distribute this for some time, until it was abolished by Callicrates of the deme of Paene. He was the first to promise to add another obol to the two-obol dole. Both Cleophon and Callicrates were later on sentenced to death, for even though the populace may be utterly deceived, later they get to hate those who have led them to act unjustly. From Cleon on, leaders of the people invariably became the men who were most willing to act audaciously and to court immediate popularity by pleasing the lower orders.

[b] Thuc. 3.36.6–37: Cleon, the most violent of the Athenians

A meeting of the assembly was summoned at once, several speakers giving their different opinions on the matter. One of these was Cleon son of Cleaenetus, who had carried the earlier motion to put the Mytilenaeans to death. Cleon was among other things the most violent of the citizens, and at that time was by far the most influential with the populace. Cleon came forward again and spoke as follows:

'On many other occasions in the past I have been convinced that a democracy is incapable of ruling over others, so much so today seeing your change of mind about the Mytilenaeans. Because your daily relations with each other are free from intrigue and fear, you have developed the same attitude towards your allies. And so you forget that whenever you are led into error by their words, or give in to pity, you are in fact putting yourselves in danger without obtaining the gratitude of your allies. What you are failing to realize is that the power you hold is in fact a tyranny, imposed upon recalcitrant subjects who are plotting against you. If they obey you, it is not because you go so far as to harm your own interest to please them, no: it is your superior strength, rather than their goodwill, that gives you power over them. But the most terrible thing is that your resolutions are never final; for you ignore the fact that a city with inferior but inviolable laws is stronger than one with beautifully concocted laws but without authority, and that ignorance combined with prudence is more useful than cleverness without discipline, and that the affairs of the community are often better entrusted in the hands of the simpler citizens than the very clever ones. For the latter always try to appear wiser than the laws, and to dominate the political debate, as though they cannot give proof of their wisdom in more important matters, by which conduct they generally drive their cities to ruin. On the other hand, those who have no trust in their own discernment, are content to be less intelligent than the laws, and less able than others to scrutinize the words of a clever speaker, and are fair judges rather than competitors, generally conduct affairs for the better. What we need is action, and not to be excited by combats of wits to take resolutions against your own judgement.'

[c] Ar. *Knights* 40–84: Paphlagon, deceiving slave of Demos

Demosthenes: We have a boorish master; he is a very irascible man and an avid bean-eater. His name is Demos of the deme of Pnyx, a half-deaf, intractable old man. Last new moon he bought a slave, a tanner called Paphlagon, a truly wicked and slanderous fellow. This leather-Paphlagonian

knows the habits of his old master; he flatters, fawns and cringes to him with little pieces of leather, saying things like: 'Oh Demos, try one single case and have a bath. Eat, gulp down, and then have dessert: here are three obols for you! Would you care for me to get your supper ready?' Then he clinches the dish that some of us have prepared and graciously presents it to the master. The other day I baked a Laconian barley-cake at Pylus, and that wicked man comes around, seizes the cake I kneaded, and offers it up to Demos as his own. He always drives us away, for none but himself must attend to the master. When Demos is having dinner, he stands at his side with a leathern thong in his hand, and scares away all the orators. He is always singing oracles to him, so much so that the master gets all Sybil-crazy. And when he sees the master drifting, he uses all his art to throw lies and slanders at the household, and so we get flogged: Paphlagon on the other hand runs around the slaves, begging, causing trouble, taking bribes, and saying things like: 'See how I've got Hylas beaten? Do as I say, or you'll die this very day! So we have to give, because if we don't, the old man will beat us eight times as much. But now, my friends, let's see how we can put an end to this and who is going to get us out of here.'

[d] Ar. *Knights* 864–70: Demagogues prosper when the city is in trouble

Sausage-seller: (to Cleon) You are like those who fish for eels: in still waters they catch nothing, but when they stir up the lime up and down, their catching is good. Likewise, you prosper when the city is in troubled water. But now tell me: you who sell so many skins, have you ever given Demos a clout to patch his shoes? And you claim to be so fond of him!

[e] Thuc. 5.43–44.1: Introducing Alcibiades

As the differences between the Athenians and Spartans had reached this point, the party at Athens of those who wanted to cancel the treaty immediately set themselves in motion. One of them was Alcibiades, son of Clinias, a man still young in age for any other Greek city, but who was already distinguished for the glory of his ancestry. Alcibiades thought that an alliance with Argos would have been more advantageous, although his wounded pride also led him to oppose an agreement with the Spartans, for they had preferred to negotiate the treaty through Nicias and Laches, overlooking Alcibiades in reason of his young age. Also, they had not shown the respect due to the ancient links of hospitality between his family and the Spartans, which his grandfather had renounced,

but he wanted to renew it by bringing assistance to their prisoners taken in the island. Considering himself disparaged in every way, Alcibiades first spoke against the treaty, saying that the Spartans could not be trusted, but had made a treaty only to get rid of the Argives and then move against the Athenians alone. Therefore, as soon as this disagreement emerged, he privately sent messages to the Argives, asking them to come to Athens as soon as possible with the Mantinaeans and the Elaeans, for the time was right and he would give them his fullest support.

Upon hearing this, and discovering that the Athenians were not hostile to an alliance with the Boeotians and had a serious disagreement with the Spartans, the Argives forgot about their own ambassadors whom they had sent to Sparta to negotiate a treaty, and began to incline more towards the Athenians, thinking that, if they were to go to war, they would have a city on their side which was an old friend of Argos as well as a sister democracy and a mighty power at sea. Accordingly, they immediately dispatched ambassadors to Athens to discuss a treaty, and these were accompanied by envoys from Mantinaea and Elaea.

[f] Thuc. 6.15.1–17.1: Alcibiades and the Sicilian expedition

These were the words of Nicias. Most of the Athenians who came forward and urged to make the expedition without repealing their vote, while some spoke in opposition to it. But the most enthusiastic advocate of the campaign was Alcibiades, son of Clinias. He was eager to stand up to Nicias, who was his political rival, in part because he had made some envious remarks about him, but most importantly because he coveted the command of the campaign and hoped to reduce Sicily and Carthage under his control and, in case of success, to foster his personal wealth and public esteem. For the reputation which Alcibiades enjoyed among the citizens led him to indulge in his appetites beyond his actual means, both in the breeding of horses and those other extravagances of his, which later on would play no insignificant part in the destruction of the city. Alarmed by the greatness of his licence and indulgence both in his private life and all the designs which he had undertaken, the masses became hostile to him as someone who aspired to tyranny. While in public his conduct of the war met with general approval, in private everybody was upset by his extravagant habits, and so they entrusted the affairs of the city to someone else.

Now however he came forward and gave the following advice to the citizens:

'Athenians, I have a better right than others to hold the command: I have to start from this point because Nicias has attacked me and because I consider myself worthy of it. The things for which I am criticized have brought fame to my ancestors and myself, as well as profit to the fatherland. The Greeks at first were hoping to see our city destroyed in the course of the war, but then, owing to the magnificent display which I have made at the Olympic games, they went under the impression that it was bigger than it actually is: for I sent seven chariots, a number never before sent by a single person, and I won the first prize, and was second and fourth, and arranged everything else in a manner worthy of my victory. Custom considers these displays honourable, and they cannot be performed without leaving behind an impression of power. And the splendour which I have displayed at home with the production of choruses and other public services, this has excited the envy of my fellow-citizens, but, again, what foreigners gather from these displays is an impression of strength. And it is not a useless folly at all when a private individual uses his wealth not only for his own benefit, but also for that of his city, nor is it unfair that a man proud of his achievements should refuse to be put on the same foot as the others. A man in misery cannot share his misfortunes with anyone, and in the same manner as nobody courts those who are badly off, a man should accept being looked down on by those who are more prosperous, or else, let him first mete out equal measure to all, and then demand to have it meted out to him.

'I am aware that men of this kind, and those who have achieved success in any field, can cause distress in the course of their lives, particularly to their peers, but they leave behind to future generations a desire of claiming connection with them, even when there is none, and are hailed by their fatherland not as strangers or scoundrels, but as fellow-countrymen and benefactors. This is what I want to attain; this is why I am abused in my private accomplishments. But what you should consider is whether anyone would be able to manage the public affairs better than me. I have brought together the most powerful states of Peloponnese without any serious danger or expense for you; I forced the Spartans to put everything at stake in one single battle at Mantinaea, and although they came out victorious, they have never since recovered all their confidence. And so my youth, combined with my supposed folly, found the right arguments to cope with the might of the Peloponnesians, winning their confidence with its ardour. Now, don't be afraid of it, but while I am still in the flower of my age, and Nicias has a reputation for good luck, make the most of the services of us both.'

[g] Thuc. 6.26.2–29: Alcibiades and the Hermae scandal

While the Athenians were engaged with the preparations for the campaign, it so happened that the statues of Hermes in the city of Athens, the typical square pillars which are so common on the doorways of temples and private houses, in the course of the same night almost all of them had their faces mutilated. Nobody knew who had done it, but the state offered generous rewards to identify the culprits. Also, it was voted that anyone who was in possession of any information relating to acts of impiety having been perpetrated should come forward and disclose testimony in confidence, whether he was a citizen, a foreigner or a slave. The matter was taken very seriously because it seemed to be ominous for the expedition, and part of a conspiracy to bring about a revolution and overthrow the democratic constitution.

Accordingly, some metics and servants gave information not about the Hermae, but other previous mutilations of statues, perpetrated by some young men in a drunken rampage, and of mock celebrations of the Eleusinian Mysteries to be held in some private residences. Also, they said that Alcibiades was implicated in this affair. These accusations were taken up by the fiercest opponents of Alcibiades, who thought that he was the obstacle to them becoming the undisputed leaders of the people, and believed that, if he was removed, they would have the first place. Accordingly, they magnified the matter, shouting loud that the affair of the Mysteries and the mutilation of the Hermae were part of a scheme to overthrow the popular government, and that Alcibiades had been involved in all this, as demonstrated by the general, undemocratic indecency of his life and his conduct.

Alcibiades immediately defended himself from the accusations of the informers. The preparations for the campaign had been completed, and Alcibiades said he was ready before sailing to be tried if he had really been involved in any of these things. If found guilty he would pay a penalty, but if he was cleared, he should keep the command of the campaign. Alcibiades protested that they should not accept slanders against him in absence, and should rather put him to death, if he had done anything wrong. Also he asked whether if it was wiser not to send him at the head of such a large expedition, while such grave accusations were still pending upon him. His opponents however were afraid that, if he was tried immediately, Alcibiades would have the army on his side, and the populace would be softened in favour of the man owing to whom the Argives and some of the Mantinaeans had joined in the expedition. They did the utmost to have the trial postponed, bringing forward other orators who said

that they should sail at once and not delay the departure of the expedition. As for Alcibiades, he should be tried upon his return at an established time. Their plan was to bring up a more serious charge, which they would more easily bring up in his absence. Accordingly, it was resolved that Alcibiades should sail.