Corrupted and Corrupting: Thucydides’ Critique of Democracy in the Sicilian Expedition

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We maintain, on the contrary, that war is simply a continuation of political intercourse with the addition of other means.¹

-Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*

¹ von Clausewitz 1984, 603.
Abstract

In Books VI and VII of his History of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides writes his account of the Sicilian Expedition, a massive Athenian campaign in Sicily against Syracuse, its allies, and, eventually, Peloponnesian reinforcements. While it is a military campaign, Thucydides’ portrayal is political as well. Athenian commanders make decisions on the battlefield that will have political implications for them in the future. Thucydides uses this military and political environment to level a specific criticism against the democracy at Athens. Throughout his account, Thucydides argues that democracy pressures and corrupts military leaders because, if they are to retain their prominent positions, they must prioritize the political considerations over military ones. In this environment, the individual leaders matter less than the democratic system because they will all have the same political considerations. One of the prominent political considerations is how to please the people. To please the people, military leaders make decisions based on what the people believe or would believe to be true rather than what is actually true, and as a result, they often underestimate their enemies and overestimate their own military capacities. This pattern is most easily discernible by examining four moments in the Sicilian campaign: the debate on whether to send an army, the attack on Epipolae, the debate on whether to retreat after Epipolae, and the army’s final retreat and collapse. In each of these examples, the Athenian leaders Alcibiades, Nicias, and Demosthenes make errors because they try to please the people rather than make sound military decisions.
Introduction

In 415 BC during the Peace of Nicias, the Athenian demos voted to send an army and fleet to Sicily to support their ally Egesta and subdue Syracuse. It was a mammoth undertaking. The Athenians’ Expeditionary Force initially consisted of one hundred triremes, five thousand hoplites, and an assortment of light troops (Thucydides, 6.25.2), and it would receive an additional sixty five triremes and thousands more hoplites (Thucydides, 7.20.2). Athens drew these forces not only from its own resources but from its subject allies, assembling a large multinational force. Two years after it began, however, the operation ended in disaster. The fleet was destroyed, the remains of the army surrendered, and Athens found itself again in open conflict with Sparta and its allies. In Thucydides’ history, the Sicilian Expedition is a critical point. While listing the events after Pericles’ death, the historian singles out the Sicilian Expedition for its great loss of life and material (Thucydides, 2.65.11-12). To understand Thucydides’ account of the Peloponnesian War, it is necessary to understand his account of the Sicilian Expedition. In the Sicilian Expedition, Thucydides makes a specific critique of democracy and its effects on military leadership. Democratic pressures force the Athenian military command, regardless of their personal political views, to please the demos. As a result, they make poor judgements, underestimating the enemy army and overestimating their own, and rely on faulty intelligence. These pressures and flaws help to bring about the Sicilian Expedition and turn it into a disaster.

Scholars have analyzed the Athenian failure in Sicily through military, governmental, and political lenses. Many scholars have focused on the decisions of individual leaders and how these

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2 Texts and translations from Book II are from the Loeb edition, 1919. Texts and translations from Book VI are from the Loeb edition, 1921. Texts and translations from Books VII and VIII are from the Loeb edition, 1923.
contributed to the Sicilian Expedition’s failure. Certainly, individual commanders can make bad decisions, but Thucydides’ portrayal of the Sicilian Expedition focuses on the overarching failure of the interactions between the democracy and its military commanders. Donald Kagan is one of the primary scholars who focuses on individual commanders. For example, he has condemned Nicias’ leadership and instead favors Alcibiades during the debate on whether to invade Sicily. The core of his argument is that Nicias engages in dishonest political machinations and uses a rhetorical maneuver in his second speech that increases the size of the expeditionary force to a point at which failure was more likely to occur and more likely to be catastrophic, whereas Alcibiades is a more honest figure, advocating the best course for Athens out of patriotism.\(^3\) I will present four of his arguments here. In the first, he states that Nicias’ argument, that Sicily would be less threatening if Syracuse dominated it, is so obviously false that Alcibiades did not need to address it in his rebuttal.\(^4\) Kagan’s second point attacks Nicias’ argument that the less the Athenians campaign in Sicily the more intimidated the Sicilians will be. Kagan suggests that this argument ignores the possibility of an Athenian victory increasing Athens’ power of intimidation.\(^5\) Kagan’s third point is that Alcibiades is correct in arguing that Sparta does not present a threat because they would not be able to threaten Athens at sea.\(^6\) Lastly, in defense of Alcibiades, he writes that the Athenian Expeditionary Force was originally supposed to be a small force rather than the vast armada the Athenians sent and Alcibiades is therefore not being reckless in advocating for a Sicilian invasion because the stakes are low.

These arguments are flawed for a variety of reasons. His defense that Alcibiades made his speech with the understanding that the invasion fleet would be small, for example, is

\(^3\) Kagan 1981, 190.
\(^4\) Ibid., 177.
\(^5\) Ibid., 177-178.
\(^6\) Ibid., 183.
undercut when Alcibiades does not speak against increasing the size of the fleet. It can be concluded that it was an acceptable arrangement for him. Additionally, his criticism of Nicias is not fully grounded in the text. Nicias’ analysis of occupying Sicily and the vulnerability Athens may have to a Sparta invasion does not fit with Kagan’s general narrative that Nicias is a shady politician. It seems more likely that Nicias makes these arguments out of a genuine concern for his city even if Kagan disagrees with his conclusions.7

More critically for my argument, however, Kagan does not give enough attention to the larger democratic system. Nicias and Alcibiades are not having an academic discussion on the merits of a Sicilian campaign. They are speaking to the demos. The democratic environment colors their arguments, as it does the other discussions and decisions before and during the Sicilian Expedition, and to criticize one speaker and praise another without reading their speeches in the democratic context is to give an incomplete picture of the situation. My intention is to provide a reading of the Sicilian Expedition in the democratic context. Four decisions in particular reveal the failures and corrupting influence of the democracy: the Sicilian debate, the assault on Epipolae, Epipolae’s aftermath, and the final retreat and collapse of the Athenian Expeditionary Force. At each of these points, Thucydides reveals how democracy can corrupt leaders’ judgements. The leaders in these situations, Alcibiades, Demosthenes, and Nicias, make their decisions after underestimating their enemy and overestimating their own army. These inaccurate judgements are based on faulty military intelligence, which more careful examination would avoid, and the leaders make them to please the people and respond to the threat of rival speakers. As a result, there is a wide gulf between the Athenian command’s understanding of their military capabilities in comparison to their enemy and reality. This pattern leads to the

7 A fuller rebuttal of Kagan can be found on page 10.
Sicilian campaign and turns it into a catastrophe. Thucydides is careful, however, to emphasize that, while individual commanders may make mistakes, the democratic system itself is to blame for the disaster because it corrupts the judgements of otherwise capable commanders.
Section I: Underestimating the Enemy

One effect democracy can have is that it leads commanders to underestimate the strength of their enemy. In order to carry out military operations, it is necessary to have an accurate view of the enemy. Deciding whether to attack or defend, how many troops to attack with, and what to do after an attack requires a commander to have a thorough understanding of where their enemy is strongest and where he is weakest so that they may maximize the benefits of his attack.

Before and during the Sicilian Expedition, the Athenian leaders are repeatedly shown to underestimate the strength of the Sicilians. This propensity for underestimation is first on display during the debates before the Expedition at Athens, when Alcibiades argues that it will be easy to conquer the Sicilians. Thucydides sets up Nicias and Hermocrates as reasonable speakers and so highlights Alcibiades’ underestimation of the enemy with an implicit comparison with the blustering Syracusan demagogue Athenagoras. Later on during the campaign, Thucydides again presents Nicias as the implicit voice of reason in comparison to Demosthenes, who argues that the Athenians should attack the Syracusans uphill at night against a wall at Epipolae. Thucydides also makes sure, however, not to present Nicias as immune to underestimating the enemy. He refuses to withdraw the Athenian Expeditionary Force after the failure at Epipolae in large part because he underestimates the Syracusans, and, when he relents and tries to withdraw the Athenian Expeditionary Force, he underestimates the Syracusans in the same ways that Alcibiades did in his speech. Thucydides’ narrative, therefore, is not meant to show the flaws of individual Athenian commanders but instead to show how they all made the same mistakes in underestimating the enemy. If figures as different as Alcibiades and Nicias make the same
mistakes, Thucydides shows, the problem is not the individual commander, but the Athenian system.

Athenagoras is the archetypical demagogue. Kagan compares him to Cleon because he is persuasive, passionate, unconcerned with logic, willing to make personal attacks against his opponents, and wrong in his facts. While I agree with this reading, Kagan seems not to recognize that Thucydides implicitly compares him to Alcibiades. Both speak second in a series of speeches in their cities’ assemblies, and both respond to less demagogic speakers. A careful reading of Athenagoras’ speech next to Alcibiades’ from the debate at Athens reveals similarities between them that typify the problems Thucydides sees in demagogic leadership. To begin, both speakers portray themselves as the defenders and servants of their states, but in doing so, they prioritize themselves and show that they are examples of the crowd-pleasing speakers Thucydides so often criticizes. When Athenagoras turns to his opponents, he compares them to previous agitators who tried to seize power for themselves and presents himself as the protector of democracy:

“ὦν ἐγὼ πειράσομαι, ἣν γε ὑμεῖς ἐθέλητε ἐπεσθαι, μὴποτε ἐφ’ ἡμῶν τι περιδεῖν γενέσθαι, ὑμᾶς μὲν τοὺς πολλοὺς πείθον τοὺς δὲ τὰ τοιαῦτα μηχανωμένους κολάζον” (Thucydides, 6.38.3-4).

His attacks on his opponents’ motivations rather than their arguments and his portrayal of himself as the defender of the people demonstrate his demagogic tendencies as discussed by Kagan. He is thus the archetypical demagogue. Likewise, Alcibiades also inserts himself as the true defender of the Democracy, which suggests he takes the role of a demagogue. He boasts of his contribution to Athens’ international prestige by winning many prizes for chariot racing at the
Olympics (Thucydides, 6.16.2). Rather bizarrely, he also boasts of his involvement in the Battle of Mantinea (Thucydides, 6.16.6), an Athenian failure that he claimed as a success because the Spartans are still recovering three years later. He thus transforms a significant military defeat into an opportunity to portray himself as a defender of the state from external threats just as Athenagoras portrays himself as the defender of the state from internal threats.

One of the similarities between Athenagoras and Alcibiades is that they both assert their cities will defeat their enemies with ease. This assertion reveals that they underestimate their enemies. When Athenagoras begins speaking, he argues that the Athenians will not invade (Thucydides 6.36.4). He is therefore underestimating Athenian daring. Even though the Athenian army is en route, he does not believe they will land, presumably because he thinks they lack the fortitude to do so. Alcibiades similarly underestimates the Sicilians. The Sicilians, according to him, are individually loyal to themselves. They try to take from the common interest and are not bound by loyalty to a single nation, and as a result, they are not able to coordinate with each and act for the greater good (Thucydides, 6.17.3.4). As a result, they will scatter in battle “ταχὺ δὲ ἄν ώς ἐκαστὸς, εἰ τί καθ’ ἡδονὴν λέγοιτο, προσχωροῖεν” (Thucydides, 6.17.4). Alcibiades also claims, contradicting Nicias’ earlier assertion, that the Syracusans lack heavy infantry, and he makes no mention of Syracuse’s advantage in cavalry (Thucydides, 6.16.5). The initial Athenian force had only thirty horses, and it is therefore likely that the Athenians, egged on by Alcibiades, did not consider the Syracusan cavalry a real threat. (Thucydides, 6.43.1). In this way, he underestimates the Syracusans. It should be noted that Athenagoras and Alcibiades are predicting opposite outcomes. Athenagoras says that the Syracusans would win if there is an attack, and

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10 By the time the Athenians have assembled a fleet, it is clear that they have the resources to threaten Syracuse.
11 “But quickly, if anything were said to please them, they would each for himself come over to our side” (Thucydides 6.17.4).
Alcibiades says the Athenians would. My purpose, however, is to examine the styles of their arguments, which are similar. Both speakers portray their cities’ enemies as far weaker than they are. Athenagoras is wrong because the Athenians will, of course, land in Sicily and carry on a campaign. Alcibiades’ prediction that the campaign will be easy is also wrong because the Syracusans will prove a difficult opponent with a powerful force of cavalry. Both orators therefore demonstrate a blustering underestimation of their cities’ enemies.

Before discussing the role of Nicias and Athenagoras as foils to the demagogues Alcibiades and Athenagoras, it is necessary to rebut Kagan and write in Nicias’ defense. Kagan’s characterization of Nicias as a shady politician in the Sicilian debate leaves out facts that are inconvenient for his argument, and it is in fact Alcibiades who uses corrupted judgement. Thucydides uses Nicias, as well as Hermocrates, to provide a contrast to Alcibiades and Athenagoras. Kagan’s first point is, as he admits, unsubstantiated. He claims that Nicias’ argument, that Sicily would present the least threat if Syracuse ruled it, seems to use stretched logic, but Kagan does not provide any more evidence for this other than writing “all this, of course, was such nonsense as to require no refutation, and, in fact, Alcibiades made no reference to it in his rebuttal.”12 That Alcibiades does not reference this point is not proof that Nicias was wrong. It could, in fact, indicate that Alcibiades did not know how to counter it, which would make it a stronger argument. Kagan’s lack of evidence in the text to support his view leaves his own argument unsupported. In his second point, Kagan asserts that Nicias does not address the possibility of an Athenian victory when in fact he does. Nicias argues that an Athenian victory would lead to Athens ruling a large, rebellious population (Thucydides, 6.11.1). This situation could drain Athenian resources, and the campaign could prove to be more trouble than it is.

worth. It is evident, however, that Nicias does not think it is likely that Athens will crush the Syracusans, but that Kagan does think it probable does not make it so. Additionally, in making this argument, Kagan himself ignores the possibility of an Athenian defeat, which would destroy Athens’ intimidating reputation amongst the Sicilians. Kagan’s third point, that Alcibiades is right to argue that Sparta does not present a threat because it is a land power, ignores Nicias’ characterization of Athens’ situation in his speech, in which he points out that Athens is still recovering from the war and the plague (Thucydides, 6.12.1). Sparta was also a land power before the peace, and, since Athens is still recovering, Sparta would have been able to invade and cause renewed devastation. Perhaps, it could be argued, Athens would survive in the immediate term, but Sparta nevertheless presents a threat. In arguing otherwise, Kagan ignores parts of the text. Kagan’s weak arguments should prompt a reconsideration of Nicias as a shady politician.

Rather than shady politicians, Nicias and Hermocrates serve as contrasts to the blustering Alcibiades and Athenagoras. Unlike their opponents, Nicias and Hermocrates provide sober estimations of their enemies’ capacities. Nicias opens his speech by discussing the threat Athens’ Peloponnesian enemies still pose. He argues that Athens is not as secure at home as the assembly may think and that Athens should secure its matters at home before expanding the empire abroad (Thucydides, 6.10.5). Sparta and its allies are still hostile, and the peace treaty they signed is not a guarantee against an attack if Athens sends an army to Sicily and leaves Attica exposed (Thucydides, 6.10.1-4). He is also concerned that the Syracusans will be a more difficult enemy than Alcibiades has made them out to be. After Alcibiades gives his speech in response, Nicias mentions that Syracuse, having an abundance of hoplites and cavalry and being far from Athens, will be difficult to conquer.\textsuperscript{13} He also points out that, even if they did conquer Sicily, it is a large,
powerful island with a large population, and it would be nearly impossible to station enough troops there to occupy it (Thucydides, 6.11.1). Nicias’ sober reasoning highlights Alcibiades’ tendency to underestimate Athens’ enemies. Sparta, Athens’ main enemy in the war, is still capable. In contrast to Alcibiades, he also argues that the Syracusans will be a powerful foe.

Hermocrates provides a similar contrast to Athenagoras. Some readers may believe, at first glance, that Hermocrates’ speech has more in common with Alcibiades’ than with Nicias’. He speaks with some bluster and says he does not believe that the Athenians have a chance of victory because the Sicilians will unite against them (Thucydides, 6.33.4) and because, since the Athenians are so far from home, they will have difficulty resupplying (Thucydides, 6.33.5). But, as will be argued later, confidence is not the same as cockiness. The more proper comparison is to Nicias. Both are pointing to threats to their cities’ national security that have so far gone unnoticed or unaddressed. In addition to Athenagoras, some Syracusans refuse to believe that an Athenian attack is imminent (Thucydides, 6.32.3). Just as the Athenians seem not to have considered their city’s security at home, the Syracusans ignore the coming invasion. Hermocrates, however, urges the city to believe that the threat is real and that the city must take the proper precautions (Thucydides, 6.33.2). He therefore gives a proper assessment of the Athenian threat without underestimating them, and in this way, he appears as a responsible politician like Nicias, in contrast with Athenagoras and Alcibiades.

Since the reader knows that Nicias’ and Hermocrates’ assessments are factually correct, they are more likely to view them as not underestimating the enemy. In Nicias’ case, the Spartans renew the war against Athens soon after it sends the expedition, and cavalry proves to be one of Syracuse’s most important advantages. In Hermocrates’ case, the Athenians send not only an expedition but a vast armada to conquer Syracuse. The reader presumably knows that the
speakers are correct, and he is therefore more likely to view their analyses as accurate. As a result, he understands that they do not underestimate their enemies in contrast to Alcibiades and Athenagoras. The differences in their speeches, namely Hermocrates’ confidence in Syracuse’s success in the coming campaign, can also be explained by the reader’s understanding that Syracuse wins. The reader knows Syracuse will win and is therefore willing to view Hermocrates’ confidence as justified. Just because Hermocrates demonstrates some patriotic confidence does not mean that he does not also present a sober analysis of the situation. The fact that the speakers end up being right makes the reader more likely to view their speeches as sober analyses that properly estimate the strengths of their cities’ enemies. The speeches share enough stylistic similarities to warrant a comparison and, consequently, a comparison of Alcibiades’ and Athenagoras’ rebuttals against them.

Later in the campaign, the Athenians receive fresh reinforcements and a new commander, Demosthenes, which temporarily tips the battle in the Athenians’ favor. These are a fresh group of soldiers unwearied by the campaign, and Thucydides writes that the Syracusans and their allies are as worried as they were in the beginning of the campaign:

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καὶ τοῖς μὲν Συρακοσίοις καὶ ξυμμάχοις κατάπληξις ἐν τῷ αὐτίκα οὐκ ὀλίγη ἐγένετο (Thucydides, 7.42.2).^{14}
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The inclusion of αὐτίκα serves to link the Syracusans’ new worries to their old worries from when the Athenians arrived at the beginning of the campaign. The Athenians also gain some strength (ῥόμη) when the reinforcements arrive (7.42.1). This situation is similar to the situation when the fleet first left Athens. The Athenians become nervous as they began to comprehend the enormity of their task, but they take courage because of the strength (ῥόμη) of the force (6.30.2).

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14 “The Syracusans and their allies were seized with no little consternation at the moment” (Thucydides 7.42.2).
Thucydides is therefore suggesting that the Athenians have made a new clean start, as they had in the beginning of the campaign and have to decide how to spend their renewed power.

According to Joseph Roisman, the Athenians have four choices: attack the forts at Plemyrium, attack the Syracusan navy again, attack the heights of Epipolae, or withdraw. Demosthenes decides to attack, and his thought process reflects the Sicilian debate. Although he does not provide Nicias’ thoughts, Thucydides frames Demosthenes’ decision to attack Epipolae in opposition to Nicias. Demosthenes attacks because he does not want to dither and lose the advantage of his fresh troops as Nicias had (Thucydides, 7.42.3). Nicias does not say anything, but Thucydides frames Nicias as an opposition figure by contrasting his earlier lack of action with Demosthenes’ energy. Nicias also does not partake in the assault (Thucydides, 7.43.2), which could be an indication of his misgivings, although he might have been too sick to go on the front lines. This framing puts Demosthenes in a similar position to Alcibiades in the earlier debate on the Expedition. Alcibiades and Demosthenes urge aggressive military action, while Nicias appears a cautious figure, either arguing against military action or acting as a contrast to Demosthenes. The military action Alcibiades and Demosthenes call for is also similar. In the debate, Alcibiades argues for a knock-out strike against the Syracusans to decide the campaign in one battle (Thucydides, 6.18.4-5). Demosthenes’ night attack seems to be the realization of this view, and, in his thinking, he will make the attack and either win or withdraw rather than slowly let his army drain away (7.42.5).

In deciding this plan, however, Demosthenes reveals that he is underestimating the enemy just as Alcibiades did, since his plan relies on an underestimation of Sicilian strength. To

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15 Roisman 1993, 57.
16 Alcibiades does argue for a more deliberate campaign after the Expedition sets out in 6.48, but the similarity between his proposal at the debate and Demosthenes’ thoughts before Epipolae provide the basis for the comparison.
attack uphill at night against a wall without modern communications equipment, uniforms, or flares is so brazen that Demosthenes must have underestimated the Sicilians in his planning. While, according to Roisman, a surprise attack might have succeeded, the wall was an obvious target for the Athenians, and, without surprise, the Athenians would not have a chance.\textsuperscript{17} No capable enemy would be defeated by his attack. Demosthenes, however, is unconcerned with Sicilian resistance. He examines the Syracusan defenses and believes that it will be easy to overwhelm the defenders:

\begin{quote}

$\text{ὁρὸν \ τὸ \ παρατείχισμα \ τῶν \ Συρακοσίων, \ ὃ \ ἐκόλυσαν \ περιτείχίσαι \ σφᾶς \ τούς \ Αθηναίους, \ άπλοῦν \ τε \ ὃν \ καί, \ εἰ \ κρατήσει \ ὑπὸ \ ὑπὸ \ τῶν \ Ἐπιπολῶν \ ὃς \ ἀναβάσεως \ καὶ \ αὐθεύς \ τοῦ \ ἐν \ αὐταίς \ στρατοπέδου, \ ραδίως \ ἄν \ αὐτὸ \ λιμφθέν (σου \ γὰρ

$\text{ὑπομεῖναι \ ἄν \ σφᾶς \ συνένα) (Thucydides, 7.42.4).}\textsuperscript{18}

\end{quote}

Demosthenes believes that, since the Syracusans are defending Epipolae with only one wall, it will be possible to defeat them, and once they break into the Syracusan camp, it will be easy \textit{(ραδίως)} to defeat them because they will all be gone, presumably having fled or been killed. This assessment is similar to Alcibiades’ earlier view that the Sicilians would be divided during an Athenian invasion, but it is in contrast to the stiff resistance they have already put up throughout the campaign.

Thucydides also seems to underline Demosthenes’ underestimation in his account of the battle. The Athenians successfully take the Syracusan wall, but a contingent of Thebans stop them shortly afterwards (Thucydides, 7.43.5-7). The engagement with the Thebans presumably occurred away from the wall near the Sicilian camp, which Demosthenes thought would be abandoned. Instead, the Athenians run into the stiffest resistance of the night by the Sicilian

\textsuperscript{17} Roisman 1993, 58.

\textsuperscript{18} “Accordingly, seeing that the Syracusan cross-wall, by which they had prevented the Athenians from completing their investment, was a single one, and that, if one should get control of the ascent to Epipolae and after that of the camp upon it, the wall itself could easily be taken—for the enemy would not then stand his ground against them” (Thucydides, 7.42.4).
camp and end up losing the battle. To specifically mention Demosthenes’ belief that there would be no resistance at the camp before showing that there is in fact a great deal of resistance emphasizes Demosthenes’ failure in judging the enemy. In his narrative, Thucydides is thus able to show that Demosthenes’ failure is a result of his underestimation of the enemy.

It seems, then, that Alcibiades and Demosthenes were guilty of underestimating the enemy. So far, Nicias stands out as an exception. Shortly after Epipolae, however, it becomes clear that he is not innocent of underestimating the enemy. When the generals gather to decide what to do next, he refuses to withdraw the Athenian Expeditionary Force, in large part because he underestimates the Syracusans. His most significant point is that the Syracusans are financially on the ropes. Nicias says they have to pay for mercenaries, fortifications, a navy, and all the other necessities of war (Thucydides, 7.48.5). They are already in debt, and, if they do not pay a part of the mercenaries, their whole cause will collapse (Thucydides, 7.48.5). This portrayal suggests that the Syracusans are on the brink of losing and that, so long as the Athenians remain, they will soon fall off the edge. This portrayal is, however, a manipulation of the facts. The Syracusans, of course, had to pay for their defenses, but the Athenians had to provide upkeep for their army too. Even if Nicias’ assertion that the Syracusans are in a worse financial situation is true, it is not as if the Athenians were free from paying for their army, so it is a questionable assertion that the Syracusans are much worse off than the Athenians. Additionally, the military situation was such that the Syracusans were not about to surrender, which can be demonstrated by looking at an earlier example of when they were ready to give up. When the Corinthian commander Gongylus first arrived in Syracuse leading Peloponnesian reinforcements, he came to the Syracusans “καταλαβὼν αύτοῦς περὶ ἀπαλλαγῆς τοῦ πολέμου
μὲλλοντας” (Thucydides, 7.2.2). Their somber mood was presumably from the fact that the Athenians had made progress on their wall and were about to encircle the city (Thucydides, 7.2.4). The Syracusans’ resolve grows when they see the Corinthian ships and learn that more Peloponnesian reinforcements are on the way (Thucydides, 7.2.3). In this instance, the Syracusans discussed surrender because military defeat was imminent, and a strengthened military position strengthened their resolve. That episode is in sharp contrast to their situation after Epipolae. After Epipolae, they had just repulsed a major assault on a critical high ground, and their strength was renewed (Thucydides, 7.46.1). They had erected monuments to celebrate their success (Thucydides, 7.45.1). They received reinforcements from Sicilian and Peloponnesian allies (Thucydides, 7.50.1). In contrast to their earlier selves in the beginning of Book VII and the demoralized Athenians at this moment, the Syracusans seem to be optimistic or at least more confident because they are in a stronger military position. It seems more likely that the Syracusans are readying themselves to carry on the war than to surrender, and it would be perplexing for them to consider surrender when they are in an advantageous position even if their debts are high.

In a surprising turn of events, Nicias, in refusing to withdraw, mirrors the earlier arguments of his rival, Alcibiades, during the Sicilian debate. Alcibiades undercounted Syracusan hoplites, and he ignored the threat Syracusan cavalry might pose in a drawn out conflict (Thucydides, 6.17.5). He extolled the Athenian fleet, and he praised the energy and wisdom he and Nicias would bring as commanders (Thucydides, 6.17.1). Nicias’ position is similar to Alcibiades’ in his speech. Nicias similarly underestimates the Syracusans by focusing on their financial problems in isolation from other factors. Just as Alcibiades discounted

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19 “Finding the Syracusans on the point of holding an assembly to discuss the abandonment of the war” (Thucydides, 7.2.2).
Syracusan hoplites, Nicias does not believe the Syracuse have the financial capacity to continue in the war. Nicias also ignores inconvenient facts, just as Alcibiades ignored the Sicilian advantage in cavalry. He does not address how the Athenians should continue in the face of a powerful enemy that has just warded off a large attack. Should the Athenians launch another attack? Should they send for more reinforcements? Nicias does not pose these questions and instead advocates only for the status quo. This inaction demonstrates that he cannot come to terms with Syracusan power, just as Alcibiades could not in his speech.

In the Sicilian Expedition, the Athenians have a number of different commanders. Alcibiades is young, dynamic, and power hungry. Nicias is cautious and deliberate. Demosthenes is active and aggressive. All of these commanders, however, share a key flaw. They fail to accurately assess the strength of their enemy. During the debate, Alcibiades writes the Sicilians off as a self-interested mob. Demosthenes believes they will lose a battle in which the odds are stacked in their favor. Even Nicias, the shining example of thoughtful leadership during the Sicilian debate, is not immune to this pattern and underestimates the Sicilians, both when he refuses to withdraw the Athenian Expeditionary Force after Epipolae and when he finally withdraws and meets with disaster. Because there are so many commanders with the same flaw, the fault must lie not with the individuals but with the pressures surrounding them. The system surrounding the Athenian leaders is causing them to have poor judgement and to underestimate their enemy.
Section II: Overestimating Themselves

Underestimating the enemy can lead to mistakes in a military campaign because a commander does not have a proper estimation of his army’s strength in relation to his enemy’s. The Athenian commanders exacerbate this problem by overestimating themselves, enlarging the gap between their view of their army’s strength in relation to the Sicilians’ and reality. From the earliest rhetoric in the Sicilian debate, through Epipolae, to the final disaster, the Athenian generals are unable to realize that their army is less capable than they think it is. Just as was the case when they underestimated the Sicilians, no Athenian commander is innocent of this mistake, and it brings about the failure of the Sicilian expedition.

The earliest examples of the Athenians overestimating themselves can be found in the Sicilian debate. Comparing Alcibiades, Athenagoras, Nicias, and Hermocrates again proves useful in determining the failures of Alcibiades and Athenagoras. Alcibiades and Athenagoras are overly attuned to the people, and they tell them what they want to hear rather than what is true. To begin, Athenagoras overestimates the Sicilians’ capacity to wage war. He states that it is the Athenians who should be happy that the Sicilians do not invade Attica, so many and so great are the Sicilian cities:

\[ \text{ἐπεὶ ἐγὼ γε ἀγαπάν οἶμαι αὐτοὺς ὅτι οὐχ ἡμεῖς ἐπ' ἐκείνους ἐρχόμεθα, πόλεις τοσαύτα καὶ οὕτω μεγάλαι (Thucydides, 6.36.4).} \]

Obviously, Athenagoras is employing some hyperbole, but his statement nevertheless reveals that he is overestimating the Sicilians. Even if he does not believe the Sicilians could invade Athens, he certainly believes the Sicilians are mighty enough to sweep the Athenian

\[ \text{20 “For I myself think that they are content that we do not come against them, being so numerous and so powerful” (Thucydides, 6.36.4).} \]
Expeditionary Force back into the sea. Later in his speech, for example, he cites the Syracusans’ advantage in cavalry as decisive and argues that they will be able to keep the Athenians in their camp (Thucydides, 6.37.2). While these assertions are questionable, they were likely applauded. By praising Syracuse, Athenagoras praises his audience, which is of course popular. At Athens, Athenagoras’ counterpart, Alcibiades, makes a series of overconfident arguments. Before he speaks, there is an implication that he believes or at least sides with the Egestaeans. Thucydides does not explicitly claim that Alcibiades believes the Egestaeans, but he shows that the Athenians in general were tempted by stories of Egestaeans wealth and support (Thucydides, 6.8.2). It is not a stretch, then, to argue that Alcibiades is playing off of these beliefs by arguing that the Athenians should assist the Egestaeans regardless of whether he personally believes them. Alcibiades’ position, therefore, is built on overconfidence from shallow intelligence. A more thorough examination would have surely seen through the Egestaeans’ charade (Thucydides, 6.8.2). Alcibiades’ position rests on overconfidence in the Egestaean allies to provide the Athenian Expeditionary Force with support, which it of course fails to do. Alcibiades also seems to be overconfident in the capacity of the Athenian army. Alcibiades extolls the Athenian fleet, praising the energy and wisdom he and Nicias would bring as commanders (Thucydides, 6.17.1). Even if the Syracusans prove too difficult to conquer, Alcibiades argues that the risks in the expedition are reduced because the Athenian navy will be able to reembark the army and bring them home (Thucydides, 6.18.5). He ties these arguments together by singling out Athens as a special city that cannot operate like others if it is to survive:

καὶ οὐκ ἐκ τοῦ αὕτου ἐπισκεπτέον ύμῖν τοῖς ἄλλοις τὸ ἕσσει, εἰ μὴ καὶ τὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα ἐξ τὸ ὄμοιον μεταλήψεσθε (Thucydides, 6.18.3).21

21 “And you cannot regard a pacific policy in the same light as other states might, unless you will change your practices also to correspond with theirs” (Thucydides, 6.18.3).
In all of these examples, Alcibiades demonstrates an overconfidence in the Athenian Expeditionary Force. According to him, its commanders are world-class, its fleet not subject to attrition or Syracusan resistance, and its service is to an exceptional city that must conquer others if it is to survive. Like with Athenagoras, some of his overconfidence can be chalked up to hyperbole, but his statements reveal how he interacts with the audience. His praise of Athens is hyperbolic, and since he is speaking to the Athenian demos, he is praising his audience. By winning the favor of his audience, Alcibiades hopes to attain more power and prominence, but it comes at a cost. Like Athenagoras, Alcibiades makes a speech with an overconfidence in his city’s army that extends past the more reasoned patriotism of Hermocrates.

Athenagoras’ and Alcibiades’ arguments are proven to be based on overconfidence because they are shown to be factually wrong as the campaign progresses. Athenagoras’ assertion that Sicilian cavalry would carry all before it is dubious at best. The Syracusan cavalry is important during the campaign, and, while it does restrict Athenian movement, it does not completely shut up the Athenian expeditionary force in its camp. Alcibiades’ arguments are similarly false. The Egestaeans lied in order to get the Athenians to send their army to support them. The Athenian army hardly has the chance to enjoy the supposed genius of a joint Alcibiades-Nicias command, since Alcibiades flees into exile shortly after the Athenian Expeditionary Force lands, and Nicias alone is a flawed commander. Alcibiades’ insurance plan in case of a defeat on land, the Athenian navy, loses against the Syracusans in a final climatic battle in the Great Harbor. Jordan in fact argues that the Athenian expeditionary force was underfunded and poorly equipped from the start and so was unlikely to conquer the whole of

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22 The Syracusan cavalry advantage was important to the Athenian defeat, but it did not paralyze the Athenians, as Athenagoras said it would, until the very end of the campaign (Thucydides, VII.78.6). Before that, the Athenians were able to move between cities and take up new positions.
Sicily. And Alcibiades’ vision of Athens as a golden city that must always expand is laid low with the Athenian Expeditionary Force at the Assinarus River. Additionally, Jordan points out that the Athenian Expeditionary Force was manned with foreigners who were not committed to the Athenian cause, so it is questionable how Athenian the Athenian Expeditionary force actually was. Thucydides’ reader has this hindsight, and Thucydides uses this knowledge in portraying the arguments of Athenagoras and Alcibiades present as overconfident.

In contrast to the overconfident Athenagoras and Alcibiades, Thucydides has Nicias and Hermocrates present more accurate estimations on the very subjects Athenagoras and Alcibiades discuss in their speeches. Nicias, for example, questions the Egestaeans’ motives. He says that they have little to lose by asking them to help but everything to gain (Thucydides, 6.12.2). He also undermines Alcibiades’ point that Athens is a city that must keep expanding. He points out that some of Athens’ subject allies, such as the Chalcidians, have not been fully subjugated and are liable to revolt again if Athens sends a large force to Sicily (Thucydides, 6.10.5). In contrast to Alcibiades’ dream of an ever-expanding Athens, Nicias portrays the city as vulnerable. It must deal with matters at home, he argues, before it pursues foreign conquests. Nicias’ view of Athens is therefore a contrast with Alcibiades’. He lacks Alcibiades’ overconfidence.

Similarly, Hermocrates does not overestimate the capacity of Syracuse to resist the Athenian invasion. While Athenagoras boasts that the Syracusans would be able to repulse any Athenian army, Hermocrates urges the city to build a fleet and prepare for a land invasion (Thucydides, 6.33.2). The implication is that, although he may be confident that Syracuse can defeat the Athenian army, he is not overconfident. Unlike Athenagoras, he realizes that Syracuse

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23 Jordan 2000, 71.
24 Jordan 2000, 74.
is not invincible and must make preparations to defend itself. Thucydides uses both speakers to provide more reasoned contrasts to the demagogic Athenagoras and Alcibiades.

Thucydides’ narrative affirms that Nicias and Hermocrates were right not to be overconfident in their cities’ capabilities. In Nicias’ case, the Egestaeans are not able to provide the support they promised. They had, in fact, tricked the Athenian envoys during their visit by providing gold and silver dining utensils that they had gathered from the whole city and its neighbors (Thucydides, 6.46.3). The Athenians are also have difficulty gathering other Sicilian allies. As Kagan notes, the Athenians lose in part because they never win over many Sicilians outside of Catana and Egesta; even in the first year of the campaign, they are unable to win over many Sicilian allies, complicating their logistical situation.25 In Hermocrates’ case, the Athenians send not only an expedition but a vast armada to conquer Syracuse. Thucydides therefore affirms both speakers’ points, in contrast to the failings of Athenagoras and Alcibiades. There are, of course, some differences in the content of their speeches. Hermocrates is more confident in Syracuse’s success in the coming campaign than Nicias is in Athens’, but Hermocrates has more reason to be confident, as shown in Syracuse’s eventual victory. Just because Hermocrates demonstrates some patriotic confidence does not mean that he does not also present a sober analysis of the situation. The accuracy of his analysis is reinforced by the fact that the reader knows the Athenian force does arrive and that the campaign does end in disaster. He is therefore more likely to view the speakers who are correct in their analysis as sober, deliberate individuals who may not be able to divine the future but are closer to it than their opponents are. The speeches share enough stylistic similarities to warrant a comparison and, consequently, a comparison of the rebuttals against them.

The Athenians have another intelligence failure before and during the attack at Epipolae, according to Roisman, and this deficiency is a reflection of the Athenians’ original shortcomings in planning the campaign. The Athenians had options other than attacking Epipolae. Attacking the isolated forts at Plemyrium or attacking the Syracusans at sea would have given the Athenians advantages in numbers or experience, but by attacking uphill at night into the jaws of the Syracusan lines, the Athenians gave their opponents the advantage. A night assault before modern communications or even standardized uniforms was likely to present another challenge, yet other than using a watchword, the Athenians took no precautions, nor did they have a contingency plan if the operation failed. Roisman argues that these shortcomings in preparations were the result of insufficient intelligence brought on by a determination to attack the enemy as soon as possible. Thucydides mentions, for example, that some of the new soldiers had difficulty returning to their camps because they were not familiar with the land (Thucydides, 7.44.8). The lack of Athenian preparations in their assault is reflective of their previous deficiencies in planning the Sicilian campaign. According to the conclusions of one author, the Athenians invaded Sicily with little intelligence. Supporting this view is the fact that the Athenians invaded Sicily with the belief that the Egestaeans would fund the operation (Thucydides, 6.8.2). The Athenians thus find themselves in unfamiliar terrain, both literally and politically. They are, for example, surprised when their local allies refused to provide soldiers and supplies, which suggests that they did not have a solid understanding of how they would

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26 Ibid., 57.
28 Ibid., 63.
29 Thompson 2017.
carry out the campaign.\textsuperscript{30} The lack of intelligence for the assault on Epipolae reflects the higher level lack of intelligence in deciding to send the expeditionary force.

Why would Demosthenes rely on incomplete intelligence while planning a potentially decisive attack on an enemy stronghold? Like Alcibiades before him, Demosthenes seems to have been overconfident in the Athenian Expeditionary Force and did not accurately assess their military capacity. The very idea of attacking fixed defenses under less than ideal circumstances reveals some overconfidence, but Thucydides brings Demosthenes’ overconfidence into greater focus by mentioning his earlier daytime attack. Before the night attack, Demosthenes ordered an attack on Epipolae during the day, but the Syracusans repulsed the Athenians (Thucydides, 7.43.1). After failing under easier circumstances, Demosthenes believes that a far more complicated night attack would succeed. This bizarre thinking can be attributed to a brazen overconfidence. Demosthenes believes that his army is good enough to win where it previously lost under easier circumstances. He stacks the odds against his army and still believes it will win, which demonstrates his overconfidence.

This overconfidence can be observed in the Athenian army itself during the assault itself, and it leads to catastrophe. At first, the Athenians are successful. They charge the Syracusan wall and force them from their first line of defense on Epipolae (Thucydides, 7.43.3). This success is, however, short lived as the Athenians pursued the defenders. Thucydides recounts that, having encountered success, they rushed the Syracusan lines “ἐν ἄταξιᾳ” in an attempt to keep the Syracusans from regrouping, but they were turned back by a stout Boeotian defense (Thucydides, 7.43.7). The brief taste of success seems to give the Athenians more confidence, which leads them to pursue the attack chaotically. Additionally, the decision to pursue the

Syracusans immediately reflects Demosthenes’ decision to attack quickly. Demosthenes wants to rush against the Syracusans as soon as he lands, even though he lacked sufficient intelligence. Similarly, the Athenians here attack the Syracusans without deliberation. While the Athenians pursue Sicilians, the only reference Thucydides gives to their thoughts is their desire to attack while they have momentum and the Sicilians are on the defensive:

αὐτοὶ μὲν εὐθὺς ἔχορον ἐς τὸ πρόσθεν, ὡς τῇ παροῦσῃ ὑμνῆ τοῦ περαίνοντος ὡν ἐνεκα ἦλθον μὴ βραδεῖς γένονται (Thucydides, 7.43.5).  

The overconfidence of the general Demosthenes, and, indeed, of the whole Athenian assembly, is reflected in the subcommanders and tactical units. Their aggression is based in part on overconfidence that they can quickly defeat the Syracusans, just as Demosthenes and the Athenians thought they could. This thinking, however, ends in disaster when the Boeotians rout the Athenians at the Syracusan camp. The Athenian attack devolves into chaos as soldiers from the rear of the column run into those retreating from the frontlines. In the dark of night, these soldiers often mistake each other for the enemy (Thucydides, 7.44.3). Thucydides contrasts this chaotic scene with the Syracusan defense which, while bloody, had to stay in one place and withstand attacks while the Athenians were in dispersed groups (Thucydides, 7.44.4-5). A more thoughtful, less confident attack might have prevented the Athenians from making a disorganized attack against the Syracusans just as it would have prevented the attack altogether or dissuaded the Athenians from sending the Athenian Expeditionary Force to Sicily.

After the Assault on Epipolae, the Athenian army is wrecked. When the generals deliberate over what to do, according to Thucydides, they understand that they are not succeeding (Thucydides, 7.47.1-2). They see that the army suffered from disease, which is made

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31 “This body of Athenians then straightway pressed forward, in order that, taking advantage of their present impulse, they might not be too late to accomplish the purpose for which they had come” (Thucydides, 7.43.5).
worse by the surrounding marshes (Thucydides, 7.47.2). The army’s morale also seems to be low. The generals understand the soldiers are being worn down by the campaign and their long stay away from home (Thucydides, 7.47.2). Weakened resolve can threaten an army’s military capacity, and a mutiny can end it altogether. After the assault on Epipolae fails, Demosthenes, in accordance with his original plan, advocates for withdrawal, (Thucydides, 7.47.3). Demosthenes’ argument that they withdraw is sensible under these conditions. He argues that the Athenians would be more useful at home fighting the Spartans than floundering on a far off island (Thucydides, 7.47.4). This strategic retreat would also end the army’s slow degradation and save the city’s resources. In order to withdraw the Athenian Expeditionary Force, however, he must persuade the other generals.

Nicias, in contrast to his earlier level-headedness, argues against Demosthenes and says that the army should remain. This poor judgement results from Nicias’ overestimation of the Athenian army and its ability to continue the war, and the contrast between Nicias and Demosthenes reveals Nicias to be unreasonably confident the Athenian Expeditionary Force. Demosthenes has a more holistic view of the Athenian army and its situation while Nicias focuses solely on its financial situation, which is the one aspect in which the Athenians may have an advantage. Thucydides writes that Nicias understands that the army is in difficult straits, although Nicias does not want to discuss it publicly (Thucydides, 7.48.1). Since he goes on to argue that the army should remain, it is likely that he was not willing to admit that the army was weak. With enough negligence, the failure to address a problem and the failure to acknowledge a problem meld into one flaw. Nicias’ failure to address the army’s weakness constitutes a failure to fully admit that it was weak. This is supported by his focus on comparing the financial resources of the Athenian and Syracusan armies. He asserts that the Athenians are in a better
financial situation than the Syracusans and argues that the army should stay because while the Syracusans are in debt, the Athenians are not only better off but far better off and that the army should “μη χρήμασιν, οḯς πολύ κρείσσους εἰσί, νικηθέντας ἀπίέναι” (Thucydides, 7.48.6).32 Nicias’ focus on finances demonstrates that he is not viewing the entire situation with the same analytical perspective he had in the earlier debate in Athens. Although previously he referenced logistics, cavalry, and vast distances in the debate, he here only discusses money, rather than the sickness in the ranks or the dwindling troop numbers. Additionally, he ignores the fact that, while money is helpful, it alone does not create an army. During the assault on Epipolae, Thucydides makes clear, the Athenians lost many men and more material (Thucydides, 7.45.2). This situation was made even worse because the original force that set out for Sicily was in terrible shape. When Nicias writes to the assembly earlier in the campaign, he tells them that the ships are rotting and the crews deserting (Thucydides, 7.12.3). Presumably, matters have only deteriorated further. A large portion of the army, therefore, has already melted away; the reinforcements have suffered a terrible loss. Additionally, Jordan’s assertion that the original force was of dubious capacity to begin with, because it was manned with foreigners who were not committed to the Athenian cause, further suggests that the Athenian army after Epipolae is in dire straits.33 Additionally, Nicias makes these poor assessments just after Demosthenes gives the more sober suggestion that they withdraw. Demosthenes’ view acts as a foil to emphasize Nicias’ unreasonable, overconfident approach.

Even at the end of the campaign, when the Athenian Expeditionary Force is in an emergency situation, Nicias and the rest of the Athenians are overconfident, and the difficulty of their situation frames this confidence as almost absurd. Two instances occur in which the

32 “Not go back home beaten by money, in which they had by far the greater resources” (Thucydides, 7.48.6).
33 Jordan 2000, 74.
Athenians struggle to operate with good intelligence. The first occurs just before the army leaves. Hermocrates, fearing that the Athenians will escape before the Syracusans finish celebrating a festival of Heracles (Thucydides, 7.73.2), sends riders to Nicias to tell him that the Syracusans are guarding the routes out of the city (Thucydides, 7.73.4). This information is false, but Nicias and the Athenians believe it and do not leave (Thucydides, 7.74.1). They even stay the next day so that the soldiers have more time to pack their supplies (Thucydides 7.74.1). They thus give the Syracusans more time than Hermocrates could have asked for. This miscalculation constitutes an intelligence failure. Just as they were with the Egestaeans, the Athenians are too overconfident and accept information without thoroughly examining it. They did not need to remain another day even according to Hermocrates’ misinformation, but they do so anyway. Nicias’ and the Athenians’ willingness to accept misinformation stems from overconfidence. The army is in an emergency, but they refuse to admit it and take the necessary precautions because they do not recognize their situation as an emergency. As has been seen throughout the campaign, they do not consider the Syracusans to be a legitimate threat because they cannot imagine themselves, the mighty Athenians, losing to anyone.

The second intelligence problem comes when Nicias manipulates reality towards the end of the retreat when the Syracusans inform him that Demosthenes and his portion of the army has surrendered, which is true. Nicias, however, does not believe them and sends a rider to confirm (Thucydides, 7.83.1-2). Suddenly, Nicias becomes concerned with his sources of information when the news is bad. The fact that Nicias cannot believe a proud Athenian army would surrender demonstrates that he has far more confidence in his army than he should. Unlike in previous circumstances, however, Nicias’ overconfidence, both in refusing to believe Demosthenes has surrendered and in believing the riders from Hermocrates, is absurd. The
Athenian Expeditionary Force is on the edge of disaster. They have failed to defeat the Syracusans. Nicias has no reason to be confident in his army. He seems, however, to be incapable of accurately judging the capacity of the Athenian army and always falls back on overestimating them.

Thucydides contrasts the Athenians’ overconfidence with their disgraceful conduct and misery during the final disaster. He paints a pitiful picture of the Athenians preparing to retreat. They are forced to leave behind their wounded comrades, who call out to their friends and family to help them and follow along for as long as they are able until they grow weary and have to be left behind:

οἱ ζῶντες καταλειπόμενοι τραυματία τε καὶ ἀσθενεῖς πολὺ τῶν τεθνεῶτον τοῖς ζῶσι λυπηρότεροι ἦσαν καὶ τῶν ἀπολωλότων ἀθλιώτεροι...ἐνα ἔκκαστον ἐπικρύμενοι, εἰ τινὰ ποῦ τις ἵδοι ἢ ἔταιροι ἢ οἰκεῖοι, τῶν τε ἐμποτῶν ἡδη ἀπώντον ἐκκρεμανύμενοι καὶ ἐπακολουθοῦντες ὅσον δύναντο, εἰ τῷ δὲ προλόγιοι ἢ ρώμη καὶ τὸ σώμα, οὐκ ἄνευ ὀλίγων ἐπιθειασμῶν καὶ οἰμωγῆς ἀπολειπόμενοι (Thucydides, 7.75.3-4).

This scene has been noted as the dark inverse of the Athenians’ departure because they are “marching away accompanied by their wounded and sick comrades, setting out with an air of squalor rather than triumph.” Thucydides himself writes that the Athenians have lost their great hope from earlier in the campaign (Thucydides, 7.75.2). Recalling the triumphal departure in such a squalid scene undercuts the earlier scene as overconfident and unrealistic. Thucydides continues this theme in the Athenians’ final defeat. Caught in a river, centralized command disintegrates, and the Athenians start to die on their own spears (Thucydides, 7.84.3). At the

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34 “The living who were being left behind, wounded or sick, far more than the dead seemed piteous to the living, and were more wretched than those that had perished. For turning to entreaty and lamentation, they drove the men to distraction; begging to be taken along and calling aloud upon each one if they saw anywhere a comrade or a kinsman, clinging to their tent-mates now going away and following after them as long as they were able, and then, when the bodily strength of one or another failed, falling behind, though not without faint appeals to the gods and lamentations” (Thucydides, 7.75.3-4).

35 Quinn 2010, 270-271.
same time, the Syracusans shower them with missiles, and the Peloponnesians enter the riverbed to slaughter the Athenians *en masse* (Thucydides, 7.84.5). The Athenians, meanwhile, are so thirsty and depraved that the Syracusans rain their missiles down on τοὺς Ἀθηναίους, πίνοντάς τε τοὺς πολλούς ἁσμένους καὶ ἐν κοίλῳ ὄντι τῷ ποταμῷ ἐν σφίσιν αὑτοῖς ταρασσομένους (Thucydides, 7.84.4). This is a far cry from Alcibiades’ earlier goals of subduing Sicily before moving on to Carthage and beyond, establishing a western Mediterranean Empire (Thucydides, 6.15.2). In the context of Thucydides’ wretched portrayal of the Athenians in their final disaster, this thinking is laughable. After the Athenian Expeditionary Force surrenders, the Syracusans execute Nicias and Demosthenes, a fitting end for the generals who had such unreasonable confidence in their army (Thucydides, 7.86.2). Thucydides emphasizes the Athenians’ prior confidence by portraying their final defeat as a depraved, chaotic catastrophe.

Just as the Athenians suffered from systematically underestimating the enemy, they chronically overestimated themselves. Both of these tendencies can be traced back their commanders prioritizing political considerations over military ones. Alcibiades and most of the Athenian assembly overestimate the Athenian Expeditionary Force when they first sent it to capture Sicily, believing that it would sweep all before it. Alcibiades pleases the people by advocating for this view. Since he speaks to the Athenian demos, he essentially praises his audience, and his audience rewards him with command of the invasion force. While Nicias and Demosthenes at times present more reasoned assessments of their armies’ capabilities, they are not immune to the democratic pressures that lead commanders to overestimate their armies. Before and after Epipolae and during the final retreat, Nicias and Demosthenes overestimate their forces. They understand that to have an accurate perception of their armies would be to

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36 “The Athenians, most of whom were drinking greedily and were all huddled in confusion in the hollow bed of the river” (Thucydides, 7.84.4).
insult the city, and therefore the demos, and that they would suffer political repercussions. Thucydides portrays this overconfidence when he describes how the Athenians willfully rely on poor intelligence when it fits their understanding of their own strength. Combined with their habit of underestimating the enemy, the Athenian command’s understanding of how their capabilities compared to their enemy’s is badly skewed, and as a result, the Athenians suffer catastrophic losses in the campaign.
Section III: Corrupting Democracy

The examples discussed demonstrate universal problems in the Athenian command. The problems do not arise only from individual leaders’ flaws. By portraying systemic problems in the Athenian command, Thucydides suggests that the problems arise from the Athenian political structure. Democracy, Thucydides argues, can corrupt the judgement of even a capable leader. It does so in three ways: making politicians desire to please the crowd, allowing for the rise of self-interested politicians, and instilling a fear of rival speakers in politicians. Each of these influences leads commanders to overestimate their own armies and underestimate their enemies to fit the popular imagination in the Athenian demos, to praise the demos, and to maintain political power. While these problems are related, it will be helpful to examine each one in turn. Using the scholarship of Kurt Raaflaub and Jonas Grethlein, I show that it is clear that Thucydides’ critique of democracy and its influence on military command in the Sicilian Expedition is in line with his general thinking on crowd-pleasing and self-interested politicians. The scholarship of David G. Smith reveals how the desire to please the crowd leads to intelligence failures during the Sicilian debate. According to him, the Athenians suffered from a democratization of knowledge and intelligence. If politicians wish to please the crowds, they must conform to the public’s conception of reality. Mary P Nichols also provides a useful template onto which to map the argument that the Athenian commanders, particularly Nicias, made their decisions in fear of rival speakers. The scholarship helps to make clear how Thucydides attributes specific military failings in the Sicilian Expedition to the general flaws in democracy.
In separate publications, Grethlein and Raaflaub argue that the biggest targets in Thucydides’ critique of democracy were crowd-pleasing and self-interested politicians. While there was much overlap between the two groups, it will be helpful to examine each category individually. I will start with the self-interested politician. Grethlein argues that Thucydides uses orators as foils for his more scientific study of history. While Thucydides is careful and deliberate in his history, he compares orators to the poets specifically because of “their inclination to meet the expectations of their audience,” which skews their portrayals. 

Raaflaub makes a similar claim when he lists the ideals Thucydides has for leaders:

- respectful firmness in dealing with the dèmos, lack of excessive ambition and thus independence that makes it possible to contradict popular sentiment, courage even to provoke anger, disdain of flattery, and psychagogic skills to balance extreme popular emotions.

The ideal leader to Thucydides is one who is able to disagree with the crowd and not submit to their popular sentiment.

Smith provides context for how these crowd-pleasing speakers can damage the city. As has been discussed, the Athenians suffer many intelligence failures during the Sicilian campaign. During the preliminary debate, the most obvious failure is that the demos believes the Egestaeans, but Smith suggests that there were wider intelligence failures, arguing that Thucydides criticizes the demos’ understanding of Sicily. He writes that, thanks to plays and popular culture, the Athenians viewed Sicily as a semi-mythical land of plenty, ripe for the taking. In contrast to his own scientific approach to history, Smith claims, Thucydides criticizes “the casual, haphazard manner in which they have come to acquire their information: rumor and gossip in the agora, anecdote and conjecture in the stoa, opinion and disagreement in the

37 Grethlein 2013, 129-130.
38 Raaflaub 2006, 204-205
39 Smith 2004, 52.
assembly. As a result, Nicias and Alcibiades play on the crowd’s misconceptions in their speeches. Smith’s argument is in keeping with Grethelin’s and Raafflau’s arguments. While I do not agree that Nicias is crowd-pleasing in the debate, I argue that Alcibiades is. Because he wants to please the crowd and not trouble them with facts, what the demos believes becomes reality in Alcibiades’ eyes lest he be on the demos’ bad side. If the crowd-pleasing speakers are unable to guide the people and present them with inconvenient truths, capabilities that Raafflau has enumerated on, the people will not be able to come to informed conclusions.

The crowd-pleasing speakers whom Raafflau and Grethlein suggest that Thucydides points to are not separated by ideological differences. While Kagan argues that Alcibiades and Nicias have different visions of Athens, the former advocating for endless expansion, worldviews and undesirable ideologies play a limited role in Thucydides’ criticism of speakers. There are, for example, some ideological differences between Athenagoras and Alcibiades that may give the appearance of contrasting speeches, but they are of secondary importance to the rhetorical similarities. Athenagoras argues that all people ought to be treated as equals, and he criticizes the young for trying to take power before they have experience, which suggests that he is criticizing a latent oligarchic faction (Thucydides, 6.38.5). Athenagoras therefore appears to be a democrat. In contrast, Alcibiades, who may at times appear to be a young oligarch, argues that the better elements of society, such as himself, ought to be treated better (Thucydides, 6.16.4). He also criticizes Nicias for trying to divide the old and young, which Athenagoras seems to be doing in his criticism of the young oligarchic faction (Thucydides, 6.18.6). While it would be too much to extract a specific ideological leaning from Alcibiades, it is safe to say that his speech

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40 Ibid., 45.
41 Ibid., 56-57.
and Athenagoras’ appear to be at ideological odds. If they were in the same city, one might imagine that they would lead opposing factions.

Yet while it may be tempting to point to these differences as evidence that Thucydides is not trying to align their speeches, ideology is beside the point in Thucydides’ narrative. The speakers’ rhetoric are his focus. I do not argue that Athenagoras and Alcibiades are the same or hold the same political views. To put Alcibiades into any box would be futile. To understand the content differences between the speeches, it is necessary to examine the particular circumstances of each. Implicit in Grethlein’s and Raaflaub’s arguments is that Thucydides portrays orators as crowd-pleasing to the specific crowds they address. Since Athenagoras and Alcibiades are speaking to different crowds, it is likely that they will advocate different positions. What pleases a crowd in Athens may be different from what pleases a crowd in Syracuse. What will likely please both is praise for their own city, which is a common element in both speeches. The divergences in the speeches are likely the result of internal politics peculiar to the two cities. Athenagoras and Alcibiades can share crowd-pleasing characteristics, but they present different speeches because they have to please different crowds.

Perhaps the strongest evidence that Athenagoras and Alcibiades, despite seemingly different ideologies, are linked is that Thucydides deploys two of his rare narrative interventions to describe these speakers. Before Athenagoras speaks, Thucydides informs the reader that he is a populist leader, introducing him as “δήμου τε προστάτης ἤν καὶ ἐν τῷ παρόντι πιθανώτατος τοῖς πολλοῖς” (Thucydides, 6.35.2). Likewise, before Alcibiades speaks, Thucydides casts doubt on his motivations. He writes that Alcibiades advocated for the Sicilian Expedition in part to gain financially and politically:

43 “[Athenagoras] was a popular leader and at the present time most influential with the masses” (Thucydides, 6.35.2).
Thucydides goes on to suggest that Alcibiades may have wanted pure power and may have even wanted to establish a tyranny (Thucydides, 6.15.2). While it is true that Thucydides does not make this accusation directly and instead puts it into the mouths of the common people, the accusation follows so closely upon an example of Alcibiades trying to achieve power at the expense of others that it is likely an implied accusation. While it is true that Thucydides’ intervention is lengthier in the case of Alcibiades than in the case of Athenagoras, the existence of narrative intervention in both cases is enough to grab the reader’s attention. Thucydides here signals to the reader that the only ideology Alcibiades and Athenagoras are committed to is self-interest. The particulars of their speeches are less important than their overarching drive to acquire power through popular persuasion and crowd-pleasing rhetoric.

In contrast to the crowd-pleasing antics of Alcibiades and Athenagoras, Thucydides provides more sober alternatives in Nicias and Hermocrates. During the Sicilian debate, these speakers make speeches that do not please the crowd and in fact present inconvenient truths. Raaflaub argues that Nicias presented inconvenient truths to the assembly but lacked the charisma to persuade them. I would agree with Raaflaub that he warns the demos to consider the difficulties involved in invading Sicily and differentiates himself from the overconfident arrogance of Alcibiades. It is notable that Nicias gives his speech after the city has voted to approve the Sicilian Expedition, inserting what was meant to be a settled debate into the

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44 “But most zealous in urging the expedition was Alcibiades son of Cleinias…above all he was eager to be made general and hoped thereby to subdue both Sicily and Carthage, and in case of success to promote at the same time his private interests in wealth as well as in glory” (Thucydides, 6.15.2).
45 Raaflaub 2006, 205.
46 Raaflaub 2006, 203.
discussion into the discussion for the good of the city (Thucydides, 6.9.1). Since the city has already decided to pursue this course of action, Nicias is presenting inconvenient truths to them. Additionally, his advice to remain at Athens is unwelcome because it prevents the Athenians from acquiring more power and wealth.

Similarly, Hermocrates recommends an inconvenient plan to secure his city’s security. He states at the beginning of his speech that he does not expect to win praise by warning the Syracusans (Thucydides, 6.33.1), but he urges them to begin immediate preparations to counter the Athenian invasion (6.33.2). He also advocates for a preemptive assault:

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\text{Σικελιώται γὰρ εἰ ἐθέλομεν ἔχωμεν καθελκοῦντες, εἰ δὲ μὴ, ὅτι πλεῖστοι μεθ᾽ ἡμῶν, καθελκόσαντες ἢ πολίτας ὑπάρχον ναυτικὸν μετὰ δυοῦν μηνοῦ τροφῆς ἀπαντήσαι Ἀθηναίοις ἐς Τάραντα καὶ ἄκραν Ἰαπυγίαν, καὶ ἠδύνησαν αὐτοῖς ὅτι οὐ περὶ τῆς Σικελίας πρότερον ἔσται ὁ ἄγων ἦ τοῦ ἐκείνους περαιωθῆαι τὸν Ἰόνιον, μάλιστ' ἂν αὐτοῖς ἐκπλήξαμεν καὶ ἐς λογισμὸν καταστήσαμεν ὅτι ὀρμώμεθα μὲν ἐκ φυλίας χώρας φύλακες (Thucydides, 6.34.4).}^{47}
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This is not a convenient option. Hermocrates himself admits that his audience will not immediately agree with him (Thucydides, 6.34.4). The Syracusans would need to pour time and money into their navy. Their ships would have to sail far from home. They would begin hostilities rather than wait behind their walls. While it is impossible to prove that this strategy would have succeeded, it is clear that it is an involved strategy that would be inconvenient. Like Nicias, Hermocrates operates in ways that contrast to Thucydides’ critique of rhetoricians; he is, according to Grethlein, giving an honest analyses of his city’s situation and not placating his audience. Both present inconvenient truths and recommend inconvenient actions.

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^{47} “If we Siceliots—all together, or, in default of this, as many as will join us—were willing to launch all our available naval force and with two months’ provisions go to meet the Athenians at Tarentum and the promontory of Iapygia, and make plain to them that the contest will not be first for Sicily, but before that for their passage across the Ionian Sea, we should mightily astound them and force them to reflect that we have as our base a friendly country from which to keep watch and ward” (Thucydides, 6.34.4).
The self-interested politician is related to the crowd-pleasing politician. The former often becomes the latter to further his political career. While they are similar, there are different consequences from self-interested and crowd-pleasing characteristics. Raaflaub discusses the dangers of the self-interested politician in Thucydides’ mind, arguing that speakers who stir the people into a frenzy for their own interests can bring about disaster.48 He uses the Sicilian Expedition to illustrate his point. While Nicias may have been calm and deliberate, he lacked Alcibiades’ persuasiveness and self-interest.49 Raaflaub thus seems to suggest that Alcibiades embodies two of Thucydides’ worst characteristics for leaders. He is a crowd-pleasing speaker, and he is self-interested. The result is a toxic mix that persuades the demos to send the Athenian Expeditionary Force to Sicily and disaster.

The problem of self-interest, however, is not confined to the agora. Demosthenes, although not speaking to the demos directly, does take up a similar position to Alcibiades in deciding to attack Epipolae, and he may have shared a similar motivation. Nicias is a shadow opponent to Demosthenes’ plan to attack Epipolae immediately, While it is true that Nicias does not speak directly, since Thucydides renders the chapter in indirect speech, Demosthenes frames his arguments in opposition to Nicias, so that the criticism of Nicias’ strategy and Demosthenes’ proposal of a new plan has the trappings of a debate. Demosthenes and Alcibiades are thus in a comparable position. Additionally, Roisman argues that Demosthenes favored a land attack on Epipolae because he was not an experienced enough naval commander to lead the fleet and win glory.50 In light of the similarities of his situation to that of Alcibiades, it seems likely that they shared a self-interested motivation.

49 Ibid., 205.
50 Roisman 1993, 58.
Tragically, as Thucydides illustrates, Nicias is not immune to democratic pressures. The potential for a rival speaker to castigate him in front of the agora corrupts his military judgement. Nichols provides a useful starting point from which to analyze his leadership. Although I agree with Nichols’ assessment of his leadership, I suggest that her argument is incomplete because it does not take into account the broader democratic context that would corrupt any leader, not only Nicias. She claims that, when Nicias wrote to the demos to send reinforcements, he was trying to please it – or at least to lessen the blow of his attempt to resign – by suggesting that the city could still win.51 After the failure at Epipolae, she argues that, in making his own decisions, Nicias “is too dependent on his city to go home” because he fears the consequences of what will happen when he gets there, and she suggests that “it is almost as if Alcibiades were still in Athens, influencing its decisions, and Nicias were the one in exile.”52 Rather than pursue this idea, however, she argues that only Nicias is to blame. His decision-making process and personality, she writes, are too connected to Athenian custom to be independent in contrast to the fully independent Alcibiades.53 While she may believe Nicias was reacting to the city, Nichols does not argue that Athenian democracy had a systemic problem of pressuring its leaders into less than wise decisions.

Nicias made his decisions, however, out of fear that a rival speaker at Athens would blame him if he retreated. Regardless of his personal persuasions, he had to make judgements to please the people, which is not a personal character flaw but instead the result of a democratic system, according to Thucydides. Thucydides begins Nicias’ argument after the failure at Epipolae by saying the Athenians would be upset with them if they were to retreat (Thucydides,

51 Nichols 2017, 470.
52 Ibid., 470.
53 Ibid., 472.
Nicias says that some tricky speaker, a “τις ἔδει λέγων,” would convince the assembly to vote against them (Thucydides, 7.48.3). Even their soldiers, he says, may be convinced even though they currently wish to withdraw (Thucydides, 7.48.4). To make matters worse, the Athenians would not have access to the best information and would be more susceptible to a tricky speaker (Thucydides, 7.48.3). Nicias seems to decide, then, that he will only operate based on the knowledge the demos would have access to if he were to withdraw. Since the demos would not have all of the information Nicias has at this moment as commander, Nicias limits his access to military intelligence and sets himself up for failure.

Nicias was right that the Athenians were sometimes hostile to generals who failed. His arguments, however, demonstrate how democratic pressures have corrupted his judgement, which is Thucydides’ core criticism of democracy. Nicias’ opening has nothing to do with the army’s military situation. He prioritizes political considerations instead. Only once he has established the political consequences of retreating does he proceed to his arguments on the expedition’s viability. Thucydides’ presentation of Nicias’ argument in this order suggests that he focuses first and foremost on pleasing the people and therefore has corrupted judgement. He admits that Nicias, recognizing the difficulties the army is in, is privately unsure about whether the army should retreat, but the speech he gives publicly is firmly in favor of remaining:

أشياء ما لم يكن يعرفه، ورغم ذلك، كان رهيبًا بين الأثنين وما زال يتردد بينهما ويعتذر، فهكذا كتبت ثيوقديس في مقدمة تغلب المجمع.” (Thucydides, 7.48.3).

Nicias’ public confidence, contrasted against his private uncertainty, suggest that he is responding to public pressures, in this case the potential for another speaker to criticize him in

55 “Having knowledge of these things, although in reality he still wavered between the two alternatives and kept pondering them, yet in the speech which he openly made at that time he refused to lead the army away” (Thucydides 7.48.3).
the assembly. Nichols notes that Nicias acts as if there were another Alcibiades at Athens, and in a sense, there is.\footnote{Nichols 2017, 470.} Nicias cannot operate in his best military judgement without worrying that the clever, self-interested, crowd-pleasing speaker, of the type which Alcibiades embodies, will turn the people and even his own soldiers against him. If he were to return to Athens and explains that an Athenian army cannot accomplish the goal the Athenian demos set for them, he would make an implicit suggestion that the city is not as great as it imagines itself. Nicias cannot be an effective general because he knows that, if the enemy does not kill him, then his own city may.

At the end of the passage, Thucydides gives a subtle affirmation of this reading. Demosthenes, who argues that the Athenian Expeditionary Force should retreat, gives in to Nicias (Thucydides, 7.49.4). Demosthenes is an equal to Nicias and could have persisted in his argument, but he may have realized that Nicias could blame him for retreating when if they were to return to the city. Demosthenes is therefore compelled to go against his better judgement and allows the army to remain. The political environment requires Nicias, Demosthenes, and the rest of the Athenian command to corrupt their judgement if they are to serve the city.

This corrupting influence is Thucydides’ ultimate critique of democracy. Whether Alcibiades, Nicias, or Demosthenes make good or bad decisions is of secondary interest in the Sicilian Expedition. At least as much of the text is dedicated to understanding how the Athenian democracy corrupted their judgements as to whatever personal flaws they each possessed. Certainly, they did not operate in the same manner in the Democracy. Alcibiades was the tricky speaker Nicias had to worry about. Demosthenes attempted to rise to greater prominence as Alcibiades had but through military successes rather than rhetorical skill in the agora. But
Athenian democracy creates a system in which the three face either the pressure or temptation to have corrupt judgement to please the people, further their political careers, and serve their city.
Conclusions

The Sicilian Expedition was a flawed undertaking with flawed leaders, and there were multiple factors that contributed to its failure. Thucydides, however, lays much of the blame at the feet of the Democracy. The ever present danger of rival crowd-pleasing, self-interested speakers corrupts the Athenian generals’ judgements and makes them ponder not only military considerations but political ones too. Often, the political considerations take priority. The Athenian commanders underestimate the enemy and overestimate themselves, and in doing so, they often rely on faulty intelligence. Even Nicias, who warned the Athenians against invasion in the debate, follows this pattern and misjudges his army and the enemy’s. As a result, the Athenian command operates with a faulty understanding of their military capacities in comparison to their enemy’s, and the Athenian Expeditionary Force ends in disaster in the Assinarus River. The implications of Thucydides’ portrayal, however, do not. Athens continues to be a democracy for most of the rest of the war barring a brief flirtation with oligarchy. The greater significance of Thucydides’ portrayal of the Sicilian Expedition is that the problems that led to the Sicilian Expedition and made it such a spectacular failure still exist in the Democracy, and they will likely lead to Athens’ fall.

Thucydides suggests that Athens will share the fate of the Athenian Expeditionary Force. Just before its final collapse at the end of Book VII, Thucydides describes the army in terms of a city. When the army first departs, Thucydides comments that they are like the fleeing citizenry of a besieged city (Thucydides, 7.75.5). Thucydides himself links the army to a city, which one may reasonably believe to be Athens given that the army is under Athenian command. Once the army departs, Nicias tells them that they do not need to fear being attacked because their army is so
large that wherever they set up camp, they are like a city that no other city would receive easily (Thucydides, 7.77.4). Although Thucydides puts the words in Nicias’ mouth, he frames the army as the embodiment of the city. Later in the same speech, Nicias tries to encourage the Athenians by telling them that they will restore the strength of the city because the city is not walls and buildings but men (Thucydides, 7.77.7). This is a direct reference to Athens. It leaves no doubt that by comparing the army to a city, Thucydides is comparing it to Athens. This is an ominous sign for Athens. The Athenian Expeditionary Force is about to encounter its final catastrophe.

Thucydides’ use of city metaphors and a direct reference to Athens itself suggest that Athens will soon be in similar situation.

After he concludes his narrative of the Sicilian Expedition, Thucydides’ suggests that the flaws that led to it still exist in Athenian democracy. After Nicias and Demosthenes’ surrender, word begins to travel back to Athens that they have lost the Sicilian campaign. The Athenians’ reaction affirms Thucydides’ critique of democracy. When the survivors of the Expedition tell the Athenians that the army has been destroyed, the Athenians at first do not believe them even though Thucydides is careful to tell us that the soldiers “σαφῶς ἀγγέλλουσι” (Thucydides, 8.1.1).

When the people eventually believe the soldiers, they shift the blame to the speakers and prophets despite having voted for the expedition:

"χαλεποὶ μὲν ἦσαν τοὺς ἥμισυρμηθεῖσα τῶν ῥητόρων τὸν ἔκπλουν, ὡσπερ οὐκ αὐτοὶ ψηφισάμενοι ὅργιζοντο δὲ καὶ τοῖς χρησμολόγοις τε καὶ μάντεσι καὶ ὑπόσι ποτὲ αὐτοὺς θείασαντες ἐπήλπισαν ὡς λήψονται Σικελίαν (Thucydides, 8.1.1)."

In both of these reactions, the fundamental problems with democracy that Thucydides portrays in the Expedition go unresolved. The Athenians at first prefer not to believe inconvenient truths.

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57 "They were angry with the orators who had taken part in promoting the expedition—as though they had not voted for it themselves—and they were also enraged at the oracle-mongers and soothsayers and whoever at that time by any practice of divination had led them to hope that they would conquer Sicily.” (Thucydides, 8.1.1).
They cannot imagine that their army is capable is losing. This calls to mind their earlier intelligence failure when they believed the Egestaeans without carefully examining their claims. It calls to mind the Athenians’ lack of familiarity with Epipolae, Nicias’ refusal to believe that Demosthenes had surrendered, and the other intelligence failures that helped make the Sicilian campaign the disaster it was. When the people finally believe the messengers, they punish their leaders, forgetting that they themselves voted for the campaign (Thucydides, 8.1.1). Given the reaction of the people to their leaders, Nicias was perhaps right to be afraid to retreat. This reaction will have a corrosive effect on the next generation of leaders just as it did on the Athenian command in the Sicilian Expedition. They will spend more time placating the people than making sound tactical decisions. Thucydides writes that Nicias was least deserving of all the Greeks die at the hands of the Sicilians because he cultivated excellence (Thucydides, 7.86.5). Even if this is more a comment on Nicias’ personal excellence rather than on his public service, the sentiment demonstrates that the system of democracy can corrupt even a good man, shrinking the number of potential future leaders.\footnote{Westlake 1941, 59.}

Thucydides suggests that the democracy that voted for the Sicilian Expedition is just as damaged after they learn they lost as they were when they voted to send their army to Sicily. The people believe their own narratives rather than reality, and the new generation of leaders will presumably have to play to this narrative just as Alcibiades, Nicias, and Demosthenes did, and their military judgements will likely become corrupted by political considerations. As a result, the city will fall not because of any individual’s failing but because the democracy is rotten at its core and not only corrupted but corrupting.
Bibliography:


