

# EXCELLENCE AND ENVY: PLUTARCH ON THE DIFFICULTIES OF LEADING THE PEOPLE

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## Introduction

The Agora – the place where all public business was held in the ancient Greek world, where commerce took place, where politics was discussed, and occasion-ally where men cast their vote for the ostracism – was brimming with activity. Circa 482 B.C., an ostracism had been called by the Assembly, and on the appointed day, the shards of pottery called ostraka<sup>1</sup> were passed out for the citizens to write the name of the man each believed to be dangerous to Athens. As the votes came in, ostrakon after ostrakon revealed the etched name, *Aristides*.

This ostracism was nothing uncommon, in fact it was a regular part of the Athenian governmental process. At least every two years the popular Assembly was invited to hold the vote, but at any time the People could call for a vote of ostracism. This right gave the People a way to hinder tyranny by banishing any man they believed too powerful. The notable feature of the ostracism of 482 B.C. was that the exiled public servant, Aristides, was arguably the most virtuous man in Athens. Aristides “the Just,” a title, which he earned in his service

of the People, had proven his integrity and devotion to Athens time and time again. However, his open display of virtue irritated the People, and, provoked by Aristides’ political rivals, the People not only rejected Aristides’ leadership, but banished him as a dangerous autocrat.

This episode reflects a question that has loomed over democratic states from the beginning: are good leaders – individuals who are virtuous and will lead for the common good rather than for personal benefit or party politics – compatible with democratic regimes? As history has divulged a number of great men at the head of popular states (e.g., Winston Churchill, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln), such a combination cannot be impossible, but this only sharpens the question: why is it so difficult for leaders to excel in free societies and direct the state towards the public good? What are the obstacles inherent in democracy that impede excellent leadership?

To answer such a question, first, certain terms must be clarified. Democracy is the rule of the many, a concept many of us know without having to really think about it. We take it as a matter of fact that it is the fairest and best form of government, but often forget it has its flaws as well. By democracy, we typically do not mean the strictest definition of democracy as a specific form of government. Very few believe that direct democracy, a system in which each citizen votes on every issue, is a good way of carrying out public business. In this paper, unless specified as a direct demo-

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<sup>1</sup> In Greek, Ostraka (ὄστρακα) is the plural form of the singular ostrakon (ὄστρακον).

cracy, the term "democracy" or "democratic" refers to a system of government that is based on principles of individual civil rights where many citizens have a substantial influence over affairs of state. This influence may be primarily in the selection of representatives or in the direct creation of public policy. Additionally, aiming towards public good is the standard by which excellent leaders are measured in this discussion. The public good is understood as the broad maximum benefit to the body politic in any situation.

To understand the impediments to excellent leadership, one must look to the examples of great leaders of the past. Many such accounts were chronicled by the ancient historian Plutarch. He wrote analytical summaries of numerous Greek and Roman leaders; but Plutarch did more than write histories. Rather, he focused on the characters of these men and the aspects of their lives that would teach important lessons that, otherwise, could only be gleaned from experience.<sup>2</sup> Plutarch's examination of the leaders in the two most famous democratic states, Greece and Rome, demonstrate the obstacles to excellent leadership and how the great men of the past met those impediments. The lives of Tiberius, Aristides, and Pericles demonstrate Plutarch's understanding of why popular regimes are often difficult to lead well. Through telling the stories of these men's lives, Plutarch shows personal weakness, peer competition, and the inadequacies of the People as three major obstacles to bringing about the well-being for a democracy.

Assuming human nature to be constant throughout the ages, the lessons of the ancients can give insight into the issues of today, and teach democratic citizens over 2000 years later what hindrances are innate to democracies and how to surmount these obstacles to bring about the common good of a state.

## CHAPTER ONE Tiberius Gracchus

In an imperfect world, achieving equality and justice generally means upsetting an unjust status quo. Reforms often cause offense and are met with resistance from those who profited from the original state of affairs. Tiberius Gracchus dealt with such resistance during his political career. He worked against an entrenched abuse of Rome's public land laws and sought to restore the original aim of the public lands, i.e., to provide relief for the poor. To right the wrongs he perceived, Tiberius promoted land reform, putting him in direct conflict with those who had taken lands illegally.

The landowners his reforms penalized nearly halted Tiberius' law to "reinststate the poor citizens to their former possessions," and, ultimately, their hostility resulted in Tiberius' death.<sup>3</sup> While their opposition was a great obstacle to carrying out his legislation, the main obstacles he encountered, according to Plutarch, were the failings of Tiberius' otherwise excellent character. In Plutarch's presentation, the Gracchan land reform began as an attempt to ennoble the citizenry and improve the welfare of Rome; however, as opposition grew more personal, Tiberius became more motivated by party spirit and spite than the public welfare.<sup>4</sup> Plutarch believed that Tiberius was ultimately unable to resist the temptation to retaliate against his political enemies and allowed this to guide his later policies. Indeed, Tiberius succumbed to immoderation and he lost sight of the greater goals he intended for the people, the very goals that had endeared him to them.

In order to understand this problem, it is necessary to know about Tiberius' life and to uncover the change in judgment that reflected his weakness. Tiberius Sempronius

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<sup>2</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Alexander*, pg 139.

<sup>3</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius Gracchus*, pg 360.

<sup>4</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius Gracchus*, pgs 357, 361, and 367.

Gracchus was born to an aristocratic family in the second century BC. His father (of the same name) had led a great political and military career, was a beloved consul, and won great victories in Spain among other accomplishments. On his mother's side, Tiberius was related to Scipio Africanus, who had conquered Hannibal in the second Punic war; in short, his familial ties gave him great political support as well as an example of excellence by which to live.

### **The Numantine Negotiation and the Reproach of the People**

While his family gave him a good base of support, his rise to popularity was primarily due to his own personal virtues. Following his father's example, Tiberius began his political career by succeeding in military affairs. In a short time, Plutarch noted, he gained many honors and "excelled all the young men of the army in obedience and courage."<sup>5</sup> He was beloved by his fellow soldiers and his commanders alike. Due to his respected character and virtue, Tiberius was appointed quaestor, or paymaster, while he served in the war against the Numantines in Spain.

By the end of the Numantine campaign, Tiberius would have his first experience of political backlash inspired by his actions in a democratic regime. After losing many major battles in Spain, the consul, Gaius Mancinus, made an attempt to retreat in the night, but, unfortunately for the Romans, the Numantines stopped their retreat and took possession of their entire camp, quickly surrounding the whole army. A large part of the Roman army fell in the ensuing clash, and Mancinus promptly realized that his actions had endangered the whole army and that the only hope of survival would be to strike a truce. The Numantines acquiesced; however, they

refused to negotiate with any Roman other than Tiberius Gracchus. His reputation as an honorable man gained the trust of his enemies, but the preference was also out of remembrance of his father who had dealt generously with the Numantines during his generalship. Tiberius worked with the Numantines to establish conditions of peace. Although he complied with several concessions, he negotiated an honorable compact and saved the lives of thousands of Roman soldiers.

Additionally, as one of the stipulations of the truce, the Numantines took as spoils the possessions of the Roman camp. Yet, the victors had grown to respect Tiberius so much that they granted him anything of the spoils that he wished for himself. Being granted this great honor, he demonstrated great restraint and merely took his quaestor account books, so that he could perform his office, and some frankincense for public sacrifices. In all his dealings with the Numantines, he worked for the welfare of Rome and sought only its interests. Despite saving lives, negotiating successfully, and taking nothing for himself, trouble awaited him upon his return to Rome.

As Plutarch implies, even when their interests are best served, democracies, like men, are not readily disposed to accept compromise in lieu of what it (thinks it) wants, and Tiberius learned this upon his arrival in Rome. At this time, Plutarch writes, "he found the whole transaction censured and reproached, as a proceeding that was base and scandalous to the Romans."<sup>6</sup> After sending their troops out to Spain in hopes of expanding the Republic, the news that Tiberius had negotiated terms of surrender was viewed as shameful. Rather than being overjoyed at the safe return of over 20,000 men, many citizens focused on the sting of defeat and reprimanded those responsible.

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<sup>5</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius Gracchus*, pg 357.

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<sup>6</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius Gracchus*, pg 359.

Plutarch depicts the People as ignorant of the particulars of the situation. Tiberius, according to Plutarch's account, had acted exemplarily and made the best of the circumstances in negotiating with the Numantines. However, as democratic people hardly look beyond their general desires, they could only find fault with Tiberius for not bringing about perfect conditions. The People failed to grasp that Tiberius was bartering as the emissary of the conquered side. In this light, the honorable compact was an exceptional feat. However, understanding only the general goal of the campaign – conquering the Numantines – the People saw only the failure of their elected officers and they transferred their displeasure on to Tiberius. This ignorance of particular circumstances led to an immediate rejection of Tiberius and demeaned the good he had accomplished. As we shall see, in Plutarch's view this is a prominent weakness of democracies and one that makes them very hard to lead well.

The faction that censured the event called for all of the officers involved – consuls, tribunes, and quaestors included – to be bound and delivered to the enemy. The soldiers, knowing that Tiberius was the hero of the hour, spoke up and hailed Tiberius as their rescuer. After hearing the particulars of the capture, all charges were dropped against all officers except for the consul, Mancinus, who was promptly stripped and sent to the Numantines in chains for his failure. While Tiberius survived the incident and eventually won great renown for his part in the negotiations, he had his first glimpse into how just actions could be misperceived and rejected by the people in a republic. There would be many obstacles to Tiberius' pursuit of Rome's welfare, and unfortunately, for him, he would not always have the strength of his military connections to assist him.

## **Land Reform: A Rise to Tribuneship and Tension**

Tiberius gained much knowledge while traveling with the army. During his military experience, Tiberius learned firsthand about the problems of Rome, the foremost of which was the declining agrarian system. The strength of Rome had been in the wide foundation provided by a large landed peasantry. These small time farmers known as plebeians lived off of public lands gained from Rome's conquests. In return for free land, the plebes tithed a share of their crop to the state. This tax fueled the state by feeding the army and providing relief to the landless proletariat class. Free-holding farmers also provided the main manpower for Rome's army. As long as the base made of the landed peasantry held strong, Rome was strong. However, as Tiberius witnessed for himself, very few small farms had survived the decades of war and in their place large estates worked by foreign slaves provided wealth for the noble patrician class but contributed little to the common good.

In the preceding decades, Rome had participated in many major wars (most notably the Punic wars) and from these endeavors, the agrarian system had begun to fracture. The Roman army was organized around the legion: a group of 4,000 to 5,000 infantrymen and 200 to 300 cavalry. To be eligible for conscription into a legion, one must have been a land owning citizen of Rome and the small landowner of the plebian class was the most common of the citizen-soldiers. As a result of long and consecutive wars, many farms had been left unattended and had ceased to bring in money and food for the citizens on campaign. At the end of their enlistment, veterans would return home to dilapidated farms in need of costly repairs. Without the funds to restart their farms, many small landowners sold their plots to wealthy aristocrats who owned many slaves and were willing to

take on the unkempt property. Over time, the land owning, productive peasantry began to shrink, while a landless, non-productive class grew to alarming levels. Landless peasants had little to no means of making a living for themselves, many fled to the city of Rome to take advantage of the grain dole, a government hand-out of food. Once they had become the landless “urban mob” these individuals could not be enlisted as soldiers for the army, which, because of the many wars, were greatly needed.

To combat the absorption of small farms into massive estates, the Senate passed laws that limited the amount of the *ager publicus* (public land) that could be owned by any one person to five hundred acres.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the rich who had acquired large tracts of the *ager publicus* circumvented the laws by clever means. The problem worsened, and any politicians who had tried to remedy the problem had met with such hostility that they abandoned the cause. However, Tiberius, motivated either by the cries of the people or by his own observations, took it upon himself to bring about land reform. In the year 133 B.C., Tiberius was elected tribune of the people, a powerful and inviolable office invested with the power of veto and the backing of the plebian class. He made it his goal to pass a reform bill that would return the public lands to their original purpose of enriching the peasantry and the state as a whole.

The return of lands to Rome’s veterans was especially of concern to Tiberius. Plutarch gives him a moving speech: “The savage beasts,” said Tiberius, “in Italy, have their particular dens, they have their places of repose and refuge; but the men who bear arms, and expose their lives for the safety of their country, enjoy in the meantime nothing more in it but the air and light.”<sup>8</sup> Tiberius thus hoped to raise the socio-economic status of the citizenry back to one of honor and

prosperity. They had reverted to a beast-like state without means to provide for themselves and their families, and by establishing them as landed peasantry, Tiberius hoped to restore their humanity and aid Rome’s very dignity.

As he had in regards to the Numan-tine treaty, Tiberius began his fight for land reform with the interest of the republic at heart. He assembled the greatest minds and most honest characters to write a law that would ease the situation, prevent future wrongs, but would also be gentle toward the offenders. This mild bill made provisions for compensating the owners of large estates “for quitting their unlawful claims.”<sup>9</sup> Tiberius wanted merely to fix the problem of land distribution and hoped to serve all Romans. He had no vendetta against the wealthy property owners who had abused the old system and as such, compensation seemed fair. Tiberius labored to make the best of the circumstances. The gentle nature of the law satisfied the People by granting to them the return of affordable land without having to enact punishment upon the offending parties.

However, the great landowners feared the possibility of such a law that could harm their interests. Their fear of the law quickly evolved into hatred of the lawgiver. The patrician party took a strong stand against the bill and denounced Tiberius as a tyrant hungry for power. As Plutarch writes, “those of great estates were exasperated through their covetous feelings against the law itself, and against the lawgiver, through anger and party spirit. They therefore endeavored to seduce the People, declaring that Tiberius was designing...to overthrow the government.”<sup>10</sup> They denounced his generous bill as an attempt to win the favor of the lower classes and accumulate power for his own ends. The patricians spread the rumor of Tiberius’ malicious designs for

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<sup>7</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius Gracchus*, pg 360.

<sup>8</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius Gracchus*, pg 361.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius Gracchus*, pg 361.

government to dissuade him from the bill. Even though Tiberius genuinely desired the good of Rome, those who stood to lose by his actions wanted to be rid of his influence. The men of great estates chose material advantage over charity; wealth over virtue. This deviation from virtue in the opposing party, Plutarch demonstrates, inhibited Tiberius in his pursuit of what he believed to be the good of the state.

According to Plutarch's observations, the people in democracies tend more to pursue their own benefit rather than virtue or the common good. The commoners praised Tiberius for his efforts, but it is difficult to understand if their approval came from his dedication to justice or for the advantage they would receive. His opponents cried "tyrant" not based on any actions he took to seize power but out of jealousy and anger. As Plutarch writes, "it is evident that this conspiracy was formed against him more out of the hatred and malice which the rich men had to his person, than for the reasons which they commonly pretended against him."<sup>11</sup> Tiberius posed a threat to their party and to their property. The patricians were offended by his actions and used false accusations to mitigate his influence by harming his reputation. The People said Tiberius was just when they gained from his policies; yet, those who disliked the effects of his laws called the same man a tyrant.

As all democratic leaders discover, democracies are not simple to lead. Tiberius experienced two sources of the difficulties of popular regime in his early career: the ignorance and the materialism of the People. Tiberius' reprimand from the People after successful negotiations with the Numantines depicted how the People's tendency to be demanding while poorly informed led them to draw wrong conclusions and punish good men. The backlash of the patrician class, likewise, demonstrates the materialism of

the People as considerations of advantage outweighed the common good.

### **Tiberius' Decline: The Force of Internal Obstacles**

The latter half of Tiberius' enterprise for land reform displays yet another difficulty in leading a democracy. Because the People believed in Tiberius' just cause and genuine feelings, the patricians' attempts to defame his agrarian reforms were not enough to mitigate his influence. Without relenting in their opposition, the wealthy implored another tribune named Octavius to aid their side. Like many politicians before Tiberius, Octavius succumbed to the entreaties of the powerful wealthy party and was persuaded to use the tribunician right of veto to prevent the land reform bill from being put to vote. The power of the veto gave each of the ten tribunes the ability to prevent new laws that they declared contrary to the interests of the People. Octavius' veto – Latin meaning "I forbid" – prohibited Tiberius' bill, put an end to the reforms, and consequently declared the bill harmful to the People. Finally, with the power of a tribune on their side, the opposing party had made inroads on Tiberius' plans.

As the opposition had come from a fellow tribune and friend, Tiberius was caught off-guard. This momentary victory of the patrician party unleashed a side of Tiberius that had heretofore lay dormant. The stress of the event caused Tiberius to drop his moderate approach and embrace a path with severe consequences for his enemies. Plutarch recounts "Tiberius, irritated at these proceedings, presently laid aside this milder bill, but at the same time preferred another which as it was more grateful to the common people, so it was much more severe against the wrongdoers."<sup>12</sup> The new reform bill demanded immediate surrender

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<sup>11</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius*, pg 369.

<sup>12</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius Gracchus*, pg 362.

of illegally gained lands without compensation. The motivation behind this change in policy was not the wellbeing of Rome as had been with the initial, milder bill. Rather, Tiberius' passion against the wealthy class for their seduction of a friend and resistance towards his enterprise drove him from merciful legislation to impolitic punishment. Defeating the patricians by accomplishing the land reform seemingly became Tiberius' new goal instead of justice.

This change in Tiberius was not a change in character, but rather displayed one of his weaknesses. While he maintained the upper hand, Tiberius was able to follow the dictates of his reason and make good judgments – i.e., the formation of his mild bill was equally politically, morally, and economically fair. However, once he was attacked, Tiberius' anger with the patricians and resentment of their challenge caused him to become immoderate and hindered his pursuit of the public good. Plutarch saw such weaknesses as internal obstacles to excellent leadership. Had Tiberius been able to rein in his irritation and keep his focus on Rome's interests rather than his own, Tiberius could have better protected the state and preserved his political position. He lost the personal struggle with his own pride and offense, which caused him to put the implementation and continuation of his land reform (and the consequential punishment of his enemies) ahead of all else and to take several imprudent actions.

While he may still have believed in the justice of his cause, the extreme measures that he took to implement his bill undermined his reputation and the perceived integrity of his convictions. After Octavius' veto and Tiberius' harsher land bill, Tiberius made several aberrant decisions to ensure the implementation and continuation of his agrarian legislation such as suspending the governmental functions, deposing a tribune, usurping the senate's authority, and running for a second term as tribune. To rebut his

fellow tribune's veto, Tiberius declared a suspension of municipal business and warned that severe fines would follow any transgressors.<sup>13</sup> While extreme, these actions were not unprecedented. All tribunes had the power to suspend business if they believed it necessary to the good of the republic. However, freezing governmental functions and monies, while within the legal authority of a Roman magistrate, were powers reserved for extreme situations. Tribunes were officers of the People, elected by the Plebian Assembly to protect against tyrannical use of power by the aristocrat dominated Senate. By throwing around the full weight of his office to exert control over the government (even though in all likelihood he truly believed he was fighting for the Plebes), Tiberius appeared to be overstepping a tribune's mandate in order to seize control of Rome.

Moreover, to add to the appearance of a tyrannical takeover by a tribune, Tiberius also committed two acts that Plutarch describes as "neither legal or fair."<sup>14</sup> First, he violated the sacrosanct office of tribune by deposing Octavius, and secondly, he sought a second term as tribune. Once it became apparent that no amount of persuasion or blocking government function would open the land bill to a vote by the People, Tiberius decided to remove the opposition's ability to veto. To do this he had Octavius stripped of his tribunician powers. Tiberius argued that if a tribune failed to act as the People willed, he then failed his duties to the office and could, therefore, be removed by the People.<sup>15</sup> Before a violent and excited crowd, the proposition was carried in the popular assembly and Octavius was deposed as tribune. Despite the passion for the removal at the time, the justice of the issue was uneasy. The office of tribune had long been respected as inviolable because of its

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<sup>13</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius Gracchus*, pg 362.

<sup>14</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius Gracchus*, pg 363.

<sup>15</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius Gracchus*, pg 366.

connection and duty to protect the common people. To violate a tribune was to attack the People themselves.

The overthrow of Octavius created a precedent that tribunes could be removed for an unpopular action; and therefore, a degree of their discretion and authority was lost. The People eventually realized the impropriety in the act and blamed Tiberius for disgracing a sacred office. Plutarch writes, “The course he had taken with Octavius had created offense even among the populace as well as the nobility, because the dignity of the tribunes seemed to be violated.”<sup>16</sup> The office represented the protection of the common man, and once again Tiberius had treated this office and its duties as secondary to his agrarian reform. However much Tiberius understood his actions as being for the good of Rome, he was increasingly giving the impression that he was using his office to control the state. Moreover, his action proved that if a tribune could rally the people to his side, he could make any law, depose magistrates, and essentially rule Rome singlehandedly.

Once Octavius was deposed, Tiberius’ land reform bills were passed into law. Not content with this, Tiberius’ conceived his second illegal and immoderate act: running for a second year as tribune. The law dealing with the tribuneship (until Tiberius’ younger brother Gaius amended it a decade later) allowed a man to hold the office of tribune for only a single year without the option of reelection. The purpose of this term limit was to mitigate the power of a single individual and prevent the abuse of tribunician power in general. However, Tiberius believed that the only way to ensure that the Senate would not have his reforms repealed at the end of his term was to stay in office.

It became evident that the Senate would not readily acquiesce to Tiberius’ reform even after it was affirmed by vote.

As financial decisions were the prerogative of the Senate, the patricians retained some influence over Tiberius. To facilitate the distribution of land, Tiberius requested funds for a tent, a usual request for such an enterprise, but his opponents saw to it that he got as little of the public money as possible and his request was refused.

In order to bypass the Senate’s grudge, Tiberius took advantage of money bequeathed to Rome upon the death of an ally king. The king had made “the Roman people his heirs” to his fortune.<sup>17</sup> The language of the bequeathal, Tiberius argued, gave the money, not to the Senate, but to the People directly. Tiberius further asserted that the People, then, should determine the use of these funds and as he was their elected tribune, he had the right and duty to allocate it as he saw fit. With this as his justification, ordered that the money be given to those receiving public lands. The grants would allow poor farmers the capital to cultivate their new land and begin producing goods. While the People praised Tiberius, the Senate became greatly offended at this usurpation of their constitutional authority. Once again, Tiberius ignored the repercussions of his actions to his political detriment. He had made progress for his land reform and continued to strengthen the common man, but at the same time he was eroding the security of the Roman republic. His blatant disregard of the unwritten constitution and flippant use of legislative power were the first stones on the road that paved the way for the fall of the Republic.

Tiberius started with the common good in mind, but then was overtaken by his passions. Driven by his desire for reform and revenge against his opponents, Tiberius lost sight of the greater consequences of his actions. He opened up the path for a tribune to seize power and tyrannically take hold of the government. While Plutarch often gives credence to Tiberius’ sincerity, Plutarch also

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>17</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius Gracchus*, pg 365.



leaves room to question whether Tiberius was genuine in his love of the common man or if Tiberius merely saw “a popular enterprise” as a means to satisfy his ambition.<sup>18</sup> Plutarch includes examples of both. In addressing Tiberius’ initial motivation for reform, Plutarch related a rumor of Tiberius’ ignoble intentions to gain the favor of the People and therefore power. Yet, Plutarch counters the rumor with an account of his innocent intent given by his brother that Tiberius was swayed only by a true compassion for the Roman people and hoped to restore their former prosperity.<sup>19</sup>

This seemingly ambiguous explanation by Plutarch is actually rather significant. Plutarch is not wholly concerned with explaining Tiberius’ motivation to act. He leaves to the reader to decide how to interpret the events of Tiberius’ life. Rather, Plutarch concerns himself with displaying the aspects of character shown through Tiberius’ actions. True motivations are rarely straightforward and never clear, but the fruit of one’s soul is displayed through action and this is what Plutarch focuses on. From the account, Tiberius appears to be genuinely fighting for Rome’s good, but even if he had acted merely for power, the lesson is evident: his own lack of foresight and submission to party-spirit was his greatest obstacle to leading the Roman people for their own good. The question of initial motivation is muddled by what is known of Tiberius’ end. Because he continued down the road of political self-destruction by pursuing revenge on his enemies, it is easy – but not prudent – to believe that he had begun in that base condition. Plutarch avoids making an erroneous judgment by presenting both alternatives by allowing the reader to discern Tiberius’ original intentions. Relating how Tiberius stood against the accusations against him because of his “honorable and just cause” and his “genuine

feelings,” and describing his personal integrity, Plutarch makes the case for Tiberius’ sincerity.<sup>20</sup> The deeds of Tiberius seem to show a genuinely devoted statesman who was derailed by anger.

Who was to blame for Tiberius’ fall? His own personal weakness did not taint his early actions, but a change is evident. The patricians, according to Plutarch, shared some of the blame for Tiberius’ fall from excellent leadership. Their original resistance to the mild land bill created such a sense of indignation in Tiberius, that he was tainted by vengeance. The patricians seized upon the negative product of his actions and feared the repercussions. Their opposition, conceived by party-spirit and self-interest, was fueled and partly validated by Tiberius’ unrelenting determination to enact his reform. His choice to run for a second year as tribune seemed to be the final proof of his enemy’s accusations of his desire to establish a monarchy in his name.

In his pursuit of his second term, Tiberius further demonstrated his vulnerability to the lure of party politics. Plutarch notes his indulgence of the People’s desires in order to win their favor for the election. Tiberius used his authority to reduce mandatory military service, increase the common people’s authority in judicial matters, and he also legislated for non-patrician class citizens to hold the position of judge. While these laws align with Tiberius’ platform to promote the people, Plutarch believed that his actions were demagogic and grew from a vengeful spirit. Tiberius, according to Plutarch, promoted such measures “endeavoring as much as in him lay to lessen the power of the Senate, rather from passion and partisanship than from any rational regard to equity and the public good.”<sup>21</sup> He hoped to secure the goodwill of the people through his actions, but his main concern was to

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<sup>18</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius Gracchus*, pg 360.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius Gracchus*, pgs 359 and 357.

<sup>21</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius Gracchus*, pg 367.

undermine the authority of the patrician class and harm those who had wronged him. Tiberius acted out of partisanship, meaning that a desire for his party and for his own policies to succeed had superseded his desire for the political and moral wellbeing of his countrymen. The very same party-spirit that had induced the patricians to fight his first bill, now affected Tiberius himself. All the politicians at Rome were vulnerable to these passions. The mindset of “them against us” easily permeates any government on contentious issues. A good statesman resists the urge to give into the temptation of party politics and rather fights battles for what is good for the state as a whole not the position of one’s party. Tiberius unwittingly lost sight of what connected his ambitions for land reform to the wellbeing of Rome and slipped in to party-spirit. His mistake in judgment reflected his character, and this fault would lead not only to his political demise but also to his own death.

### **The Repercussions of Personal Weakness**

On the day of Tiberius’ illegal reelection, the opposing party forced their way into the rostra, led by Publius Nasica, an aristocrat who held no office at that time, and murdered Tiberius. “This, we are told, was the first sedition amongst the Romans, since the abrogation of kingly government, that ended in the effusion of blood.”<sup>22</sup> One of the unintended consequences of Tiberius’ actions was that it opened the flood gates of violence as a means of political backlash. The opposition had come to hate him personally.<sup>23</sup> The policies promoted by Tiberius were not the opposition’s primary object of criticism as evident by the fact that the Senate “to soothe the people after these transactions, did not oppose the division of the public lands, and permitted them to

choose another commissioner in the room of Tiberius.”<sup>24</sup> Envy of his position of power and anger over their own loss of land and authority through Tiberius’ encroachment of senatorial power resulted in utter loathing. The tyranny that Tiberius’ actions proved possible became a real concern but the fear of it was also used as a political tool to detract from Tiberius’ political popularity.

Tiberius tried to rule for the good of the People of Rome, but was diverted from this aim by the hostility of his peers and his own reactions to that opposition. Plutarch’s *Life of Tiberius* displays the encumbrance of a ruler’s own personal vulnerabilities to his struggle for excellent leadership. Tiberius’ particular weaknesses clouded his judgment and hindered his pursuit of Rome’s wellbeing. Tiberius experienced opposition from three different directions, each of which coincide with Plutarch’s obstacles to excellent leadership: the People, peers, and himself. First, the People are demanding but ill informed so that it generally demands what is not possible or not in its best interest (as evident in the Numantine negotiations). Additionally, advantage makes people act for their own good and ignore the greater needs of society (displayed in the backlash of the Patrician class). Secondly, peer pressure forms a formidable obstacle when fellow magistrates – Roman Senators in this case – fear for their own power. Thirdly, personal character can hinder leadership if it cannot withstand the pressures of the People and one’s peers and the general temptations that attend a position of power.

Politically, Tiberius seemed to be unstoppable and thus, his political rivals found the means of victory over him in his assassination. The problem of peer envy, Plutarch’s second obstacle, not only slowed Tiberius’ efforts to improve Rome but put an end to it. Ultimately, Tiberius’ political legacy was of struggle and violence. His death would not be the final blood spilt over

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<sup>22</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius Gracchus*, pg 369.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>24</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius Gracchus*, pg 370.

political disagreements. Ten years after Tiberius' death, his younger brother, Gaius Gracchus, wrestled with the same issues of opposition and met the same fate. Rome began its decline in the years following this violence.

Plutarch's *Life of Tiberius* helps one to understand how to lead a democracy. Resistance to reform can rarely (or never) be avoided; however, a leader can affect his own reactions by using self-control and use prudent judgment to determine to what extent one should push the reform. Tiberius pushed his land bill at all costs, but a better leader might have examined a measure's possible ripples and weighed those effects on the public good with those of the reform. Self-control and moderation is an important theme throughout Plutarch's writings.

Moreover, a leader of democratic regimes must trust that his fellow citizens can be persuaded of the best action for the nation and rely on extreme measures only when he has determined that the cure is not more harmful than the disease. Tiberius pushed hard to implement his reforms, but in doing so lost sight of the good of Rome. Plutarch liked to compare a good leader to a skilled doctor, but a physician has just as much power to save his patient as harm him, and without careful attention to one's own actions, the latter can occur as in the life of Tiberius.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Aristides

Personal virtue has hardly been displayed in anyone as much as in the Athenian general Aristides. He was moderate, fair, loyal, and honest. His reputation and dedication to Athens helped him rise in politics by the trust he garnered with the People and his fellow political officials. He handled the impediments of a democracy with the goal of improving the states. He learned from his

confrontations with the People and his own peers how to best lead a democratic regime and point it towards virtue. He experienced hindrances from his own pursuit of virtue and from the envy of the People, but the greatest threat to his leadership was in the form of peer competition with the politician Themistocles. Despite Aristides being temporarily ostracized for a number of years, he remained ever loyal to the interests of Athens. The obstacles of democracies thwart good leaders, but these impediments do not make the existence of such men impossible.

From an early age, according to Plutarch, Aristides displayed natural virtue with a "staid and settled temper; intent on the exercise of justice, not admitting any degree of falsity, indecorum, or trickery, no, not so much as at his play."<sup>25</sup> He disliked lying and cheating, and could not tolerate it even for personal benefit. This characteristic stayed with him into his political career. He avoided corruption, and refused to help in any schemes. He believed that acting admirably for the state was good in itself, and as such refused any gifts of money or extra glory. "Holding the opinion that he ought to offer himself to the services of his country without mercenary views and irrespectively of any reward," he was the most incorruptible man in Athens.<sup>26</sup> With this attitude, he did not maintain a grand estate, but lived humbly with little wealth. Typically thought to be a dishonor, his poverty was seen as an extension of his temperance and justice.<sup>27</sup> He put his efforts towards what he deemed the public good and not into increasing his own livelihood.

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<sup>25</sup> Plutarch, Vol.1, *Aristides*, pg 436.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Plutarch, Vol.1, *Aristides*, pg 482.

## Teachings of a Treasurer on the Corruption of Materialism

His integrity was coupled with a boldness for justice. He judged cases disinterestedly, even when defendants tried to appeal to his private feelings, and he refused to tolerate dishonesty in public office. When put in the office of treasurer, Aristides exposed the mismanagement of public funds and identified those to blame, one of whom being the famous Themistocles. Payments had been ignored to benefit certain people among other illegal transactions, and despite the involvement of one of the most popular up and coming politicians, Aristides chose to make the truth known. In doing so, Aristides incurred the ire of Themistocles. Using his connections and influence, Themistocles turned the tables and “impeaching [Aristides] when he gave in his accounts, caused him to be condemned of robbing the public.”<sup>28</sup> Themistocles took vengeance by removing Aristides from the office of treasurer with the very charges that Aristides had accused him of. Aiming for honesty, Aristides choice to act justly was encumbered by the political competition between him and Themistocles. Aristides had his own connections, and regained his position as treasurer while avoiding the fine of Themistocles’ indictment. The noble character of Aristides had gained him powerful friends, and equally as important, had supported him in the eyes of the public during this debacle. Moreover, peer competition did not stop Aristides from achieving his goal of drawing Athens closer to justice.

During his second term as treasurer, Aristides, to test the morals of the city, began to be more lenient in his accounting. He remained silent when men took advantage of the public moneys. The more he seemed to permit corruption, the more the men that grew wealthy from these dealings

began to praise him. These same men who had accused him of embezzlement, were now championing him as a just and wise man and encouraging popular opinion in his favor. However, when publicly before the state for reelection, Aristides once again spoke up with great courage and chastised Athens for its praise of evil and its condemnation of good. He spoke to the crowd saying, “When I discharged my office well and faithfully I was insulted and abused; but now that I have allowed the public thieves in a variety of malpractices, I am considered an admirable patriot. I am more ashamed therefore, of this present honour than of the former sentence.”<sup>29</sup> Aristides renounced the corruption that gave him favor. This act showed a genuine devotion to the city’s wellbeing. Easily, Aristides could have accepted the honor and political benefits of corruption and chosen the path of the selfish, careless rich. Nevertheless, he chose honesty and remained, first and foremost, responsible to his polis.

In this instance, Aristides’ diligence caused his opponents to rage against him. Their drive for wealth was greater than their desire for virtue in public office, so they promoted action that benefited them materially. Just as in the life of Tiberius Gracchus, material desires overshadowed excellent leadership for many individuals. Those surrounding Aristides wanted to continue looting the treasury and, consequently, put pressure on his career to maintain their corruption. Yet, as in the case of Tiberius Gracchus’ return from peace negotiations with the Numantines, Aristides’ reputation frustrated the initial attack of his opponents and regained his position. Aristides remained true to his good character and “gained the real and true commendations from the best men.”<sup>30</sup>

However, Tiberius and Aristides differ in their acts following this vindication.

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<sup>28</sup> Plutarch, Vol.1, *Aristides*, pg 437.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Aristides*, pg 438

Tiberius gave in to anger and retorted with a harsher law bill that increased punishment of the offenders (who were also his adversaries) while Aristides calmly bided his time and pretended to give in to the system's corruption to expose it. Aristides received praise while Tiberius made enemies. This gave Aristides an opportunity that Tiberius did not achieve: the ability to censure the city's corruption. Tiberius offended the aristocratic party and incurred their hatred in an immoderate way. By doing so, any claim of the system's injustice appeared to be a plea for self-preservation and revenge. Aristides, on the other hand, was politically astute and gave up personal gain in order to reprimand the guilty and protect the community's money. Aristides' actions display selflessness, a characteristic that is coveted in democracies.<sup>31</sup> Putting the well-being of the community before himself displayed his love of country, integrity, and excellent leadership.

### **A Selfless Leader and the Irritation of Virtue**

Another example of Aristides' dedication to Athens over his own reputation and glory was displayed in his actions as general at the battle of Marathon. In the Athenian fashion, ten generals, one chosen by each of the tribes, were sent to preside over the army. In turn, each general had full authority for a day and then passed off the command to the next general. This was done to divide

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<sup>31</sup> In a democratic understanding, selfishness is one of the cardinal sins and is looked down upon. Where the People grant power, it also fears the use of that power for objects other than its own interest. Greatness wants praise, and excellence wants honor, but the masses do not trust those who expect admiration. To be part of a democracy is to be a part of a whole and citizens want leaders that want the best for the whole, not just best for himself. Selfishness smells of tyranny. This is where the fear of greatness comes from because it can easily be selfish.

power so that no one man had full control of the army and could use force against Athens herself.

However, one army under multiple leaders does not often tend toward the efficiency and organization necessary for military victory. Unity and consistency was needed especially in the face of the great threat of the Persian invasion of Greece. Aristides understood this need and acted to fulfill it. Plutarch writes, "Every leader by his day having the command in chief, when it came to Aristides' turn he delivered it into the hands of Miltiades, showing his fellow-officers that it is not dishonourable to obey and follow wise and able men."<sup>32</sup> Aristides gave his day of command to Miltiades who was the best of the ten generals appointed to Marathon. Putting aside pride and the personal glory of leading the Athenian army, Aristides once again chose to act for the good of the state by turning over his authority to the man he believed would serve Athens best. The other generals, respecting Aristides example, followed suit and yielded the command undivided to Miltiades. Under a strong authority, the Greeks were able to repel the Persians from Marathon and victory was won for Athens. Aristides' sound judgment and unselfish relenting of power increased Athens' safety and glory. He demonstrated his excellent leadership by leading his fellow generals to do what was best for the state.

Yet, for all of his devotion to the state, Aristides' excellence created difficulties in the public arena at home. At the onset of his public career, the people admired his sense of justice and, as a result, the people called him Aristides the Just. His reputation of integrity had gained him many supporters and furthered his career in government; however, as time moved forward, Aristides' political rivals grew eager to be rid of him and the people grew cold

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<sup>32</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Aristides*, pg 438.

towards his reputation. Plutarch summed up the shift in affection: “Aristides, therefore, had at first the fortune to be beloved for his surname, but at length envied.”<sup>33</sup> The city’s love eventually turned to resentment. This bitterness towards Aristides the Just arose from two sources: peer envy and democratic envy.

Peer envy reared its head in the life of Aristides most notably from another prominent political figure in Athens: Themistocles. Plutarch points out that from their childhood, the two boys were constantly at odds with one another.<sup>34</sup> They differed in just about every way, but the public competition arose from their differing political parties; Aristides for the aristocratic party and Themistocles for the popular party. Aristides often felt it necessary to oppose Themistocles for the good of Athens. The People trusted Aristides’ motives and judgment, which made his opposition to Themistocles frequently successful. As such, Themistocles, who envied Aristides’ sway with the people, desired a chance to get rid of Aristides’ resistance. Thus, when Themistocles sensed the change in public sentiment towards Aristides, he took advantage of the ostracism. Feeding off the recent disillusion with Aristides’ appellation of “Just,” Plutarch describes, “Themistocles spread a rumour amongst the people that, by determining and judging all matters privately, he had destroyed the courts of judicature, and was secretly making way for a monarchy in his own person.”<sup>35</sup> Lying to the people, Themistocles colored Aristides’ reputation with tyrannous intentions giving grounds for which to implement the ostracism. Themistocles wanted to banish Aristides, but no amount of goading on Themistocles’ part could have had an effect on the people if they had not already begun to envy Aristides as well.

Democratic envy formed as a result of the nature of popular people. Aristides had maintained a pure character and acted for the public’s good; however, the people began to feel the weight of his righteousness the more it was asserted. The title of Aristides originated from an excellence of virtue, and virtue calls for others to act likewise. Aristides’ constant appearance before the people as “the Just” aggravated their own sense of injustice until at last they resorted to banish him from the city entirely. Asserting his reasoning for this, Plutarch states, “the spirit of the people, now grown high, and confident with their late victory, naturally entertained feelings of dislike to all of more than common fame and reputation ... giving their jealousy of his reputation the name of fear of tyranny.”<sup>36</sup> According to Plutarch, popular governments naturally envy those with a reputation for excellence when times are good. Yet, popular opinion does not like to admit to acting out of envy or passion and instead creates a rationale to justify themselves. The citizens pretended to banish Aristides for criminal intent, but in reality, they could no longer stand to have a virtuous man in government that reminded them of their own shortcomings.

### The Ostracism of a Just Man

This complex problem of democratic envy of excellence is best encapsulated in an antidote of Aristides’ ostracism that Plutarch records. In the simplest terms, an ostracism was carried out by writing the name of the citizen to be banished on a shard of pottery, called an ostracon. Then the names would be counted and if the required number was reached, the individual with the most votes would be banished for ten years. It often happened that citizens voting for ostracism were illiterate and needed assistance in writing out the names of those they wished

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<sup>33</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Aristides*, pg 439.

<sup>34</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Aristides*, pg 435.

<sup>35</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Aristides*, pg 439.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

to banish. On the day of Aristides' ostracism, a man such as this came up to Aristides in the market-place, not knowing who he was speaking to, and asked him to write the name of *Aristides* on the ostrakon for him. When Aristides asked the illiterate man why he disliked Aristides and if he had ever done the man any personal wrong, the illiterate man replied, "None at all, neither know I the man; but I am tired of hearing him everywhere called the Just."<sup>37</sup> The man felt no need to cover up his feelings and freely expressed his resentment of Aristides' good reputation. The common people simply tire of exalted excellence when they feel they no longer need it. As Plutarch mentioned, the victory at Marathon had given Athens confidence and the people who had wanted Aristides' direction before now felt superior to it and cast him aside.

However, the confidence of the city would not last forever. Three years after his banishment, Aristides was recalled to Athens. The Persians were attempting to invade Greece a second time, and many feared that those who had been ostracized may have wanted to join the Persian side to get back at Athens. Aristides, most of all, had had an immense popularity and would have had the ability to establish a pro-Persian party. But the fears of the people were unfounded. Aristides had never wished ill upon his native city and rather constantly urged his fellow Greeks to withstand Persian influence. Upon returning to Athens, Aristides became an advisor to Themistocles who was at that time the most prominent Athenian. He was once again appointed general and served during the battle of Plataea, which expelled the Persian force from Greece.

After the end of the war, Aristides returned to Athens where he was once more respected for his virtue and integrity. This time, victory did not result in his banishment

because he choose to act in a way that did not inflame the envy of the people. Rather than continuing his former behavior of reprimanding the city for its vices, Aristides, upon his return from Plataea, increased the people's role in government. Aristides understood that the citizens returning from war would be full of spirit and confidence. This coupled with their power and weapons left over from the war could create a difficult situation for the city. To give a vent for this fervor, Aristides introduced a law to democratize government further.

Nevertheless, his legislation was not merely to pacify the people and prevent himself from becoming the aim of their anger again. Plutarch explains that Aristides "deeming the people to deserve consideration on account of their valiant behavior... he brought forward a decree that every one might share in the government and the archons be chosen out of the whole body of the Athenians."<sup>38</sup> Aristides, despite being in the aristocratic party, believed that the men's bravery in battle merited more influence in the government. Citizens that could die for their country's safety and honor deserved an active role in the polis. Learning from his previous experiences, Aristides was able to clear the hurdle of the People's passions by prudently assessing their nature in light of the current conditions, and avoiding criticism while implementing laws that would benefit the whole state.

For these actions and more, Aristides was loved by his fellow Athenians. His excellent leadership caused not only his own city to welcome him back with open arms, but it also drew in the whole of Greece. During his time as General, Aristides had gained a reputation for his virtue and was called to determine the contributions that each Greek city was to pay towards the war effort. This he did in a fair and satisfactory way for the whole of Greece. The Persian

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<sup>37</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Aristides*, pg 440.

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<sup>38</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Aristides*, pg 452.

war had catalyzed a unity of the Greeks to expel the invasion. They united primarily under the military leadership of the Spartan commander Pausanias. However, with the pride of victory and corruption of power, Pausanias, by the end of the war, became tyrannical and selfish, treating most Greeks as little more than slaves. Because of this injustice, according to Plutarch, “The sea captains and generals of the Greeks...came to Aristides and requested him to be their general and to receive the confederates into his command.”<sup>39</sup> Without corruption and injustice, Aristides proved to be a man worthy of leadership. Thus unified, Athens, then, became the leader of the newly created Greek Delian league – the same league that Pericles would later direct. Consequently, the whole of Greece freely submitted itself to Aristides. Promotion to this role affirmed Aristides in the eyes of the public and reaffirmed his judgment and rule.

### **A Devoted Leader Overcoming Obstacles**

With such great power over all of Greece, Aristides remained the good statesmen that he had always been. He never personally gained in a material sense from his position. He determined taxes based on what was necessary and never took anything for himself. In fact, he gloried in his poverty, believing it was a tribute to his virtue rather than a hindrance to his livelihood. This denial of personal gain was one of the aspects of his character that helped deflect the opposition of the People. His public acts, which mirrored his private convictions, gave the people trust in his guidance. While he suffered the hostility of the People from the urging of Themistocles for ostracism, he maintained his devotion to Athens and never desired vengeance for the injustice he bore.

Aristides only encountered the obstacle of personal character when his extreme virtue agitated the citizens’ view of their own virtue. For Aristides, the only issue of his character was that he demanded of his city the same virtue he possessed. He was patient, and honest in his dealings, but when he saw faults in the political system, the People, or his fellow representatives, he was quick to give advice to improve the issue. The constant reminders of Athens’ faults irritated the People. The growing agitation gave Aristides’ political rivals a point of access to incite the People against him. Despite the People ostracizing Aristides, he remained ever loyal and never reproached them or changed his virtuous ways. He merely learned from his experience to treat such sensitive issues with tact and diplomacy in the future.

He further learned, that in order to do what is best for Athens, he may have to give a bit on his personal sense of justice in public matters. While he maintained honesty and fair dealings throughout all of his private life, he chose to favor Athens at times over the rest of the Greeks. In these later years, Plutarch writes, “In public matters [Aristides] acted often in accordance with his country’s policy, which demanded, sometimes, not a little injustice.”<sup>40</sup> Aristides had spent the majority of his life vying for the wellbeing of Athens and when he found himself in debates with the whole of Greece for the location of the league’s treasury, he argued for its placement in Athens as expedient rather than just.<sup>41</sup> In this action Aristides demonstrates a key trait of excellent leadership: self-denial for the public benefit. Just as he had acted in his second term as treasurer, Aristides gave in to vice on a personal level so that the whole could benefit. Tiberius and Pericles both lacked this ability to give up his own desires for the good of the state. Aristides, a man who

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<sup>39</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Aristides*, pg 453.

<sup>40</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Aristides*, pg 454.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*.



strove for integrity and justice, gave up some of his personal virtue for the public good; a trait that made him a truly excellent leader.

Aristides was a devoted leader of Athens until his end. Today, we know very little of how Aristides met his end. The death of Aristides was ambiguous even in Plutarch's time. Plutarch reported that there were stories that he died of old age, others say he died away on public business, but there is even a more heinous rumor surrounding his end. Despite there being no historical evidence or documentation, Plutarch includes in his life of Aristides, a vague tale that survived the centuries stating that Aristides died while on the run from an envious mob in Athens. Plutarch relates the rumor: "After the banishment of Themistocles...the people growing insolent, there sprung up a number of false and frivolous accusers, impeaching the best and most influential men and exposing them to the envy of the multitude, whom their good fortune and power had filled with self-conceit."<sup>42</sup> Aristides, according to the story, was charged with the crime of bribery on a whim of the passionate populace. This crime carried a heavy fine, that, being indigent, Aristides could not pay and so, he left the city and died in Ionia across the sea. Whether true or not, the existence of this rumor gives support to the tendency of the people to accuse great men unjustly out of envy.

The life of Aristides gives great insight into the obstacles to excellent leadership. During his political career, he suffered from the caprice of the People's affections and the attacks of political rivals, but most often he was remembered for his excellence of character. Popular governments crave good men to lead them, and Aristides was often called upon for his virtue to take charge. Aristides gives the example of a

leader of almost purely uncorrupted virtue and a true desire for the wellbeing of Athens. His place in the Athenian government shows that excellence is not in such contention with popular government as to make it incompatible. Democracies want noble and good leaders; however, the perceptions of human nature are often colored by one's desires, needs, experience, or ambitions. Thus, leaders must be aware of the People's impetuses. Leadership must also be coupled with tact in the face of peer resistance such as Aristides used during his role as treasurer and upon his return from Plataea where he prudently handled the People's passions. A democratic people are jealous of their authority and are on constant watch for those who may have the opportunity to reduce it. As such, even those of great virtue have to be wary and guard their actions to avoid the capricious and unfounded envy of those they rule.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Pericles

Plutarch and Thucydides both describe Athens at the onset of the Peloponnesian War as being a democracy in name, but being, in fact, ruled by a single man, Pericles.<sup>43</sup> Pericles was able to lead Athens with exceptional, singular authority because he was moderate, prudent, and understood human nature. By these skills he navigated adroitly through the obstacles inherent in a democratic state; however, even the great Pericles could not escape the fickle sentiments of the People or the envy of his peers. At the onset of his career, Pericles was aware of the public's resentment towards nobility and fear of the upper class. Then, in his service of the common man, he experienced the trust and gratitude of a satisfied

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<sup>42</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Aristides*, pg 455.

<sup>43</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 208; and Thucydides, 2.65.9.

people. However, envy, anxiety, and plague would weaken the attitudes of the People against him, and their sick hearts and minds would demand action against the one to whom they had conferred the responsibility. Pericles provides an excellent example of how to effectively navigate the impediments of democracy and best lead a country for the common good. While he died before his full plans for Athens could be recognized, Plutarch shows a man who could have led his country to excellence.

In the early stages of Pericles's career, he established quite a reputation for himself. He first avoided political affairs and turned to the military life because he was apprehensive of the People's attitudes towards his social status. As a well-bred noble with substantial wealth, Plutarch explains, "he was fearful all this might bring him to be banished as a dangerous person."<sup>44</sup> Even before gaining experience in politics, Pericles understood the public obstacles to being a great leader. Men distrust those with influence, especially in a democracy. Money coupled with familial connections and the stature of noble birth, provided means to sway the government to one's will, and this power was often abused (e.g. the tyranny of Pisistratus, demagoguery of Cleon, etc.) As negative acts leave a more lasting memory, any who appeared on the political scene with these characteristics were quickly judged. This judgment often led to ostracism, or banishment for ten years. Hoping to avoid this fate and making a bad public impression, Pericles joined the military as a youth and proved his valor and virtue in the public's eye before going on to politics.

## Pericles' Clever Persuasion

Pericles entered into politics when his name had already been connected with love of country and strength of soul. Plutarch describes his choice to join the common party as a political one, seeing that the choice would "secure himself" and make him least likely to be suspected of "aiming at arbitrary power."<sup>45</sup> He was always aware of the difficulty that fear of ambition caused. He aimed to assuage these fears and in most of his actions, displayed his ambition for the state over his own personal benefit. His early political measures were criticized by comic poets as demagoguery: pandering to the desires and whims of the People. Pericles petitioned to distribute public monies, land, and other resources for the benefit of the poor. He also recalled Cimon, a rival politician that he himself had worked to banish, when he sensed that the People desired Cimon's return.<sup>46</sup> The most magnificent of all his early dealings was the creation of the religious buildings of the Acropolis; an act censured by the People when they first saw the great expense, but eventually accepted because of the People's desire for prestige and Pericles' clever persuasion.<sup>47</sup>

The Athenians had acquired a large amount of wealth in their treasury from the growing empire. Pericles believed that Athens should use the money for a lasting marker of the state's magnificence by erecting temples on the Acropolis. But Pericles wanted more than a lasting symbol of Athens' wealth, he also wanted his people to benefit economically from the public building project. With such wealth in Athens' treasury, Pericles found ways to disburse the money to the citizens so that the wealth could benefit the People. Those who joined the army received salaries from the state, but

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<sup>44</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 206.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 209.

<sup>47</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 211.

Pericles wanted to share the wealth with the citizens who remained at home as well. Pericles conceived the project on the Acropolis as a way to give the money to the People without spoiling their civil character by granting them money for being idle. The massive building project Pericles envisioned would contract hundreds of artisans and use large quantities of materials that would be purchased through local merchants. As the project would take many years to complete, it promised to give a substantial and extended boost to the economy that would reach nearly every trade.<sup>48</sup>

Yet, at the time these works were proposed, the People opposed the spending of their gold, and had trouble understanding the benefits of such an undertaking. When the citizens expressed their disapproval of the project as squandering public funds, Pericles presented the Assembly with an alternative: “let the cost not go to your account, but to mine; and let the inscription upon the buildings stand in my name.”<sup>49</sup> After hearing Pericles’ proposal, the Athenian people quickly changed their minds. If glory was to be had from the credit of building such a grand edifice, then the People wanted it for themselves. It took the threat of honor going to Pericles himself to make Athens realize that the honor was worth the expense. Soon afterwards, a vote for the construction of the temples using money from the city’s treasury passed with demands to spare no expense.<sup>50</sup>

This debate over the temples exposes two obstacles to good leadership that the masses cause in a government of the People. The many often have a hard time seeing the true benefit of certain policy especially when the benefit is primarily long term, and they are more motivated by greed and envy than reason. The Athenian people could not comprehend the enormous benefit to their

society, but instead got caught up on the immediate expense of the project. Because of their shortsightedness, the People rejected Pericles’ proposal. When Pericles suggested he would himself take the prestige of the buildings, the Athenians desired the fame of the project and could not stand to see another take an honor over them. In many respects, the People as a whole are fickle in policy because of their changing passions. Pericles understood the fickleness of the People, and played off of their desire for prestige to influence their opinion of the building project. Any politician who strives for the wellbeing of the state has to understand and work around the short-sightedness and fickleness of the populace. Pericles believed that the grandeur of Athens and the prosperity of its people was important to uphold; and he, by understanding the capricious nature of the People, was able to manipulate them to follow his suggestions for policy, and they loved him for it.

These two inadequacies of the People are the same two issues which Tiberius Gracchus would deal with 300 years later; however, unlike Tiberius, Pericles was not hindered by the fickleness and cupidity of the People. Rather, Pericles fully understood these vices and found ways of persuasion that would use those vices to the advantage of society at large. When the people were ignorant of the benefit to the state from the Temples, Pericles relied on their tendency to desire personal benefit and prestige to get the job done. Whereas, Tiberius fought the passions of his opponents with his own passion, Pericles exercised moderation and wise deliberation. This difference in character, allowed Pericles to meet impediments with finesse and success. As a result, Pericles was able to convince the public to trust his leadership.

In all of his actions, Plutarch (the great analyzer of men’s characters) does not condemn Pericles for being an indulger of the People. Instead, he praises him as having

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<sup>48</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 212.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 214.

the wisdom of a doctor: “he did but like a skillful physician, who, in a complicated and chronic disease, as he sees occasion, at one while allows his patient the moderate use of such things as please him, at another while gives him keen pains and drug to work the cure.”<sup>51</sup> Pericles had the ability to know what desires of the People he could give in to, and still work for the wellbeing of the polis. The benefits which he granted were sufficient to appease the masses, but not so luxurious as to spoil their character for government.<sup>52</sup>

Not only did the People respect Pericles for his beneficences but also for his ability to converse with the public. Pericles was a man of spectacular rhetoric and could speak in a way which effected the “the strings and keys to the soul.”<sup>53</sup> He had an ability to flesh out the desires of people and convince them of the best course of action. They listened to him because he spoke well, but they adhered to his words because of something more. “The source of his predominance,” in Plutarch’s words, “was not barely his power of language, but, as Thucydides assures us, the reputation of his life, and the confidence felt in his character; his manifest freedom from every kind of corruption, and superiority to all considerations of money.”<sup>54</sup> The People adopted his suggestions, because they knew him to be more than merely a man of good repute and that his reputation matched his true character. The facts of his life, his moderation in all he did and his honest dealings in public affairs secured him in the People’s affections. He abstained from increasing his personal wealth, despite his power, and put all his energies towards improving the state. He merely maintained his own estate so as to

use it for his family and benefit the needy by it.<sup>55</sup>

Aristides and Tiberius also made efforts not to materially benefit from their positions. Not taking advantage of the wealth that power can give is a defense of some of the obstacles to greatness posed by the people. Tiberius gained favor not only from his own people and military peers, but also was respected by his military enemies for his unselfish dealings with the Numantines. Aristides was also trusted because he chose to reject affluence and never gained financially from his policies. By rejecting extravagant, personal wealth, a leader disarms one of the main fears of the People: that they will be used merely for personal gain and their wellbeing will be ignored or even harmed. Moderation, especially in this respect, seems to denote a deference to the will of the People and repel additional envy that could harm one’s political rule. Pericles, instead of satisfying his own wants, put his efforts into improving Athens and gaining their trust.

### **Pericles’ Personal Virtue as a Public Vice**

Despite the good reputation that Pericles fostered, he was not immune to the obstacles of democracies. His power incurred envy, whether from the aristocrats that found his grants too favorable to the base or from the common masses that saw the creation of the Acropolis as autocratic. This envy caused his enemies to sue him and his close friends in court. Pericles had shown that he could withstand personal attacks, but eventually his enemies realized that his weakness was in his love of his friends. Three of his most intimate friends were charged with life threatening crimes.

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<sup>51</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 215.

<sup>52</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 208.

<sup>53</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 215.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>55</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 216-217 (This is also reminiscent of the life of Aristides where he abstained from gaining personal wealth from his position in Athens).

Phidias, an artist – and friend of Pericles – whom was placed in charge of the decoration of the Acropolis died in prison as a result of the malice towards Pericles; Aspasia, Pericles' mistress, was charged with impiety and brought before a jury; and his teacher, Anaxagoras, was charged for teaching “new doctrines about things above” just as Socrates was, and forced to flee the city.<sup>56</sup> These attacks on the people closest to him showed the animosity towards Pericles. While Pericles had always dealt with external pressures with moderation and prudence, the threat to his friends could hardly be tolerated by the great ruler.

That he reacted negatively at all, however, was a rarity for Pericles. He did not generally succumb to the impediments of democratic governments; but in this case, the pressure was more than he could personally handle. To distract his enemies from their malice towards his friends, Plutarch notes that Pericles “kindled the war, which hitherto had lingered and smothered, and blew it up into a flame; hoping by that means, to disperse and scatter these complaints and charges, and to allay their jealousy.”<sup>57</sup> Pericles sensed that Athens' desire for war was great enough that if he acquiesced, it would satisfy their anger towards his own person. Although he knew this war would be against Athens' best interest, his weakness for the ones he loved took precedent. The war that Pericles kindled was no small contest, but the Peloponnesian War in which Athens lost hold of its empire. In this way, Pericles allowed personal desires to prevail over the public good.

The pressure of the People and his political rivals caused Pericles to forget the duties of a leader. If Pericles did not believe that the war was in the best interests of Athens, he should have held out against the passions of the People as he had previously. However, this fault of a leader is difficult to

weigh in its reciprocal virtue of a private individual. Pericles dropped everything to save the ones he loved, even his duty to the state. Thus, it follows that to be an excellent leader one must surrender his own personal good to that of the entire society and where they conflict, choose the public good over private gain. This decision is extremely difficult and requires an enormous amount of will. Despite the good Pericles accomplished, this character decision to sacrifice all for his kin ended up being a political weakness that hindered his ability to be an excellent leader. The resistance, once great enough and directed at a weakness, can cause even the most capable of men to lapse. In addition to the external opposition of peers and the People, internal obstacles arise from weaknesses when the backlash of politics affects one personally.

Pericles' story is similar to that of Tiberius Gracchus, who, when his moderate land bill was shot down lost his moderation, assumed a harsher bill, and illegally deposed a fellow tribune. Both Tiberius and Pericles show that an inner struggle threatens excellent leadership in addition to the external impediments of other people and events. The fight is to not take it personally, and become confused in one's priorities. Individual passion can preempt the leader's good intentions for the People, by causing him to choose sub-optimal strategies that appease his sense of indignation, but ignore the needs of the people, which are the leader's first priority.

While Pericles did give into personal interests, nevertheless, his reaction cannot be equated to that of Tiberius. Tiberius resorted to extreme, unconstitutional measures that eroded the stability of Rome as a personal vendetta against the Patrician class. Pericles, on the other hand, saved others who were unjustly treated because of their association with him; and encouraged a war that seemed both inevitable and desired by the people.

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<sup>56</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 228.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

## Pericles Prescribes Harsh Treatment

With the mobilization for war, the Athenians turned to Pericles to lead them. Once the Athenians gave the leadership of the Empire to Pericles singularly, there was a change in his approach. Plutarch says that he was “no longer the same man ... nor as tame and gentle and familiar as formerly with the populace, so as readily to yield to their pleasures.”<sup>58</sup> He continued to be the great physician of the state, allowing only what would do them good, but it had come time when pains and drugs were needed over pleasures. He spoke to them and curbed their desires when necessary. No longer would he appease the masses with pay for public duties, appropriations of lands, or stipends for theaters.<sup>59</sup> Often, the citizens were hungry to engage the Spartans on the battlefield and retaliate against the destruction of their lands, but Pericles would not allow the people to satisfy this desire. He believed in undertaking military action only when risk was low and advantage worthwhile. When suitable, Pericles used the army, but always looked to save the lives of his people rather than gain the glory of battle out of a “wisdom and love of his countrymen.”<sup>60</sup>

Compared to their rivals the Spartans, the Athenians were less prepared for a land war. Any battle on land, especially one begun on Spartan terms, would be a swift and devastating loss for Athens. Not only were the Spartan soldiers better trained for combat, but they greatly outnumbered the Athenians as well.<sup>61</sup> Realizing this, Pericles urged his people to stay within the city walls and limited their efforts to naval attacks. At times, the Athenians were huddled within the walls of the city while the Spartans were

a small distance away devastating the countryside. Many within the city could see the enemy destroy the houses, temples, and marketplaces of their hometowns. Pericles used exceptional prudence and judgment in convincing the Athenians to refrain from leaving the city to meet the Spartans.

Unfortunately, Pericles’ appeals to the People’s reason eventually lost their effectiveness. The suffering of destruction enraged the People for war. Pericles perceived the weakening of the People’s resolve and feared that these temporary passions would legislate military action. The cost of such a policy would be the lives of thousands of Athenians, a price too high in Pericles’ mind. Because of the great tension regarding this issue, Pericles suspended the People’s voting rights. “He did not convene the people into an assembly,” Plutarch writes, “for fear lest they should force him to act against his judgment.”<sup>62</sup> Using delicate judgment, Pericles chose what he believed the lesser of two evils, the suspension of civil rights, over the annihilation of his people. Pericles acted on the far limits of statesmanship and his actions could easily be questioned as despotic, but, Pericles is redeemed in the eyes of history by his dedication to Athens’ wellbeing and his avoidance of personal gain by his power.

Once again, he acted with the discretion of a doctor. Ignoring the cries of the people, he prescribed and enforced a treatment that would save their lives if they could only endure the pain. Mourning, anger, and restiveness grew in the people; the Athenians could only hold out for so long, despite their trust in Pericles. While he would not ease their suffering by granting them the battle they wanted, Pericles strengthened their morale with public grants and divisions of land taken through naval engagements.<sup>63</sup> Giving the people new wealth relieved some of the mental and material

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<sup>58</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 215.

<sup>59</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 208.

<sup>60</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 218.

<sup>61</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 229.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 230.

stress caused by the invasion and eased the passions that clouded their reason. Restraining the People showed genuine good leadership on Pericles' part. He chose to act for the safety of the Athenian people. He withstood numerous attacks for not advancing on the enemy; but, as Plutarch states, "Pericles was not at all moved by any attacks, but took all patiently, and submitted in silence to the disgrace they threw upon him and the ill-will they bore him."<sup>64</sup> He dedicated himself at the expense of his honor to the good of the city. While it was immensely hard to allow the desolation, Pericles' policy chose the lesser of two evils. Had the Athenians stayed to defend their villages, they would have failed against the superior Spartan army, losing in addition to their property, their lives.

### **Sick Hearts Reject an Excellent Leader**

While Pericles tried to make the best of the situation, the passions of the People would come to threaten his rule. Athenian citizens crowded together in the city according to Pericles' strategy. However, the close quarters that prevented slaughter by Spartan sword soon produced its own horrors. Disease and plague swept through the city in 430 BC. Thousands died, and generous estimates say that the Athenian plague wiped out a fourth of the population.<sup>65</sup> Oppressed by invasion and disease, the general unhappiness of Athens reached its zenith and turned to discontent for Pericles and his policies. Plutarch writes, "the people, distempered and afflicted in their souls, as well as in their bodies, were utterly enraged like madmen against Pericles, and, like patients grown delirious, sought to lay violent hands on their physician, or as it

were, their father."<sup>66</sup> This time, Pericles could not reason with the citizens and convince them of his prognosis. They swiftly passed judgment upon him, voted him out of office, and punished him with a fine. They also sent ambassadors on to Sparta to commission peace, of which nothing came.<sup>67</sup>

No act of Pericles could mitigate the People's passions, but their punishment of him assuaged their rage against him. The People had desired a scapegoat for their misery, the many deaths and unhappiness needed to be avenged, but once they had vented their passions through judicial institutions, the People regained their sanity. The true statesmen's job is a hard one, he must give the credit to the state when he does good, but he also bears the blame when the nation's luck turns sour. The People demand accountability for all negativity, even in the case of a natural phenomenon such as the plague, a fate that no one could have controlled. As the leader, the responsibility was laid on the head of Pericles. After discharging their rage on Pericles, they soon called upon him for his help (he was not banished and while his absolute power was removed, he still maintained his generalship). However, his rule did not last much longer. The plague hit a second time, and in its wake Pericles caught the disease and died before he could see the city out of harm's way.

From his deposition, Pericles experienced a long established truth – the people rarely recall the good done for them for very long. There appears to be a collective amnesia of the public for the virtues of their current leader, and that half-life is especially short when the times are hard. The shortsightedness of the People is a huge obstacle to great leadership. Additionally, as evident from Pericles' struggle to win support for the building project on the Acropolis, envy, considerations for material gain, and ignor-

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> The Asclepion, pg 1

<sup>66</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg. 230

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

ance cloud the People's ability to perceive the public good rightly. Pericles had to constantly remind them of what was good for them. He convinced when possible, and at times pushed them against their wishes; but always orchestrating for the best interests of Athens. He skillfully cajoled and convinced when able, and would dictate and demand when forced; but no matter the method employed, Pericles deftly wielded his words to induce the survival of his patient, with the least injury to the body.

## CONCLUSION

It is difficult to rule, but more so to rule well. Plutarch's *Lives* provide numerous examples of excellent men and their struggles to succeed in leading a democratic people. A good leader directs policies to bring about the public good while an excellent leader achieves it; however, neither discerning nor accomplishing the public good is an easy task. Plutarch's portraits illustrate three chief impediments to excellent leadership in a democratic regime: the leader's own personal weaknesses, the peer competition arising from the envy, ambition and self-interest of the leader's fellow officials, and the inadequacy of the People. These three problems, as we have seen in the lives of Tiberius, Aristides, and Pericles, arise through various circumstances. While even the best of leaders cannot avoid them entirely, by understanding them, a leader can prepare to surmount such obstacles and provide for the interest of a democratic state.

### Personal Weakness

Personal character is primary. A leader needs to have foresight and prudence akin to Pericles when he persuaded the Athenians to resist a land battle with Sparta; he also needs integrity and humility such as

Aristides when he determined the tax system for the Delian league.<sup>68</sup> Virtue is necessary for an individual to be an excellent leader, for without virtue man cannot put aside his own desires for the good of his country. A leader may have private vices, as all men are fallible, but when those vices condemn him in the public eye or cloud an individual's understanding of his role as a leader, they hinder his pursuit of the public good.

Tiberius is a prime example of how a personal weakness can undermine a leader's excellence. Plutarch describes Tiberius as a man of upright character and a noble heart: "[his] valour in war against [his] country's enemies, [his] justice in the government of its subjects, [his] care and industry in office, and [his] self-command in all that regarded [his] pleasures, were equally remarkable."<sup>69</sup> During his career in the army and his early work in politics, Tiberius was courageous, fair, and diligent; however, he had a spirit that was susceptible to strong passion. This aspect of his character remained in check during his rise to popularity and into his appointment as tribune. He was able to discern Rome's problems, and found a solution in land reform. He championed policy that he believed would increase the public wellbeing. It was not until the other Patricians roused vehement opposition against these policies that Tiberius' weakness was illuminated.<sup>70</sup> Tiberius had labored to solve the agrarian problem fairly, but once his hard work was utterly dismissed, his sense of indignation clouded his reason.

Once he allowed his passions authority over his person, Tiberius began to lose his prudent judgment. He resorted to extreme uses of his tribunician power, supported harsher reforms, undermined tradition by removing a fellow tribune from office, and illegally ran for a second term as

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<sup>68</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 218 & *Aristides*, pg 453.

<sup>69</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius*, pg 357.

<sup>70</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius*, pg 362.



tribune.<sup>71</sup> Nearly every one of these acts on its own was contrary to the public good. Tiberius' actions inadvertently eroded Rome's stable system and demonstrated a tribune's ability to seize tyrannical power. The fault in his character caused a confusion of priorities in Tiberius. To lead for the good of the state, a leader must be able to separate his own desires from the interests of the society and place the public good above his own. Tiberius's anger obscured his understanding of his actions; while he believed that his reforms would improve Rome, he was blind to the harm that he was causing through the means he used to achieve those reforms. Unfortunately, Tiberius gave into his weakness and never achieved the good that he had hoped.

Aristides and Pericles also dealt with the complication that their personal characters clashed with the public sphere. Aristides did not suffer from immoderation as Tiberius did; rather, his extreme virtue formed a peculiar fault: a sanctimonious condescension toward the People. As Plutarch relates in the story of Aristides' appointment as treasurer, Aristides used his position to point out embezzlement and censure Athens' faults.<sup>72</sup> Aristides revealed corruption and vice for the purpose of improving Athens, but the method in which he critiqued Athens took the form of a rebuke rather than advice. Plutarch quotes his chiding of the People: "When I discharged my office well and faithfully, I was insulted and abused; but now that I have allowed the public thieves in a variety of malpractices, I am considered an admirable patriot. I am more ashamed, therefore, of this present honour than of the former sentence; and I commiserate your condition, with whom it is more praiseworthy to oblige ill men than to conserve the revenue of the public."<sup>73</sup> While he gained respect for his integrity in the situation,

reprimands of the public character in this self-righteous manner eventually irritated the People and led to his ostracism. However, as we shall see later, Aristides' ostracism was a result, not only of his sacrosanct attitude but also of peer competition and the fickleness of the People. Aristides' fault did not directly impede his pursuit of Athens' wellbeing, but it was important because it excited the passions of the citizens who, in turn, barred his ability to lead by sending him into exile.

Pericles also dealt with the internal impediments produced by his personal temperament. Plutarch accuses Pericles of inciting the war with Sparta in order to free his friends from the malicious attacks of his political enemies.<sup>74</sup> Similarly to Tiberius, Pericles was pushed to considerations of personal concerns by the attacks of his political opponents and in this instance, Pericles chose to sacrifice public safety for private interests. Pericles had always submitted to the reproaches of the People and threats of his rivals with tact. "Pericles," Plutarch wrote, "was not at all moved by any attacks, but took all patiently, and submitted in silence to the disgrace they threw upon him and the ill will they bore him."<sup>75</sup> The "young athlete of politics" was able to accept harm to his own person from Athens, but the molestation of his close friends was more than he was willing to sacrifice for the public good.<sup>76</sup>

While this devotion to his friends can be seen as a virtue in private citizens, it becomes a sin for a leader. The people of Athens had entrusted great powers to Pericles for the purpose of protecting the state. To use that power to spur on a war contrary to Athenian interests to facilitate personal

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<sup>71</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 2, *Tiberius*, pgs 362, 363, and 365.

<sup>72</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Aristides*, pg 437.

<sup>73</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Aristides*, pg 438.

<sup>74</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 228.

<sup>75</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 230.

<sup>76</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 203 – Plutarch calls Pericles "the young athlete" of politics which reflects of his dexterity in maneuvering through the hurdles of democratic leadership.

goals, even if those goals were noble, was a crime against duty. Pericles should not be condemned as a bad person for such a choice, but if the requirement of excellent leadership is that one always acts for the State's best interests, then it cannot be denied that Pericles failed in this respect. The Peloponnesian War, which Pericles provoked, resulted in victory of Sparta and the dissolution of the Athenian Empire. Ultimately, this mistake of Pericles was punished in the destruction of Athens. Pericles demonstrated the moderation and self-awareness necessary to overcome this obstacle; however, it seems his Achilles' heel for his friends clouded his judgment. He either chose his intimates over the state as a whole, or was confused by desires to protect them as to the repercussions of his actions. Either way, Plutarch finds a fault in this Titan of leadership for his acquiescence to an internal impediment.

### Peer Competition

Character weaknesses are an internal issue, for which the leader is responsible; conversely, peer competition is an external obstacle that results from the jealousy of one official in respect to the authority or position of another. Aristides' life presents a clear study of the effects of rivalry from fellow public officials and underscores Plutarch's second impediment to excellent leadership. The source of rivalry in Aristides' career was the politician Themistocles. As Aristides had garnered a good reputation with the People for his justice and integrity, he "set himself against all Themistocles did" to protect Athens.<sup>77</sup>

Aristides set himself as an obstruction to Themistocles' rise to power and he received the reciprocal opposition from Themistocles. Aristides fought more than fairly, using prudence to accomplish good

policies. This involved not taking credit for his own legislation, for instance. "He often brought in his bills by other persons," Plutarch states, "lest Themistocles, through party spirit against him, should be any hindrance to the good of the public."<sup>78</sup> Aristides understood that peer rivalry could harm his pursuit of the public good. Knowing that Themistocles would stop even legislation which was beneficial to the polis in order to thwart him, Aristides was able to obtain public benefit by removing his name, and therefore Themistocles' opposition, from the needed policies.

However, Aristides did not completely dodge all of the consequences of peer competition. After many public challenges with one another, the opportunity eventually presented itself to Themistocles to rid himself of Aristides' competition. The People of Athens began to grow proud because of their victories against the Persians, and as a result, they were offended at Aristides' constant chastisements and appeals to improve themselves. Themistocles seized upon this discontent and inflamed the passions of the People against Aristides, bringing about his ostracism.<sup>79</sup> As a result of Themistocles' opposition, Aristides was banished from Athens for three years before he was recalled. For those three years, Aristides was unable to directly lead Athens, but he continued to promote its wellbeing by being an advocate abroad for its interests. Aristides was utterly barred from influencing policy during his exile, but his strength of character and genuine love of Athens prevailed over the force of peer competition. Once recalled, his integrity recommended him to his people and he was granted substantial authority over the cities allied to Athens that would eventually form the Delian League.

Aristides survived his fellow leaders because of his virtue. Tiberius and Pericles,

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<sup>77</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Aristides*, pg 436.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Aristides*, pg 439.

however, were not as fortunate. Whereas Aristides' character succeeded over peer opposition, Tiberius' and Pericles' characters caused them to succumb to it. Tiberius lost sight of Rome's true interests by succumbing to the zeal of indignation at the unjust opposition of the Patricians. He failed to moderate his own emotions in response to political attacks, and this bent his actions away from the public good towards his own personal vendetta. Likewise, Pericles ushered in the war that would lead to the dissolution of Athens' hegemony in the Hellas to save a few of his closest friends. Tiberius' weakness comes from a personal vice of immoderation and lack of self-control; harder for us to accept is the case of Pericles, in which private virtue was equally problematic for bringing about the best interests of the state. To achieve the good, a leader must put aside his personal desires (whether they be honorable or not) if they interfere or conflict with the necessity of society at large.

### **The Inadequacies of the People**

The third impediment of a democratic regime, the inadequacies of the People, is an obstacle peculiar to popular governments. The People pose a rather broad complication for leaders. Democratic regimes derive authority from the citizens and, therefore, its leaders are duty-bound to serve the public's will. However, as men are fallible, a society of men takes on its own vices. Plutarch despises democracies for their base characters. The *Lives* of Pericles, Tiberius, and Aristides display the many vices of the People, most notably their fickleness, tendency to envy, lack of information, shortsightedness, and selfishness for personal benefit over public good. The problems caused by these natural traits of the People ebb and flow as the majority sentiment changes. The challenge to leadership comes when these characteristics

obscure the People's understanding of their own interests.

Pericles' life presents a clear illustration of the inadequacies of the People and gives examples of how to surmount this difficult obstacle. For example, the construction of the Acropolis demonstrated the tendency of the People to be shortsighted and also envious of personal glory. Pericles had organized the building project for the good of Athens, but the People had trouble perceiving the benefits that Pericles envisioned. Pericles wanted to enrich the people of Athens with his building projects. Those who had gone into military service received pay from public money, but Pericles hoped equally to enrich those who remained at home. An extensive public project requiring many artisans and materials was a perfect opportunity for Pericles to enrich both the state's glory and the individual's well-being.<sup>80</sup>

The People, however, did not understand these benefits but only saw the great expenses to the city. Pericles made plans for creating several public and sacred buildings that would demand much labor and expensive materials.<sup>81</sup> Many people griped about Pericles' extravagance. Having learned of the People's growing enmity, Pericles addressed the popular assembly and asked if the construction project was too extensive for the public to support. Overwhelmingly, the consensus was against Pericles' idea. When the assembly expressed their disapproval of the construction, Pericles answered, "since it is so, let the cost not go to your account, but to mine; and let the inscription upon the buildings stand in my name."<sup>82</sup> While Pericles may have been simply magnanimous in offering to fund the large public works project, Plutarch suggests that Peri-

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<sup>80</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 212.

<sup>81</sup> Including the Parthenon and other temples, the long wall, the Propylaea (gateway), and the Odium (music room).

<sup>82</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 214.

cles was using his understanding of the People's nature to change their decisions. Pericles' offer immediately charmed the People and convinced them not only to agree to Pericles' plan but also to encourage him to greater expenditures.

Within a short time, the people had changed their minds, but it was not due to Pericles' ability to persuade them of the true benefits of the public works. The creating of jobs and a lasting monument to the polis' prosperity and power was not a powerful enough motivator for the people. Instead, Pericles had to remind the People of the immediate gain of fame from such an accomplishment. When he threatened to take the credit for the buildings along with the burden of paying for them, the People reacted "out of emulation of the glory of the works."<sup>83</sup> Their motivator, according to Plutarch, was an ambition to equal or excel Pericles in honors. Envy for collective glory convinced the Athenians to fund the building, and Pericles foresaw that his words would have this effect. The People demonstrated their shortsightedness by focusing only on the immediate expenditures and fame of the project instead of seeing the more subtle and long-term economical advantages.

Since lack of forethought threatened to hamper Pericles' policies for good, he used the People's tendency to envy for his own means. In this case, Pericles' used a form of trickery to accomplish economic benefit and public glory. When any of the People's vices becomes unresponsive to rational persuasion and the People become resolute against the public good it seems that a democratic leader's only recourse is prudent deception. Such a remedy walks a fine line between statesmanship and tyranny, but a good leader will only use such cunning persuasion to bring about benefits for the state. The People were so blinded by their shortsightedness that Pericles had to resort

to playing off the People's envy for glory to influence their decision.

Similarly, Aristides experienced the envy and shortsightedness of the People but, unlike with Pericles, Aristides' encounter resulted in exile. Aristides continuously worked for the public good and always put Athens' interests above his own. He justly adjudicated situations and strove to instruct Athens towards virtue. Plutarch, however, remarks that despite his goodness, Aristides was "at length envied" by the People. His unrelenting righteousness stirred up feelings of inadequacy in individuals that manifested themselves in jealousy and resentment. Unable to reach the heights of Aristides' virtue, the People became irritated by Aristides. Moreover, they concerned themselves with their immediate frustration with his reputation than with the good he had done for them. The shortsightedness of the People works both ways: it is slow to see future repercussions and quick to forget the benefits procured.

The People's vices often cause them to harm their own interests, and a poorly informed populace only serves to magnify those problems. Pericles understood this problem very well. During the first year of the Peloponnesian War, the Spartans ransacked the towns and lands outside the walls of Athens. Unprepared for hand to hand combat with the trained Spartan infantry, Pericles warned the People to stay within the walls and refrain from fighting. The People became grieved and disgruntled with the destruction of their property and desire to retaliate. The Athenians were unable to grasp the whole picture. Many did not know the unfavorable odds that awaited outside the walls, and underestimated their own lack of ability on land against the Spartans. This ignorance nearly drove the citizens to plunge into a battle they could not and would not have won.

Yet Pericles, being the statesmen that he was, did his best to correct this issue.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

He spoke to them often, keeping them informed of the danger, and he reminded them that their lives were more important than their lands. Discontent grew, and when his words were no longer enough, Plutarch explains that “he did not convene the people into an assembly, for fear lest they should force him to act against his judgment.”<sup>84</sup> Pericles, knowing that the people were distraught and that their judgment was impaired, took precautions to prevent their current despondency from directing Athens down a path of ruin. Plutarch compares Pericles to a skillful ship captain who minds his ship in a storm with his expertise and judgment, ignoring the cries of the sea-sick passengers.<sup>85</sup> Pericles carefully persuaded when persuasion was possible, but when that failed, he took measures to prevent the People from harming their own wellbeing.

In order to do good Pericles had to suppress free speech, essentially, by shutting down the democratic government and briefly ruling as an autocrat. As with the building project on the Acropolis, reasonable persuasion does not always convince the People of the right course of action. When this happens, a leader must balance the consequences of free will with that of a suspension of civil rights.<sup>86</sup> Defeat and certain death for thousands of citizens was too high a price for Pericles to allow the People their choice in the matter. Pericles perceived the influence that ignorance and suffering would have on the People’s political decisions, and cut them off before they could harm themselves.

In addition to causing errors of military or political policy, ignorance often

causes democratic citizens wrongfully to reproach the decisions of their leaders who have better knowledge of a situation. Pericles managed to keep the Athenians within the city’s walls despite their desire for war. Likewise, Tiberius dealt with the backlash due to the Roman people’s lack of knowledge during his return from negotiations with the Numantines.

After the Roman army lost a devastating battle to the Numantines, Tiberius served as an emissary from the defeated side to determine conditions for surrender. Tiberius managed to procure an agreement that saved the lives of all surviving Roman soldiers, a tremendous accomplishment under the circumstances. However, the People remaining in Rome thought the whole transaction was ignoble and reproached the officers. They had expected a victory, and when the battle was lost, they demanded a more advantageous deal than Tiberius had negotiated. Their poor understanding of the situation lead them to unrealistic expectations. Tiberius made the best of the circumstances, but without knowledge of the specific circumstances, the People easily reproached him. Whereas Pericles survived the waves of the People’s passions with skill and communication, Tiberius relied on his good reputation and the corroboration of his fellow soldiers to convince the People of his just dealings.

Lack of experience and knowledge of specific situations creates a disparity between what the People want and what they often get. This disparity mixed with the shortsightedness, materialism, and jealousy of officials produces a substantial obstacle for leadership. The People, while shown in a negative light in these examples, is also the bulwark against tyranny. In the same way as the just statesman is slowed by the will and passions of the People, so is the despot. A society with a belief in civil rights will support the authority of its citizens to have an effect on the ruler even if it has

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<sup>84</sup> Plutarch, Vol. 1, *Pericles*, pg 229

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Modern Example: Abraham Lincoln, at the onset of the American Civil War, suspended habeas corpus and freedom of speech in some areas to provide first for the continuation of the union of the states. Without union, Lincoln believed, there could be no protection of civil rights; and therefore, a temporary suspension of rights was permissible.

tendencies to thwart the actions of good men as well. Because of this, the power of the People will remain strong in a free society, although when their inadequacies, such as shortsightedness, materialism, envy, and ignorance divert that power against the common good, excellent leaders will have difficulty accomplishing good.

### **Surmounting the Obstacles of Democracies**

Each of the three impediments we have discussed here: personal weakness, peer competition, and the inadequacies of the People, can pose great threats to an individual looking to lead a popular regime. These obstacles can be seen as both internal and external impediments; personal weakness is for instance an internal issue of one's character that can only be corrected by moderation and self-awareness. While character is the product of education, birth, and experience, an individual has the ability directly to affect it through dedication. If this internal impediment is not surmounted, then it is extremely difficult for an individual to determine let alone accomplish the public good. Tiberius suffered greatly from the internal obstacle, succumbing to anger and a vengeful spirit he ended up bringing more evil to Rome than good.

The external impediments of peer competition and the inadequacy of the People have to be overcome differently. Plutarch reflected on the core problem of these impediments: “[peers and the People] although controlled by the statesman, control him, and although carried along by him, carry him along, since he has no firmly established strength to oppose those from whom his strength is derived.”<sup>87</sup> The problems of one's peers and the public are inherent to popular governments. At times,

these obstacles must be evaded, as in the case of Pericles refusing to convene the assembly of the People out of fear that they would force his hand to war. Other times, they must be confronted head-on, as Aristides did when he exposed the long-standing corruption in Athens regarding the treasury post.

A thorough understanding of these issues is also often needed so that preemptive measures can be made to avoid unnecessary provocations of one's peers and constituents. Tiberius, Aristides, and Pericles each refrained from monetarily gaining from their positions of power and built virtuous reputations through military careers before rising in politics. These reputations often saved these leaders from backlash of passions; for instance, when Tiberius' reputation with his soldiers defended him against Roman outrage over the loss to Numantium. However, there will always be time in a statesman's journey that he cannot prepare for or avoid, but rather he must look to persuade this fellow citizens to choose their own interests rightly. Pericles persuaded the Athenians to stay behind the walls; however, as the circumstances worsened, persuasion by reason was not enough. In extreme circumstances, persuasion may take the form of manipulation and coercion as Pericles' suspension of the Assembly. This act, must never be used lightly or frequently, but with great prudence to determine its necessity.

All of these obstacles spring from the weaknesses of human nature. As one great statesman once said, men are not angels.<sup>88</sup> Because of this, those who govern must understand human nature and its tendency to hinder the public good. While it is possible to overcome these obstacles, it takes a wise person with an honest heart, strong resolve, and many other virtues to successfully

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<sup>87</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia: On Monarchy, Democracy, and Oligarchy*, pg 1.

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<sup>88</sup> This great statesman was James Madison and this is a paraphrase of his sagacious Federalist Paper No. 51.

navigate the obstacle course of popular politics. As human nature does not change from generation to generation, but is a fixed constant, the same impediments can be seen in the democracies of our own era. Many today lament whether or not an excellent leader is even possible. It must be if human nature has not altered; we merely have not seen anyone who has a proper understanding of the impediments to good leadership so as to overcome them and implement the best interest of the country.

Additionally, it may be worth reflecting on how much we personally take part in being an impediment. For those who share in governing or those who make up the People, it is important to be aware of how our own vices can affect our perceptions and encourage our actions. The obstacles of personal weakness, peer competition, and the People's shortfalls have been factors in all democratic regimes and will continue to be in the future. While no state will ever be made complete in its fairness, prosperity, and quest for the common good, the pursuit of these can be less encumbered when the leaders know the hoops that have to be jumped through and the hurdles that must be surmounted. The People as well have a responsibility for the quality of its leaders. Citizens need to be vigilant in becoming informed, checking their passions, and looking for non-immediate repercussions. As the source of authority, the People are duty bound to be protectors of the public good rather than its enemy. Only by understanding and checking its vices can the People open the road for great statesmen to lead. If the People can moderate its vice, there is no necessity for such extremity as used by Pericles when he suspended the Assembly in Athens.

Plutarch understood that directing a popular government was possible, but demanded a delicate touch. The great historian and philosopher compared the works of a good leader to the art of a master musician

tuning his instrument: "the real statesman will... get on well in a democracy with its many sounds and strings by loosening the strings in some matters of government and tightening them in others, relaxing at the proper time and then again holding fast mightily, knowing how to resist the masses and to hold his ground against them."<sup>89</sup> Prudence becomes the most important virtue that a leader possesses. Thus, knowing when, how, and to what extent one must act is the secret to orchestrating the government in accord with the public wellbeing according to Plutarch. Plutarch's literary craftsmanship in the *Lives* holds great truths not only of the ancient past, but also applicable and indispensable for the present. To succeed, virtuous leaders must learn the harmonious chords of democracies so that they can compose their rule in such a way as to create a symphony, and conduct the nation's true interests and wellbeing. But equally, the People need to participate in the harmony of the state by being aware of its own faults, and striving to become informed, thoughtful, and sensitive of the public good.

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<sup>89</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia: On Monarchy, Democracy, and Oligarchy*, pg 1

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