

NEMESIS: ALCIBIADES AND THE FALL OF ATHENS

(DAVID STUTTARD)

January 14, 2020

We live in an age lacking dynamic leadership. We are instead led, if one can call it that, by men who are clowns, feminized, or confused—or, often, by confused feminized clowns. The idea of a charismatic, ambitious, intelligent, unapologetically masculine leader has entirely vanished from our minds, in part because we see no examples among us, and in part because we are indoctrinated such men are retrograde and properly consigned to the past, and we should accept our new, apparently vat-grown, “leaders,” typically resembling some hybrid of John Kerry and Trigglypuff. Still, a heretical little voice whispers to us, pointing out that eras of human flourishing and accomplishment are always led by men of glory, and asking us, why is that?

To answer that question, and learn some related lessons, we cannot do better than review the life of one of the most famous Athenians—Alcibiades, son of Cleinias. Born in 450 B.C. and dead by the arrows of assassins forty-six years later, his life must be read to be believed. In past eras, his story was taught to schoolchildren and known by all, but no longer, since schoolchildren are only taught about stupid, unimportant, unaccomplished (or pernicious) people who check the right identity politics boxes. At least among sectors of the Right, though, Alcibiades has recently returned to the spotlight, thanks to the pseudonymous Bronze Age Pervert’s peerless reimagining of Mitt Romney if he had been Alcibiades. Romney could never have been Alcibiades; that’s the joke, and the point—but to fully get the joke, it helps to know the background, and this outstanding book is a good way to learn it.

You don’t have to be on the Right, though, to benefit from knowing about Alcibiades, and David Stuttard’s *Nemesis* captures Alcibiades in all his genius and contradiction. We know from the title that the ending is not a happy one for the main character. Or maybe it is, given his premises, and the premises of the time. The Greek philosophers knew, as was carved on the façade of the temple at Delphi, that man should pursue “Nothing in Excess.” But the philosophers, though we remember them as the most important men of the age, were in fact often looked

down upon by the doers of the age, who did not, usually, respect the Delphic maxim. And none less so than Alcibiades.

Alcibiades's motivations are clear, even at this great distance. His core motivation, common among the Greeks but taken to a fever pitch by the greatest among them, was the desire, like Achilles, "always to be best and to surpass all others." For us, tempered by two thousand years of Christian belief, of exaltation of charity, love, and selflessness, and contempt for pride as being the greatest sin, it is hard to truly embrace this attitude. But the desire to be best, better than others, is a natural attitude among men, held with greater or lesser fierceness (and nearly completely lacking in women, even if nowadays sometimes shallowly implanted by ideological indoctrination). Everything Alcibiades did was to advance this goal, with a single-mindedness, an obsessiveness, that always characterizes those who accomplish great things—but with terrible costs, for others and, ultimately, for Alcibiades, though he would not have counted any of that cost.

As with all histories of the Ancient World, for nearly every event he narrates, Stuttard has to select among competing sources, usually written years later, often of dubious veracity. Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War* is his main source; Stuttard suggests, without exactly claiming, that Alcibiades may have been a direct source for Thucydides, offering his own spin, which is certainly possible and would explain various elements of the *History*. (I don't know if this theory is original to Stuttard.) The contemporaneous plays of Aristophanes pillory Alcibiades (often lightly disguised), but as the author notes, Alcibiades was always enormously controversial, so even from such direct sources an accurate picture cannot be guaranteed, and sources from centuries later are even less reliable. Still, the basic story of Alcibiades's life is not in dispute.

He was born in 450 B.C., a member of the Athenian elite, with high aristocratic lineage from both his parents, though his mother's family had been exiled more than once. His mother, Deinomache, was married and divorced from Pericles, the greatest Athenian of the age, before she married Cleinias. And when Cleinias was killed in battle in 447, Alcibiades was sent to the household of Pericles to be raised as his ward. Thus, Alcibiades grew up during the years of Athens's greatest glory, after the defeat of the Persians and before the Peloponnesian War.

Tales, perhaps apocryphal but showing how he was viewed by contemporaries, are told of his childhood and adolescence. The tales prefigure his later reputation, as a boundlessly immodest, but super-competent, glory hound always willing to take risks greater and matters further than others, disrespectful of authority, prone to using violence to settle arguments, and hyper-sensitive to slights or to being seen as other than the best in any endeavor. And, given his social role as a member of the aristocratic elite and a member of Pericles's household, he was also exposed to the rough-and-tumble of Athenian politics, which was not a gentle sport.

When the Peloponnesian War began in 431, Alcibiades eagerly went to war. He fought as a hoplite at the Athenian victory at Potidea, early in the war; it was told that, advancing too far into the enemy's ranks, he had to be saved by Socrates, under whom he had earlier studied. Naturally, his bravery was admired, in that age when martial bravery was the core measure of a man, and Alcibiades rapidly entered the public life of Athens, funding liturgies and engaging in politics. But he was also already collecting enemies, lots of them, as we can tell from his being repeatedly satirized in the plays of Aristophanes. The war ground on, with Alcibiades enrolling in the cavalry, which fit since he was obsessed with horses, a typical aristocratic pursuit. He again and again showed his bravery and managed to not be hurt or killed, and when he turned thirty, he became eligible for elective offices, both military and civil. At that moment, however, Athens and Sparta signed the Peace of Nicias in 421, pushing the pause button on the war.

During the troubled Peace, Alcibiades pushed an aggressive line, keeping himself in the forefront of Athenian politics, and of Greek politics more generally, entering multiple winning chariot teams at once at the Olympic games and spending every day, all day, being a tireless self-promoter. He was instrumental in demanding the destruction of Melos, the aftermath of the famous Melian Dialogue, which encapsulates the dominant Athenian attitude of the time toward other Greeks. Naturally, all this made him even more enemies, who sourly, but perhaps accurately, viewed his self-promotion as that of a man who wanted, not like Pericles to be "first citizen," but to be a tyrant.

Fitting the pattern that characterized his life, Alcibiades reached too far. When the war fired up again, he was one of the major advocates

for the massive Athenian expedition in 415 to conquer Syracuse, which failed disastrously and resulted in tens of thousands of Athenian deaths. It was just prior to the launch of that expedition that Athens was rent by the mysterious destruction of the Herms, idols set up throughout the city as defenders of it. Suspicion fell on Alcibiades, known to be irreligious (though, as Stuttard points out, it is extremely unlikely that Alcibiades would have deliberately jeopardized the Syracusan expedition he had worked so hard to accomplish). And then his enemies also accused him of profaning the sacred Eleusinian Mysteries—but postponed his trial until the Syracusan expedition, on which Alcibiades would sail, should return.

And sail he did. But neither he nor the expedition returned. Halfway through the expedition, with his enemies working overtime back in Athens, the Assembly sent a ship to arrest Alcibiades and return him to Athens to stand trial for impiety and sacrilege. Instead, he fled to Sparta (and the Sicilians destroyed the rest of the Athenians), Athens's greatest enemy, and offered his services to them. At this point, two related characteristics of Alcibiades come to the fore. First, he was able to, apparently overnight, completely adapt himself to an alien culture, and participate in it at the highest levels, as if he had been born to it. Second, he turned traitor at the drop of a hat; this was only the first instance. Alcibiades was for one thing only: Alcibiades, and the rest of his career is testimony and confirmation.

It helped his transition that Alcibiades had Spartan friends and connections, some by happenstance, some because the Athenian aristocracy always had a tense relationship with democracy and tended to feel commonality with other Greek city-states that had an aristocratic government. Back in Athens, Alcibiades was formally cursed by the priests, all his wealth was confiscated, and a stone set up listing his disgrace. To boot, he was sentenced to death in absentia.

He ignored Athenian rage, and used his rhetorical charm to convince the Spartans he was really on their side. He promptly began feeding the Spartans state secrets learned in Athens, and giving them excellent strategic advice, while engaging in sophistry like "I'm doing all I can to reclaim a homeland I no longer have." Then he had an affair with the wife of one of the two Spartan kings (he was, no surprise, a famous playboy in Athens too), probably fathering a son by her. He also became

involved in the machinations between Sparta and Persia, the latter angling again for influence over Greece, especially in Ionia. Stuttard deftly describes the complex Persian involvement in the war, although he has the annoying habit of insisting on using Old Persian forms of names, hence Darayavahuš, complete with diacritics, instead of Darius.

The Persians played off the Spartans against the Athenians, but at this time were supporting the Spartans. So, fighting in Ionia, perhaps sensing a wavering of Spartan support for him, Alcibiades fell in with the local satrap, Tissaphernes. For Alcibiades was not only a first-class orator; he also had that type of personality difficult to withstand in person, which meant that he often carried the day in the fiercely argumentative councils of his time. The defect in relying on that talent to win arguments, though, is that when you're absent, the effect wears off. In the 1990s, before he returned to Apple, Steve Jobs ran NeXT, and he kept the company afloat by wooing investors caught in his famous "reality distortion field." But he couldn't enchant everyone at once, or use his talents on consumers, and so his company never really succeeded. For such men (and they are all men), it is only when underlying conditions conspire to push your line in your absence, to make it stay appealing and the obvious choice, that this strategy will work for long, and Alcibiades was always being called away. (Moreover, the flip side of the reality distortion field is often narcissism without self-reference, combined with a belief in your own destiny. These are probably necessary elements to its success, but faced with the right opponents, and the slightest setback, this can be used against you.) So when the Spartans arrived to arrest Alcibiades, he had already shifted his loyalties to the Persians, in 412 yet again skipping out just ahead of the executioner.

Now Alcibiades morphed into a Persian, effete in Greek eyes, but effective in the tangled politics of Persia. He helped the Persians play the Spartans against the Athenians. Soon enough, the desperate Athenians, negotiating with Alcibiades, offered Tissaphernes a better deal than the Spartans for Persian support—including eliminating Athenian democracy, and letting Alcibiades return, because Alcibiades convinced them he controlled Tissaphernes. Which he didn't, but he figured he would worry about that later. But he didn't go back to Athens yet, instead fighting in northern Ionia and Thrace, now against the Spartans. In 407,

finally, he stage-managed his return to Athens, to great acclaim, as the savior who would now lead the city, at long last, to victory.

Then it all went permanently wrong, after so many years of juggling, balancing, and lucky escapes. The Persians went back to the Spartans; it became clear Alcibiades had lied about his influence. He sailed out as commander of the Athenian fleet and lost most of it, at the Battle of Notium (conducted recklessly by an incompetent subordinate, but Alcibiades got the blame). He could win no victories on sea or land, but needed money, so he looted a city loyal to Athens. Quickly, and logically, the Athenians turned against him, and once again, Alcibiades got out while the getting was good—to Thrace, land of hard-drinking horsemen, cousins of the Greeks, where he had allies, and again mutated himself, to a Thracian prince.

But in 404, Sparta finally defeated Athens, and imposed the oligarchical rule of the Thirty on Athens. The Thirty acted to eliminate their enemies, and their enemies included Alcibiades, a free floating threat who might pop up any day to destabilize the fragile state. Alcibiades, sensing the danger, inexplicably left Thrace, where he was relatively safe and functioned as a warlord, and moved back to Persia. The satrap Pharnabazus put him under house arrest, in Phrygia, and Alcibiades waited for an audience with the Great King—no doubt, he hoped to once again rise to glory, and could not do so in backward Thrace. But the Athenians and the Spartans both wanted him dead; Pharnabazus obliged, sending his own uncle and brother to do the job. They stole his weapons, set his house on fire and shot him down as he rushed out to fight, naked, with only a dagger. So passed Alcibiades, son of Cleinias, to his eternal reward, whatever that may be.

I keep promising lessons for today, so what are those, or some of those? First, Alcibiades is a prototypical Man of Destiny. My belief is that such a man will inevitably rise to power following a future fracture, and though the timing is impossible to predict, I'd guess sooner rather than later. Troubled times call forth such men, even if we have mostly forgotten they exist. Much of the reason Alcibiades was able to cut his flaming arc across the sky was the instability of his times. War, economic turmoil, changes in attitudes, all played a part; in a more stable time with less tolerance for flash, say Augustan Rome, he would have toed the line or ended up quickly dead. But in the right circumstances,

such a man can become dominant nearly overnight (something hinted at in Trump's rise, with all his gross defects and without most of the virtues of Alcibiades).

As Stuttard discusses, as the centuries passed, Alcibiades became partially fused in the public imagination with Alexander the Great. This was inevitable, no doubt, not only because their careers bore a surface similarity, but because every society needs heroes. Success when alive means the masses overlook the missteps and vices, and time after death gives a sheen to achievements and buries the errors and crimes. I celebrate Hernán Cortés, man of contradiction and high fortune, but let's be honest, if he had lived closer in time to us, it would be harder to overlook his sins and failures. No matter—what is important is that the masses need a hero and a broken society needs a leader. This suggests that when the modern Man of Destiny arrives, a pent-up hunger will smooth his path.

It is not to the contrary that Alcibiades was ultimately unsuccessful, or that his slippery ways were often far from admirable by our standards (or, though to a lesser degree, by the standards of his own time). A man largely unbound by the past is needed to reboot society and, no doubt, cometh the hour, cometh the man. There are other examples, such as Napoleon, or, again, Augustus—not clones of Alcibiades, to be sure, but sharing many of his core character traits. Each such man is tailored to the society and times in which he rises, so each is different. But one must be very careful of what one dreams; like wishes granted by a djinn, the results of the Man of Destiny are unpredictable, at best, and very unpleasant, at worst. Thus, for example, it seems to me increasingly unlikely that the man who will arise in the coming fracture, great or small, will exemplify Christian virtue, even if he claims to be Christian. Much more likely the pagan virtues will overtly reassert themselves—not fake pagan virtues manufactured by twentieth-century ideologues, but the real pagan virtues, for good or ill.

And what does this imply for America's resurgent Right? Success, most likely, since its program is that of reality, but that is not my topic here. Rather, it has been much on my mind of late what alliances will form in the days immediately before us, and survive the acid test of effectiveness in the looming wars to come. Those very different can form binding alliances in the face of evil; the most evocative are J. R. R.

Tolkein's fictional cross-species alliances. But can a believing Christian form an alliance with, or serve, a modern-day Alcibiades, who cares nothing for Christianity or Christian core values, yet advances many of the same goals, seeks human flourishing, and, most importantly, smashes our common enemies? Is there a point at which such strange bedfellows, pagans and Christians, cannot coexist within one society? I don't know, though in the short term at a minimum, I strongly endorse the alliance, both because it's a winning one, and I like to win, and because, as Rod Dreher points out all the time, Christians simply don't have numbers or the Zeitgeist on our side, so I conclude the only solution is alliances.

Second, the times of Alcibiades offers a lesson about how our own times will develop. This period of Greek history offers innumerable examples of the destruction of comity within Greek city-states. The most famous is Thucydides's description of how Athenians turned on each other, ending hallowed freedoms of speech and engaging in political violence. It's safe to conclude that this is the inevitable arc of democracy (Peter Turchin would say of any society), and that the set of civil rights tied to republican government under the American Constitution of 1787 is a system that only works in a relatively homogeneous society that has a high degree of collective virtue, and then only for a short time, as counted on historical time scales. We can be sure the same breakdown will happen here; it is obviously already well under way as shown by the suppression of speech and violence visited by the Left on the Right since 2016. It is a fantasy to pretend otherwise; we might as well accept it. There is no way back, only forward, through the fire. Trying to turn the clock back to 1787, or 1865, isn't going to work. A new thing, for a new age.

Third, and more obliquely, any book about great men contains an implicit lesson about how we teach the young. As Plato said, the stories we tell "mold and shape" our children, and that is why curating them is important. The Left knows this, and the catamite Right refuses to fight them, which is why the Left is able to indoctrinate our children in ever more extreme ways. Not just in school—I watched part of *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* on an airplane the other day, gazing in horrified wonder at the wide range of ludicrous propaganda. Among other indoctrination, the movie continuously portrayed and valorized Mary Sues of

approved victim groups as world-bestridding heroes, while men were shown as simpering, vacillating weaklings, who, in rare moments of competency, still knew their proper place, subordinate to the Mary Sues. Or, to take another media example, that clutch of odious homosexual brainwashers, GLAAD, having achieved its goal that a preposterous ten percent of “regular characters on primetime scripted broadcast series” be portrayed as sexual deviants, rather than saying “thank you” to the media which thus toadies to them, immediately demanded that the new goal be—twenty percent. All of this is bizarrely anti-reality, yet we are fed so much of it we often do not realize it, and our children are defenseless against these attacks (except mine—they consume a steady counter-diet, along with weapons practice). Teaching stories such as the life of Alcibiades, and drawing proper, and subtle, lessons, cleanses the mind of such rot, so I strongly recommend every family read this book, and books like it, and that parents then direct children what they should learn from heroic men of history—including that what is past, is prologue.