

Classics and Strategy

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The original idea funded by the Smith Richardson Foundation was to combine a series of essays with a year-long informal seminar to discuss some of the classic texts that were relevant to how we think of strategy, how we assess enemies, or how tyrants act. A group of wise and lively young professionals spent several evenings in their busy lives to read a few of these books with me, engaging in discussions that at least for me were very fruitful. I cannot thank them enough.

Several of the essays in this book have been published before. The chapters on Plutarch, Xenophon and Aeschylus have appeared in shorter versions in *The*

American Interest. Chapters on Tacitus and Montesquieu have been published in *Orbis*.

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*"Homer is original this morning, and
nothing is perhaps so old as today's
newspaper."*

Charles Péguy

Introduction

The unifying theme of this book is the argument that classic texts – whether by Roman historians such as Tacitus or Greek tragedians such as Aeschylus – give us important, and even unusual, insights into strategy. They certainly do not supply a ready-made strategy that could be applied to a specific security problem we face now. Guicciardini or Montesquieu have nothing to say about how to rein the People's Republic of China or what posture to take in order to deter Putin's neo-imperial Russian project. All these ancient authors are concerned with the circumstances of their own times, colored by the peculiar characters of great men leading their polities to success and perdition. Even if they may hope that their written words will be a possession forever, as Thucydides claimed, they are limited by the human mind, incapable of seeing the future and certainly of providing a plan for action to posterity. Most writers, that is, are children of their time and not prophets of the future.

But classics are classics for a reason. We read them less to discover historical facts and more to uncover eternal truths. In the realm of strategy, they open for us new or forgotten ways of thinking about threats and the competitive security environment, offering a perspective that is missing in modern intellectual and educational circles. Free of technical jargon and without abstractions, classics favor simplicity over simplification, privilege practical insights over abstraction, and elevate the role of individuals over impersonal trends and institutions.

Classical texts, whether recounting history or describing a tragedy, have a lasting quality to them exactly because they seek to uncover the deepest thoughts and desires of man. They understand that strategy is not a plan, a design to be implemented, but a relentless strife to exercise power over others. Hence, it requires knowing the others and being ready for the possibility of tragedy. For example, any good strategy must be founded on an understanding of the rival, of how he may react, and of what he aspires to achieve. Strategy, therefore, goes hand in hand with anthropology, understood as the broad study of man rather than the narrow academic field. In order to act, one must know against whom one is acting: the rival is not an inert bloc of marble upon which one can implement a design, but a willful actor who responds.

Classics are useful precisely because they offer what much of modern thinking about strategy lacks: a deep grounding in reality. Modern strategic thought is shaped by three broad ideas. First, a belief in the equal rationality of all; second, a trust in impersonal forces, often progressive in

nature; third, a resulting penchant for data gathering. These are all linked by the discounting of the role of the individual statesman, the person who has a more insightful understanding of the political landscape or who plays the role of a quasi-demiurge of the strategic environment. The strategist, for this modern mindset, is replaced by the planner and the manager.

The simplifications at the basis of this modern mindset thus miss one crucial, and yet elusive, factor: the complexity of the human mind. The Chorus in Sophocles's *Antigone* famously summed it up: "Numberless wonders, terrible wonders walk the world but none the match for man."¹ Obviously this – the infinite, terrible man – is too infinite of a concept to be a useful variable for strategic thinking. But it serves as a powerful reminder of the limitless possibilities that political interactions can take. Man is endowed with free will, moved by reason but also by passions; it is both a calculating, rational being and a raging, impulsive animal. Wrath, fear, or love are unpredictable and no data-gathering operation can encompass them. In the end, competition and war are not driven by mathematical equations but are a clash of minds and wills, fears and desires, often only loosely connected to the quantifiable and calculable material capabilities.

Being exposed to a classical perspective on strategy may now be more important than ever. The United States and the West are competing with tyrannical regimes of

¹ Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1984), *Antigone* #377-8, p. 76.

various stripes, run by a small number of individuals whose minds are difficult to comprehend. We are also competing in distant lands, a situation that puts a premium on our ability to develop appropriate knowledge of the enemy, his *modus operandi*, his goals and his fears. And in response we often rely on large data collection (more intelligence) and technological solutions (kinetic strikes from afar), useful but imperfect and dangerous approaches. The former can only accumulate information on what the enemy is doing, not on how he thinks and thus what he may do; the latter is a reactive approach that ignores the political dynamics of the targeted region. Data collection is not the same as knowledge; targeting is not the same as political influence. Both are symptoms of our inability or unwillingness to comprehend the enemy.

What we need is to develop and maintain the ability to think about rivals of whom we know little and whose behavior we find surprising. One way of addressing this challenge is by studying ancient history and ancient writers. The classical Greek or Roman mind was shaped by a sense that our data will never be sufficiently ample to comprehend the limitless possibilities of our rivals' minds. Nevertheless, in order to compete and beat our rivals we need to see the world through their eyes. These writers are aware that we are not interchangeable calculating mechanisms, and behave differently because of free will, honor or rage. Such a mindset characterizes also the writings of more recent thinkers, such as Guicciardini or Montesquieu, who remained alert to the importance of the

particolare and to the paradoxes of politics, all stemming from the infinite possibilities of the human mind.

But the modern approach to studying politics, as well as all other realms, limits the spectrum of causes to material and calculable variables, the working of which can be generalized and thus abstracted. As the historian Christopher Dawson put it,

In place of the Aristotelian doctrine that the heavens were moved by conscious spiritual substances, which derived their eternal motion from God, the unmoved mover, there was now substituted a conception of the world as a vast machine, consisting of material bodies situated in absolute space, and moved by mechanical physical laws. The ultimate realities were no longer spiritual substances and qualities, but Space, Matter and Time.²

The classics put a premium on the role of the particular individual man, rather than abstract impersonal forces. The “space, matter and time” variables are, in the classical mindset, not the decisive forces determining our actions.

There is a tragic quality of the individual who acts because the contest is often unfair (yes, sometimes because of the participation of higher forces, the various pagan deities) and posthumous glory is, well, posthumous. The

² Christopher Dawson, “The Historic Origins of Liberalism,” *The Review of Politics* 16, no. 3 (July 1954): p. 272.

good and decent often lose. Hector, the devout husband, father, and citizen, is killed and Troy is destroyed. But the broader point is that people fight despite the odds, from positions of material weakness. They fight because of a whole spectrum of reasons that cannot be easily calculated. And the outcomes are unpredictable and often undesirable. As again Sophocles put it in *Antigone*,

Man the master, ingenious past all measure
past all dreams, the skills within his grasp –
he forges on, now to destruction
now again to greatness.³

Most of the classic writers did not assume equal rationality of all involved, and were perhaps more creative in penetrating the mindset of foreign foes. With often scant information, Athenians or Romans sought to be *advocati diaboli*, the enemy's advocates, in order to understand his worldview and hence his strategy. It is sufficient to read speeches put in the mouth of Rome's enemies by the historian Tacitus (e.g., Calgacus's speech in Tacitus's *Agricola*) to marvel at the ability of a strong supporter of the Roman empire to understand the motivations of the rebellious populations. Or one can consider Aeschylus's tragedy, *The Persians*, in which he describes the emotions of the Persian court and leadership after their defeat at Salamis. The Renaissance writer, Francesco Guicciardini, in his own way, shares the skepticism about the universal rationality, and thus uniformity of behavior, of all, pushing

³ Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, *Antigone* #406-409, p. 77.

us to appreciate the particular character and mindset of political actors.

But there is more. Permeating the classics is a sense that knowing the landscape, the political dynamics, and the rival is useful, perhaps even necessary, but insufficient for action. It is certainly tempting to ascribe enormous importance to knowing the enemy and the theater of action. If, for instance, one knows how the opponent thinks – and perhaps even what he thinks and what he can achieve – then the temptation is to believe that one can control the outcome of the rivalry. Such knowledge gives not just prescience of the rival's moves, but the keys to how to direct him through pressure and incentives to the desired results. This stems from a peculiarly modern belief that the accumulation of knowledge (the quantity of intelligence) is a path not only to our understanding but also to our ability to manipulate the great mechanism of nature of which politics is a part.

Such modern temptation leads to strategic gnosticism: the belief that knowledge will be the source of our security and victory. To know the enemy is to know how to win. Knowing the enemy replaces decision making and prudential judgment, turning strategic interactions into a mechanical process in which inputs (one's actions) can be measured precisely to attain the wanted outputs (the rival's behavior). As a practical result of this thinking, greater faith and thus resources are bestowed upon intelligence gathering, which is expected to generate the knowledge of the enemy. In itself, more intelligence – more “knowing” – is desirable because it is to be expected that the rivals will possess various secrets, whether in terms of capabilities or

intentions, that may damage us. The risk is that the policy makers will seek a reprieve from the hard and often tragic necessity to take decisions by subcontracting it to the intelligence gatherers. Knowledge, or absence of it, supplies the decision or lack thereof. The problem therefore lies not in the intelligence activity or in the necessary task of assessing the enemy but in the political leaders that elevate the “knowing of the enemy” to a position that is duly occupied by themselves. Classical writers offer a good corrective to this modern temptation of strategic gnosticism and never lift from the shoulders of statesmen the ultimate responsibility – and the associated possibility of tragedy – for acting.

Finally, as part of their appreciation for the diversity of politics and the infinite possibilities of the human mind, classical writers often focus on tyrants. Tyrants were not remnants of a disappearing age, or anomalies on the political scene, but frequent players. In fact, the temptation of most polities was to slide toward tyrannical rule. Not surprisingly, both Greek and Roman – but also later, Medieval and Renaissance – writers studied tyrants, trying to understand them, manipulate them, advise them, or simply, suggesting best ways to eliminate them and, if that proved to be impossible, to live under them. Regrettably, modern language and thought have effectively expunged the word “tyrant” from their lexicon, diminishing our ability to assess many of our enemies. And in the prolonged excitement of the end of the Cold War, we deluded ourselves that tyrants were a reality of the past. Many classics can disavow us of this notion of the historically

transient nature of tyrants while studying how their fears and cravings shape their domestic and foreign behavior.

The premise behind the essays that follow is that reading the classics is fruitful and, in fact, more essential now. We may be entering an age when strategic competitions are determined less by material resources and more by the character of the rivals. When the enemy is menacing less because of his capabilities – large armies, well developed economies, or mass population that can be drafted for an aggressive purpose – and more because of his capacity to think of surprising forms of attacks, the art of assessing the rival and of being open to a wide range of behavior (and thus of surprises) rises in importance. Such an art is also more difficult to pursue because it is not sufficient to count the GDP or the artillery tubes or the manpower of the enemy. The menace is in the enemy's mind more than in his arms or factories.

And this is why classics are important. They train our minds to accept the limitless possibilities of man's behavior, the relentless competition and strive of human affairs, and the crucial role of particular statesmen. In the years to come, we will face more competition from several disparate actors (peer competitors, middle-tier nuclear states, various groups). A militarily more powerful but perhaps socially more fragile China will continue to test our power in the Pacific; a proto-imperial Russia, led by an autocrat or a group of *boyars*, will vie for greater control over Europe's eastern frontier; and the wide availability and ease of use of lethal technology will continue to empower small groups, making them capable of great disruptions. Rivalries

and competitions will not disappear, and the spectrum of conflicts is widened. We need to buttress our intellectual foundations by examining case studies and texts that privilege the strategic (as opposed to a merely planning) role of leaders. And we must consider rivals that will fight regardless of their position of relative power or of whether they are on the “wrong side” of history or large trends. A Guicciardini can alert us to the necessity of understanding the particular; a Tacitus can offer us an appreciation of political order and of how to live under a tyranny; a Xenophon or a Suetonius can give us an insight into the mind of tyrants, full of fears, poisoned by adulation, and with short-term calculations (in Plato’s words, “plunder he must have from all available sources or his life will be torment and agony”). This is a mix that no modern grand theory, limited by its abstraction and blinded by its simplification, can fully grasp.

*"[They] for
want of an enemy, long cherished a too
lasting and enfeebling peace: a state
more flattering than secure; since the
repose enjoyed amidst ambitious and
powerful neighbors is treacherous."*

Tacitus, Germania

Chapter 2:

Plutarch and the benefits of having an enemy

Great power rivalry and competition are back. We officially recognize, as clearly stated in the 2017 National Security Strategy, that the U.S. faces competitors and rivals, and that the world is not on an inevitable path toward harmony. To be even more blunt, the U.S. has enemies of different stripes positioned all along an extended frontier spanning the globe. American citizens and U.S. allies must brace themselves for the many demands the coming decades will make on their moral and physical resources, if they want to maintain the international political equilibrium that underwrites their liberty.

The existence of enemies today is no cause for despair. Their presence is not an anomaly, but rather a

constant in history: Enemies and rivals will never disappear. The defeat of one enemy is likely to give rise to another, perhaps of a different type and power, but none the less dangerous. Social interactions inevitably generate friction and rivalries; blissful isolation invites envy; and friendships and alliances are both a response to, and a source of, enmity. Regardless of how hard we try to live in harmonious relations with others, enemies will remain an inescapable and enduring reality of political life.

The question, then, is what we ought to do about enemies. Undoubtedly, we have to compete with them and defeat them, lest our security and liberty are damaged. But even before doing that, perhaps we can benefit from them. This is, in a nutshell, what Plutarch suggests in a short essay entitled "How to profit by one's enemies."⁴

Enemies are eternal

Probably an extempore oration that Plutarch only later wrote down, the essay's main focus is on self-improvement, on man's path toward a virtuous life. It is not a treatise of strategy nor does it explicitly address questions of national security or geopolitical rivalry. But it is written for a politician, Cornelius Pulcher who had "chosen the mildest form of official administration."⁵ And, as Plutarch himself points out, it follows the pattern of other essays he

⁴ Plutarch, "How to profit by one's enemies," in *Moralia, Volume II*, Loeb Classical Library 222 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), pp. 3-44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

had written including his “Advice to Statesmen.” It is therefore an essay that has a public, political relevance.

While it is mostly about inter-personal relations, Plutarch’s essay and has some applicability to the wider realm of political interactions, including those among states. The ancients did not separate neatly the various levels of human action, from the individual to the polity, allowing therefore an easy transfer of lessons from the life of a man to the life of a city. States are not “black boxes” that act in ways that are fundamentally different from those of individual human beings. Therefore, in general for the ancients, the dynamics that characterize interpersonal relations (e.g., friendships and enmities) are akin to those that shape strategic interactions among polities (e.g., alliances and geopolitical rivalries). What can be applicable on one plane can be applicable on the other; in fact, understanding behaviors that dominate at the private level are key to maintaining good order at the public level. “Private troubles become the causes of public ones and small troubles of great ones,” Plutarch reiterates elsewhere, in his famous “Precepts of Statecraft.”⁶

Plutarch begins by recognizing that enemies will always exist for two related reasons. First, rivalries arise because of the acquisitive impulse in human beings, which spurs us to desire what we do not possess, leading to a clash

⁶ Plutarch, “Precepts of Statecraft,” in *Moralia, Volume X*, Loeb Classical Library 321 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), p. 295.

with others. It is thus naïve to expect that enmities can wither away entirely and that the harmony of friendship can spread uninterruptedly throughout the world. Plutarch notes that a “government which has not had to bear with envy or jealous rivalry or contention—emotions most productive of enmity—has not hitherto existed.”⁷ This is a simple recognition of the eternal presence of conflict in human affairs, a key assumption in the Realist school of international relations, and a given for classical authors. Harmonious relations are possible among friends, but on a wider scale, the city of man will remain vitiated by the imperfectability of man.

The second reason for the continuing presence of enemies is paradoxically the praiseworthy and necessary search for friends. “For our very friendships, if nothing else, involve us in enmities.”⁸ To have friends is *ipso facto* to have enemies. A slight suggestion is present here of the risk of entrapment, namely, of the danger of becoming involved in squabbles of friends or allies in which we have less interest or stake than they do. In other words, the enemy of our ally is not necessarily our enemy—or at least, it should not be so. A logical consequence of this reasoning is that friendships or alliances are risky propositions because they create enemies that we may not have had beforehand. Plutarch’s point, however, is that as enemies are always present, so is the necessity of friends. We seek allies to balance against existing rivals but also to improve our

⁷ Plutarch, “How to profit by one’s enemies,” #1, p. 5.

⁸ Ibid.

welfare: Even in the absence of enemies we would seek friends and allies. To assume, however, that friendships create new enemies is futile and even risky because it may lead us to fear the amity of a fellow man or state. The modern liberal belief that we can transcend friendships and allies in favor of partners working in a coordinated fashion under some global institutional structure—thus avoiding the creation of enemies and rivals—is as impractical and empirically silly as it is dangerous. Enemies and allies will continue to exist because of the eternal competition in social interactions at every level. Hence, as Evelyn Waugh wrote, “it is going to be a long war. The great thing is to spend it among friends.”⁹

The question then becomes whether we can turn this tragic enduring reality—the presence of enemies—into an opportunity for our benefit. It is obvious that enemies are dangerous because they seek to damage us in some way, and consequently life would be easier without them. But a sign of human progress and of the intelligence proper to shrewd individuals is the ability to discern how to take advantage of otherwise undesirable situations. “Fools spoil even their friendships,” Plutarch writes, “while wise men are able to make a fitting use even of their enemies.”¹⁰

The benefits of enemies

⁹ Evelyn Waugh, *Officers and Gentlemen* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1955).

¹⁰ Plutarch, “How to profit by one’s enemies,” #2, p. 9.

An enemy observes, studies, and assesses us explicitly to discover our vulnerabilities, and how the patterns of our behavior might exacerbate these. An enemy is attuned to what a friend is not; an enemy, unlike a friend, has no reason to make an excuse for any of our poor or bad traits or faults. Because our enemy is not complacent about us, and has developed an analytical viewpoint of us, an enemy enables us to engage in seeing ourselves more clearly than our friends arguably can. He is like a mirror, pointing out to us our vulnerabilities and pushing us toward a cogent strategy. A clear-sighted analysis or examination of ourselves is an interwoven theme of the essay. In line with this theme, Plutarch suggests three benefits of having an enemy.

1. The existence of enemies is an incentive for good governance.

The first benefit of having an enemy is that the mere acknowledgement of the enemy's presence alters how we behave. Acknowledgement is not yet a strategic interaction in which the actions of one side generate the reaction of the other. It precedes the active part of a rivalry. The simple existence of an enemy, even of one that has not acted yet, provokes or ought to provoke a change in our posture. Once we have acknowledged that a particular enemy exists, we face incentives to modify our outlook for the future, how we prepare for it, and how we organize ourselves to meet it.

Naturally, we will be more attuned to the need to develop defensive measures encompassing, in the direst circumstances, plans to eliminate the enemy. But that is not a way of *benefiting* from the enemy; it is an instinctive reaction spurred by the desire of self-preservation. The beneficial change stems from the fact that the enemy is like a mirror to us—a critic that points out the foibles and weaknesses that we may possess. The enemy is constantly watching us, seeking our weak spots in order to undermine our safety, wellbeing, or reputation. Plutarch notes that “Your enemy, wide awake, is constantly lying in wait to take advantage of your actions, and seeking to gain some hold on you, keeping up a constant patrol about your life.” An enemy, he continues, “plays the detective on your actions and digs his way into your plans and searches them through and through.”¹¹

The presence of a rival who is ceaselessly watching us, seeking to damage us through our own weaknesses, is an incentive to improvement. In our private lives, that motivation may be a shame about our vices that we hide in order to be able to criticize or to take the higher moral ground in front of potential enemies. It is “a peculiar mark of vice that we feel more ashamed of our faults before our enemies than before our friends.”¹² We want to consider our rivals as morally inferior and thus we worry that they may find something for which we can be reproached. Quoting Antisthenes, a pupil of Socrates, Plutarch stresses this point:

¹¹ Ibid., #3, p. 11.

¹² Ibid., p. 13.

“men have need of true friends or else of ardent enemies; for the first by admonition, and the second by reviling, turn them from error.”¹³ Enemies make us more virtuous.

But this logic is applicable to more than personal moral self-improvement. Plutarch compares the path of virtue of an individual to that of a state. He writes:

For just as states which are chastened by border warfare and continual campaigning become well content with good order and a sound government, so persons who have been compelled on account of enmities to practice soberness of living, to guard against indolence and contemptuousness... are insensibly led by force of habit to make no mistakes, and are made orderly in their behavior, even if reason co-operate but slightly.¹⁴

This mechanism is unlikely to lead every state to become more virtuous by being, for instance, more respectful of human life or by having a greater appreciation for liberty. The particular political leadership of a state (e.g., a Putin or an Assad) may be immune to the reproachful posture of other states. More broadly, there is little global agreement on what a virtuous political regime may be: Western democracies have one view (and even within them there are marked differences, for instance, on the meaning

¹³ Ibid., #6, p. 21.

¹⁴ Ibid., #3, p. 13.

and list of “human rights”) that is not fully shared by many non-Western states. This is not to affirm that no objective standards exist and that we should accept moral equivalency, but only to acknowledge that the attainment of moral superiority may be a very small incentive for states. As long as a regime or a political leader is firmly in control, or the state is sufficiently powerful to achieve some of its ends, the pursuit of a “life beyond reproach” is not high on either’s list.

Nonetheless, in the first part of the paragraph cited above, Plutarch suggests a direct relation between international rivalries and internal order. An enemy on the frontier makes the citizens of the threatened state more appreciative of political order and good governance. The most basic aspiration of people is security and, when reminded of the risks to it, they seek to improve their chances of survival. One way to do that is to alter their own behavior: less infighting among themselves, more appreciation for unity. This is Plutarch’s version of a “rally ‘round the flag” effect.

2. Enemies spur us to be more coordinated and efficient.

The second benefit of having enemies is that people who are engaged in a competition with others seek more effective political leaders and more efficient political regimes. In general, they try to improve their capabilities and skills. Plutarch notes that actors or instrument players, “when there is rivalry and competition with another company, ... apply not only themselves but their

instruments more attentively, picking their strings and tuning them and playing their flutes in more exact harmony.”¹⁵ Without rivalry or competition, laziness about the status quo often becomes pervasive. Competition that arises out of rivalry pushes us to work together and to improve the outcome, be it music in the case of an orchestra or the security provision in the case of a polity.

The enemy provides an organizing principle for our strategy. Without enemies, one lets oneself go, so to speak. The state leadership and institutions become careless in their behavior because there is limited risk for mismanagement, for a mistaken decision, or even for a poorly thought-out strategy. Plutarch quotes the Roman Nasica who, after the Romans defeated the Carthaginians and Achaeans, argued that Rome was then in greater danger than before the victory: “[N]ow is our position really dangerous, since we have left for ourselves none to make us either afraid or ashamed.”¹⁶ The absence of an enemy who tries to use our weaknesses for his benefit and to our detriment is blissful and dangerous at the same time.

The danger of having no enemy is that it becomes more difficult to think strategically. Policies become agendas rather than strategies. The absence of an enemy – or the perception that there is no enemy – results in political leaders who assume that the achievement of a particular objective depends merely on a plan and a proper utilization of the necessary resources. With no competition from

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

another actor, no shooting back from an enemy, policies are thought to be molding a passive material, akin to chiseling a human form out of a block of marble. In the absence of a rivalry, this way of thinking goes, what is required are not strategists, individuals capable of understanding the enemy and endowed with great intuition and skills of adaptation, but managers, individuals capable of calculating the resources needed to implement a scripted agenda.

The consequences of not having a rival—and even more so, of not acknowledging one even when it exists—are tragic. It is sufficient to witness the efforts of the EU political leadership to open Europe’s doors to Ukraine in 2014. The EU’s approach was grounded in the conceit that there were no enemies to the set of principles espoused by Brussels: the benefits of an integrated market, of a borderless area, of diluted (or “pooled”) sovereignty, and of transnational rules were self-evident and universally appealing. The opponents, whether in Kiev or in Moscow, were not enemies or rivals; they simply did not comprehend yet the inevitability of this larger trend away from nation states, territorial control, and brute force. Hence, such leaders argued, the extension of the EU’s rules-based order required managerial stamina and not military prowess—a detailed agenda for negotiations, not a strategy for competition. The outcome of this thinking was that Russia retaliated, and Ukraine has been in a state of war since 2014. Russia sent “little green men” and artillery; the EU, the progressive narrative of History. And Hegel has been losing to Kutuzov ever since.

An additional danger of having no enemies is a splintering of the various institutions and individuals within a state. Lacking the organizing principle that the clear presence of an enemy supplies, it becomes more difficult to harness the many actors inside a state toward a common purpose. Narrow bureaucratic interests and the individuals' search for prestige take over as the primary motivations of state institutions and leaders.

It is difficult to have a grand strategy for a state under any set of conditions, but perhaps never more so than in the absence of an enemy and when institutional strategies pursued for a narrowly defined benefit and survival become predominant. The preferred bureaucratic option overshadows a larger strategic purpose of the interplay between various state institutions and branches. As Emily Goodman notes, "without clearly established strategic priorities set by civilian leaders, military strategy is likely to become 'decentralized' with each service focusing on its 'preferred' threats, preparing to fight the type of war most amenable to that service and most likely to provide an autonomous and dominant role for that service." In such unfocused circumstances we can expect "less integration across the services, and less willingness for services to devote resources to supporting missions, like combat air support or strategic lift."¹⁷

The "fog of peace" presents peculiar challenges that may make the state unprepared for future competition and

¹⁷ Emily O. Goldman, "Thinking About Strategy Absent the Enemy," *Security Studies* 4, no. 1 (Autumn 1994): p. 49.

conflict. As institutional selfishness takes over, each organization within the state becomes less capable of coordination and of working together toward the common objective of providing security. To use Plutarch's analogy mentioned earlier, in the absence of competition, each player plays to his own tune in order to showcase his virtuosity and skills, and to attract attention and fame for himself. The orchestra becomes a cacophonous group of glory seeking players.

3. The presence of enemies releases pressures.

Finally, the third broad benefit of having an enemy according to Plutarch is the ability to vent emotions. The enemy serves as an external punching bag to release pent up passions that otherwise may create discord among friends. As Plutarch puts it, a "man would profit in no moderate degree by venting these emotions upon his enemies, and turning the course of such discharges, so to speak, as far away as possible from his associates and relatives."¹⁸ Even more, Plutarch writes that "...your enemy, by taking up and diverting to himself your malice and jealousy, will render you more kindly and less disagreeable to your friends in their prosperity."¹⁹

As with the previous arguments, this one can also be extended to the political life of a state. Plutarch mentions an example of how the achievement of accord in domestic

¹⁸ Plutarch, "How to profit by one's enemies," #10, p. 35.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 37.

politics is illusory at best and conducive to even greater strife at worst. A political leader, Demus, “when he found himself on the winning side in a civic strife in Chios, ... advised his party associates not to banish all their opponents, but to leave some of them behind, ‘in order,’ he said, ‘that we may not begin to quarrel with our friends, though being completely rid of our enemies.’”²⁰ The claim of a harmonious consensus only leads to new and perhaps more vicious internal conflicts that can distract us from our general priorities.

This logic applies also to foreign enemies. The absence of external enemies – or, worse, the naïve belief that there are no enemies – is dangerous because it elevates the naturally discordant interests and agendas of the various leaders and political groupings inside the state. The primary concern of the state is then fractured into the pursuit of the narrow interests of factions and individual leaders. It is preferable, Plutarch seems to suggest, to have an enemy so as to release these internal tensions, or at least to subdue them by focusing the negative attention and the resources of the polity away from itself. Focusing on the internal differences of opinions or of worldviews within a polity is a luxury good that we pursue when no enemies exist – or when we think that there are no enemies because we see the world as a harmonious global community.

The flip side of this last benefit – but of all of the benefits in general that Plutarch describes – is that enmity can generate hatred. In part, there is a risk that a hatred of

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 35-37.

our enemy will prevent us from formulating a more calculating posture, blinding us to the necessity of prudence. Hatred can lead to unnecessary conflicts with the enemy, as well as to a certain strategic rigidity that does not allow for prudential changes such as temporary realignments or pauses. As a wise Roman slave, Publius Syrus (1st century BC), pithily put it: "It is a bad plan that admits of no modification."²¹

More importantly to Plutarch from the standpoint of virtue, a long-standing enemy and the hatred this may engender is dangerous because it degrades us. Plutarch writes:

[E]nimity introduces envy along with hatred, and leaves as a residue jealousy, joy over others' misfortunes, and vindictiveness. Moreover, knavery, deceit, and intrigue, which seem not bad or unjust when employed against an enemy, if once they find a lodgment, acquire a permanent tenure, and are hard to eject. The next thing is that men of themselves employ these against their friends through force of habit, unless they are on their guard against using them against their enemies.²²

²¹ Publius Syrus, *The Moral Sayings of Publius Syrus, A Roman Slave* (Cleveland, OH: L.E. Barnard & Company, 1856), Maxim #469, p. 45.

²² Plutarch, "How to profit by one's enemies," #9, p. 33.

In other words, we have to guard ourselves from a posture that is overly mistrustful, because that undermines our ability to develop and hold allies.

4. The danger of seeing no enemies

Plutarch concludes his essay “How to profit by one’s enemies” with a brief piece of advice on what to study in an enemy. Four variables are key according to him: “life, character, words, and deeds.” Interestingly, Plutarch does not include in this list the strength or resources of the enemy. Neither does he exclude them—in fact the success of the enemy (or of ourselves) results from “bending all energies” in the chosen direction. But by observing capabilities, we may miss the nature and the intent of the enemy; we tend to focus narrowly on what he has as opposed to who he is.

If the dominant question is how to defeat the enemy—or whether the rival does indeed present a clear and present danger—then presumably, the study of capabilities increases in importance. How we study the enemy depends therefore on the question we ask about the enemy and our relationship to that enemy, and on the level of threat that we might expect. The more menacing the enemy, the more important the assessment of his capabilities becomes. But Plutarch does not go this far in this essay.

Enemies today

Western political leaders spent the last few decades in a blissful insouciance of the enduring realities of international politics. They thought that the progressive power of globalization would inevitably turn enemies and rivals into friends, or better yet, partners – and that national sovereignty and citizenry would be elevated to a global community and global citizenry. This belief was wrong. We are only now slowly waking up to the fact that enemies, from China to Russia and Iran, have spent these years planning how to subvert the international order we built and maintained. We have to compete with them, deter them from further aggressive moves, and preserve the character of the liberty at home that gives us reason to oppose them. And above all, as Plutarch put it, we can turn these enemies to our benefit by using the occasion to strengthen our political order, founded on the recognition of self-evident truths that are independent from the prevailing fashion of the day.

Denying the existence of enemies and trusting in a supposed progressive inevitability of history and of our victory in it is extremely dangerous. When we are on the “right side of history,” strategic interaction, that is, willfully pursuing a set of actions aimed at persuading or compelling the strategic rival to alter his behavior, is deemed to be overrated and useless. Such an attitude can translate, as Plutarch suggests, into political passivity and defensive inaction.

There is an additional danger in the “history is with us” belief: It allows imprudent and outright reckless

behavior, in promising to cover in the future all the costs that we may incur now. In the security realm, this progressive creed elevates unfounded expectations of future security through harmony while discounting the salience of current threats. It banks on the inevitability of a harmonious world in which current opponents engage in self-defeating behavior. By doing so, it can ruin the state in the present.

The dangers of such a belief are well illustrated by a pithy historical vignette offered by both Tacitus and Suetonius, two of the greatest historians Rome had. Believing in the “right side of history” leads to a behavior analogous to that of Nero, who, both historians relate, was fooled by a “mentally deranged” man, a certain Caesellius Bassus.²³ A Roman knight, this Caesellius claimed to have had a vision of a cave full of gold, hidden there by Queen Dido, the founder of Carthage.²⁴ Her purported action had been motivated by prudence: she had sought to limit the degenerative effect of wealth on her people. Nero eagerly believed this story from Caesellius. The conviction that this wealth existed—think of Dido’s gold as the “right side of history”—led the emperor to further irresponsibility. As Tacitus writes, “on the strength of this idle hope, his [Nero’s] extravagance grew, and the treasures long accumulated were dispersed on the assumption that others had been vouchsafed which would serve his prodigality for

²³ Tacitus, *The Annals*, Loeb Classical Library 322 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), Book XVI, #1, p. 339.

²⁴ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars* (New York: Penguin, 1979), p. 230.

many years. In fact, he was already drawing on this fund for his largesses; and the expectation of wealth was among the causes of the national poverty.”²⁵ Nero spent quickly what he thought he would receive in the future.

Visions of the inevitability of history, like dreams of hidden Phoenician gold, are of course not falsifiable. Nero did not “sufficiently weigh the credibility either of his informant or of the affair in itself,” and did not “send to ascertain the truth of the tale.” But he spent furiously. And then he organized a large expedition, with fast ships and many people, to search for this gold. The thought of inheriting the treasure of a mythological queen excited Nero, eager to demonstrate in material ways that the gods were on his side. Unsurprisingly, his expedition never found any of this treasure and the fiscal and political outcomes were equally predictable. As Suetonius describes, “Nero found himself destitute –and his financial difficulties were such that he could not lay hands on enough money even for the soldier’s pay or the veterans’ benefits; and therefore resorted to robbery and blackmail.”²⁶ Furthermore, according to Tacitus, Caesellius, the loony promiser of wealth, either committed suicide—claiming that he had never been deluded before—or, after a brief imprisonment, lived free but without his wealth that had been confiscated by Nero to cover some of the expenses incurred in the hunt for Dido’s treasures.

²⁵ Tacitus, *The Annals*, Book XVI, #3, p. 341.

²⁶ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, pp. 230-231.

The story of Caesellius and Dido's gold serves as a clear warning. Beliefs in visions of gold—or in inexorable progress—are untestable and foolish. Most importantly, these beliefs are treacherous because they make us act now as if wealth and peace were guaranteed tomorrow. Discounting future risks, we squander the present; convinced in the inevitability of universal progress, we do not accept the persistent existence of enemies.

The true historical reality is that we do not win because we consider ourselves to be on the right side of history, with no worthy rivals. We win because we defeat our enemies. History does not cause us to win. We have to underwrite victory and our own survival against the enduring opposition of enemies.

The beauty of Plutarch's essay is that it assumes the existence of enemies and finds the positive aspects of their constant presence. A world without them is unrealistic, a dangerous utopian harmony, that, even if realized, would weaken us as individuals and as polities. Enemies keep us humble or at least aware of our vulnerabilities because they seek to weaken or defeat us. We improve because of the presence of enemies. To wish them away as dying remnants of past ages is not only historically mistaken but also selfishly hazardous because it removes a motivation to maintain prudence in our own behavior.

“If you live under a tyrant, it is better to be his friend only to a certain extent rather than be completely intimate with him. In this way, if you are a respected citizen, you will profit from his power – sometimes even more than do those close to him. And if he should fall, you may still hope to save yourself.”

Francesco Guicciardini, Ricordi,
#100

Chapter 3:

Xenophon and the Mind of Tyrants

Tyrants – degenerate kings who rule according to their own will and unrestrained by law – occurred relatively frequently in the history of ancient Greece (Sparta excepted) and of Rome. They are routinely the protagonists of tragedies, dialogues, and histories written by classic authors, from Herodotus to Tacitus, from Plato to Cicero. Such ancient writers were well attuned not only to the existence, but also to the power and persistence, of tyrants. These found the term “tyrant” or *tyrannos* appropriate as a descriptor for a corrupted form of

political regime based on personal rule; they also found it useful as an analytical tool. These writers were accurate on both accounts in their day. More importantly, their assessments have remained insightful.

Today's political analysts will no doubt scoff that thinking about tyrants is much too old-fashioned. This attitude has some historical roots. The modern democratic age also birthed a democratic mindset that turned its focus away from specific individuals and particular leaders. Over a century ago Alexis de Tocqueville noted how the democratic caste of modern times naturally differed from the aristocratic age, when a few men had a relatively overwhelming power to make and implement decisions on their own; to compete with other leaders on the basis of the power of their polities; and also (but perhaps more so) to compete on the basis of their individual wit, charisma, or military skill. Since a democratic age, and the associated worldview, favors analyses and explanations that are "democratic" rather than "aristocratic", it places a premium on impersonal forces that shape history in a slow but relentless way, like a glacier shaping a valley. The resulting analyses focus therefore on trends rather than specific individuals, on the institutional settings of states rather than particular leaders, on dictatorial regimes rather than tyrants.

The ancient writers—with their more holistic approach to human beings and the practice of politics—were arguably more aware than modern political analysts are of the psychological and emotional motivations of tyrants. This enabled them to shed light on tyrants' human

vulnerabilities. Such a method is exemplified in particular in Xenophon's dialogue on the tyrant, known as the *Hiero or Tyrannicus*, which highlights traits particular to the tyrant that influence his political behavior in identifiable ways. Notwithstanding our democratic age and outlook, we can still find in the classic accounts of tyrants and their minds from Xenophon and similar ancient thinkers, timeless lessons. In particular three lessons have a contemporary relevance for how to deal with tyrants.

First, ancient authors show that tyrants may be prone to behave on the basis of narrow, short-term calculations. Tyrants are not necessarily the far-sighted strategic players presented in popular culture, with horizons that exceed those of (often) volatile democracies. Consequently, there is little guarantee that a tyrant will alter his behavior when threatened with the vague promise of future punishment or benefits. *Second*, however much tyrants are perennially preoccupied with palace intrigue—which may result in a provincial outlook—they are nevertheless also rapacious and are never satisfied. A tyrant is not just a local thug, concerned about his immediate surroundings and his personal security. Tyrants often engage in long-range power projections. *Third*, tyrants do not see discontinuity between peace and war. Tyrants are in a state of perennial conflict internally and externally, and they use violence along its entire spectrum. The concept of peace, understood as the existence of a harmony of interests, is incomprehensible to a tyrant.

Modern reluctance to study “tyrants”

The term “tyrant” is used less frequently in modern language and thought than it was in ancient times. This is due in part to semantics. There is a sense that “tyrant” is an unsophisticated word; that it is a rhetorical rather than an analytical label. Then there is the democratic turn within modernity that precludes the study of “aristocratic” individuals, rendering “tyrant” as a concept rather null and void, because it puts too much emphasis on the individual leader, his emotions, and a skewed sense of reality. Modern analyses thus have downplayed the emphasis on individuals in favor of large impersonal forces as the principal causes of political behavior and international relations. Contests of ideas, competitions among economic systems, the *élan* of the masses, or domestic institutional structures—these are familiar explanations for political phenomena that more comfortably fit the modern mind.

Moreover, since perhaps Max Weber, the modern presumption has been that political analysis ought to be pursued not only *sine ira et studio*—without anger and partiality (as Tacitus put it in the first lines of his *Annales*)²⁷—but also without expressing moral judgments. Calling somebody a tyrant deliberately expresses a “value judgment,” and it carries a tinge of anger and partiality, too. Tacitus, like many other ancient writers, had a strong dislike

²⁷ Tacitus, *Histories: Books 4-5 Annals: Books 1-3*, trans. Clifford H. Moore and John Jackson, Loeb Classical Library 249 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), I:1, p. 244.

for tyrants and did not mince words when describing the debauchery of a Nero or Tiberius, even though he kept a certain equidistant skepticism of those who chose a loud and theatrical opposition to them. In contrast, for the well-heeled modern mind “tyrant” is a slur with no analytical benefit: To call a political leader a tyrant is to impart a nefarious connotation to that individual, and to render explicit judgment that the leader is personally responsible for the brutality of his state in its domestic as well as foreign acts. There may be an understandable political temptation to use such a label in order to create front-page headlines while demonstrating determination (e.g., President Biden calling Putin a “killer”), but even that is a rare event with only superficial value. In general, this is viewed as a rhetorical stunt. And hence the preference today to ignore *in toto* the reality of a tyrant by adopting euphemisms such as “rogue state” or “strongman”—or by studying which institutional arrangements may be less optimal for liberty, or by measuring what material conditions might impede the exercise of freedom.

Modern skepticism toward the term “tyrant” as an analytical variable has an additional source: the belief that the twentieth-century version of dictatorship has been marked by the unique and lethal combination of ideology and science.

From this viewpoint, modern dictators—Hitler and Stalin come to mind—are essentially deadly managers of ideological dogmas and scientific tools: racial purity and paganism combined with armored divisions and gas chambers, atheistic materialism prodded by the atom and

industrial power. As Winston Churchill famously put it, the outcome of the combination was a “dark age, made more sinister, and perhaps more prolonged, by the lights of a perverted science.”²⁸ The resulting totalitarian systems had to be more than anything an *individual* tyrant could hope to erect. Modern tyrannies are therefore seen as all-pervasive political systems, totalitarian in nature, that cannot sustain themselves by the sheer will of one tyrant. A dictator in the 20th century may have been the titular head of such a system, but he was epiphenomenal—a tool in the hands of a larger and impersonal apparatus of terror rather than its creator and main cause. Hence, again, instead of focusing on the tyrant, we continue to prefer to look at domestic structures of power.

There is yet another modern rationale for downgrading the tyrant as an analytical concept, and it is related to the previous several points: It is hard to study and to know a tyrant. To assess a hostile state, it is easier to quantify and measure a variety of variables other than a tyrant’s mind: demographic trends for instance, or economic growth, natural resources, or military capabilities. Pondering the nature of the (hostile) regime, its constitutional arrangements, and the institutional levers of power also provides a sense of greater objectivity about its behaviors; these are certainly more generalizable in terms of time and place (e.g., predicting that a particular institutional

²⁸ Winston Churchill, House of Commons speech of 18 June 1940, <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/their-finest-hour/>.

structure of the state should lead to similar outcomes in similar circumstances). A tyrant's mind, on the other hand, is a much harder thing to know.

This is in part why we tend to focus on the capabilities, rather than the intentions, of the enemy. Material assets are quantifiable. They are more visible and more tangible, and even when they only can be known with a degree of imperfection (capabilities can be concealed, or the data may be simply wrong, as may be the case with, for example, China's economic trends) they can still offer a level of certainty that can never be reached by assessing only the words, or the thoughts and intentions, of the hostile actor.²⁹ This does not preclude the study of intentions: The enemy can make their intentions known through public speeches, military doctrines, and discrete actions. Nor do we have to rely on the enemy's publicly available revelations—we can even eavesdrop on a rival's internal debates and conversations.

²⁹ The natural tendency to focus on quantifiable data is very understandable and not in itself wrong. Studying mobilization tables before 1914 or the numbers of aircraft, tanks, and artillery tubes before 1939 was needed and useful. These figures provided hard parameters that limited, constrained, or indicated the likely vectors of the enemy's behavior – and therefore could also serve as proxies of intentions. But an assessment of hard facts is more effective in providing tactical warning and analyzing short-term developments rather than pointing to the enemy's long-term proclivities and aspirations. See also Ernest May, ed., *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment before the Two World Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

Intentions are tricky things, however. They are easier to hide than material capabilities and are fungible. They can also change quickly. The enemy may not even know his own intentions in the future as they change, adapting to new realities or following the latest whim of erratic despots. In her study of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Roberta Wohlstetter observed that

All decisions are made in the face of uncertainty, even those that depend simply on an understanding of natural phenomena. But decisions based on reading the intentions of others, and in particular, the intentions of an enemy, are especially difficult. These intentions are complicated and shifting, and subject to change between the time the intent is signalized and the time of the intended act. Sometimes they are also deliberately obscured, or invented to mislead, as in the case of bluffing. At least in reading natural phenomena, we have Albert Einstein's famous assurance that God is subtle but plain mean. The same cannot be said for the enemy.³⁰

In brief, a perfect assessment of the rival is impossible because he himself may not know how he will behave tomorrow, given the circumstances. As Machiavelli put it,

³⁰ Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962), p. 226.

It is not so difficult to understand the plans of the enemy as it is sometimes difficult to understand his actions, and not so much actions that are done by him at a distance as ones present and near. For it has often happened that when a fight has lasted until night, whoever has won believes he has lost, and whoever has lost believes he has won.³¹

It is easier to know the plans, the written intentions of the enemy, than his actual actions. Actions are responses to a particular situation and are therefore *sui generis*; they are very difficult to understand and certainly to predict. Thus, we should always anticipate and plan for surprises.³²

Nevertheless, in politics as in international relations, there is no escaping from an investigation of intentions. Even when we focus on capabilities, we are drawing intent from them: If you have such-and-such capabilities, you must have the intent or, at a minimum, you will have the intent to use them. In fact, especially in the tradition of the liberal worldview, we ascribe particular intentions to specific domestic regimes: Democracies, for instance, are said to have peaceful intentions toward fellow democratic regimes while they nourish often a powerful dislike and fear of authoritarian states, leading them to a behavior of

³¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. H. Mansfield and N. Tarcov (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), III: 18, p. 258.

³² On surprises, see Richard K. Betts, "Analysis, War, and Decisions: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable," *World Politics* XXI (October 1978): pp. 61-89.

“liberal imprudence.” Intentions, in other words, reside in the institutions and the regime of the state in question. By institutionalizing (as it were) intention, modern annalists haven’t done away with the need to study it. They’ve only attempted to remove the difficulty of studying the variation of the human mind and the peculiarities of the leader’s personality.

And so there is still an analytical place for tyrants. In the global excitement at the turn of the 21st century, generated by a progressive belief in mankind’s political advancement, we deluded ourselves that tyrants were vanishing artifacts of history. Any dictators still in power were seen as remnants of a disappearing age, or anomalies of the world’s true political path. And yet, two decades into the century, tyrants are still here.

One of the key wisdoms coming from ancient writers is the warning that societies tend to slide toward tyrannies because of a deeply ingrained temptation in human nature. Men seek to dominate other men. Tyrants are thus frequent players in history. Tacitus, in one of the most famous first lines in Western literature, wrote that “Rome at the outset was a city held by kings; Lucius Brutus instituted liberty and the consulate.”³³ The implied point is that kings, but also tyrants, are the more natural political conditions in human history, whereas liberty has to be carved out, consciously and tenuously, through the hard

³³ “*Urbem Romam a principio reges habuere; libertatem et consulatum L. Brutus instituit.*” Tacitus, *Histories: Books 4-5 Annals: Books 1-3*, I:1, p. 242.

work of an individual who builds bulwarks against dictatorial aspirations. To put this differently, tyrants are here to stay while liberty is fragile and fleeting.

Many of today's dictators—Vladimir Putin, say, or Xi Jinping—more closely resemble ancient tyrants than modern dictators at the helm of an impersonal system of terror. Ideology and science play less of a role in their hold on power. Today's tyrants are ideological opportunists—postmodern leaders who shape their “narrative” according to public relations needs and tactical requirements of the moment. They also have to deal with science, or technology, of course, which can strengthen their rule but which can also undermine it (e.g., for every technological tool that can control information, there are others to circumvent it). Today's tyrants exercise personal rule through brute force and murder, but also through a proficient appeal to society. They are good pupils of Niccolò Machiavelli in this regard, and expend energies to avoid being hated by the majority of their subjects. They are feared, to be sure, but they buy the servility or docility of their populations through economic welfare and propaganda. They present themselves as forces of restoration of national greatness and civilizational strength.

Putin's tyranny, for instance, is built on targeted violence (the assassination of Boris Nemtsov is but one example); propaganda (the television channel “Russia Today”, the most visible tool abroad, is just one part of a much larger apparatus of disinformation); nationalism (the invention of “Novorossiya” as a distinct Russian land encompassing, of course, Ukraine's Donbas region);

political elimination of potential rivals (Navalny's arrest was the second option after a failed assassination); and on economic bribery of Russians (a project that may be more difficult to continue given the fiscal troubles of the regime). It is a personal rule, maintained for the personal benefit of the leader, yes – but pursued through a skillful cooptation of the population.

Given the persistence and the contemporary recurrence of tyrants, the ancient writers' examinations of the tyrant continue to be useful. A Xenophon or a Suetonius can give us insights into the particular psychology of the tyrant, full of fears, poisoned by adulation, and busied with short-term calculations – a mix that no modern theory fully grasps. Tacitus also is an incisive student of tyrants and of the sycophants (as well as the opponents) around them. As Francesco Guicciardini wrote in the 16th century, "Cornelius Tacitus teaches very well to those who live under tyrants how to live and act prudently, as much as he teaches well to tyrants the ways to found a tyranny."³⁴ We can similarly learn in the 21st century about tyrants from these authors.

Short-term vision and constant war

What do ancient writers say about tyranny, then? They can teach us *how*, rather than *what*, tyrants think. The latter is too particular, contingent on the individual

³⁴ Francesco Guicciardini, *Ricordi* (Milan: BUR, 2014), series C, #18, p. 109.

character of the tyrant and the unique moment in time they inhabit. The former is a description of the tyrants' *formamentis*, and therefore is generalizable. It is an assessment of tyrants and not just of this or that specific one. A tyrant is a violent narcissist whose will trumps all law, both positive and natural. Such narcissism and violence result in an inability to calculate long-term costs and benefits, as well as in a posture of perpetual hostility and conflict.

One useful ancient text to understand tyrants—and for our purposes, how tyrants may behave in their foreign policy—is a minor work by Xenophon of Athens (430–354 BC). A student of Socrates, Xenophon wrote, among many other dialogues, treatises, and histories (notably, the *Anabasis* recounting the long march to the sea of a Greek mercenary army in Persia), the *Hiero or Tyrannicus*, a brief dialogue between the eponymous tyrant of Syracuse and the poet Simonides. Somewhat forgotten, this short text was returned to our attention by Leo Strauss, who in 1948 wrote *On Tyranny*, a commentary that spurred a vibrant debate on Xenophon as well as on the wider subject of tyranny.³⁵ While Xenophon's dialogue revolves around the question of whether tyrants can be happy (the answer is no, in large measure because they must remain dissatisfied hedonists, which has consequences for their political behavior), it also offers a window into the minds of these solitary rulers whose arbitrary will is the law of the land.

³⁵ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, expanded ed. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013); Eric Voegelin, "Review: On Tyranny," *The Review of Politics* 11, no. 2 (April 1949): pp. 241-244.

Xenophon describes tyrants as having a few particular traits that, by implication, make them behave in unique, distinguishable ways. Broadly speaking, the tyrant has a very short-term horizon, fed by a lack of hope and a perennial sense of insecurity.

More granularly, the first—and perhaps most striking—characteristic of a tyrant is that he has little hope. Hope is a source of great pleasure for most men, a cause for joy even in the darkest times because it supplies an expectation of a better future. But, as Xenophon writes, “in this pleasure of hope [tyrants] are worse off than private men.”³⁶ This insight is revealed amidst the discussion between Hiero and Simonides within the dialogue on the pleasure of food, and on how the ability to be served with every conceivable delectable deprives the tyrant of the pleasant expectation of something he cannot obtain.

But the point is larger: Tyrants can get anything they want in great abundance—horses, gold, food, and women—and as a consequence they lack the anticipation of greater delights. Since the tyrant has access to everything he can possibly conceive, he cannot hope to obtain more. Fabulous wealth and absolute power turn out not to be the sources of joy but of constant disappointment. What we see of tyrants is their wealth and castles—in Putin’s case, his expensive watches, gold-laden mansions, and bank accounts—but in fact these reveal little about them. These possessions may even give us the wrong impression of

³⁶ Xenophon, *Hiero or Tyrannicus*, in Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 1:18, p. 5.

tyrants' aspirations and visions. From the outside, they appear to be materially successful and content individuals, enjoying the fruits of their labor, satisfied in the possession of wealth.

Similarly, tyrants often puzzle us because we wrongly associate artistic liberty and architectural greatness with political freedom. But artists have been happy to serve the political purposes of tyrants more often than not. As Barry Strauss brilliantly observes, "We contemporaries make a mistake if we measure freedom by a regime's ability to erect monuments, to patronize the arts, or to build protective walls."³⁷ There can be (additional) ulterior motives for grandiose artistic projects: Monumental construction works employ resources and people, who otherwise may seed social discontent and weaken the tyrant's hold over the state. The key point is that the tyrant's material possessions, along with the artistic greatness of his state, in fact hide his fragility and his inability to nourish hope for the future. As Xenophon's Hiero says, this—the golden and grandiose material surroundings—"keeps what is harsh hidden in the tyrants' soul, where human happiness and unhappiness are stored up.... [T]his escapes the notice of the multitude."³⁸

³⁷ Barry Strauss, "In the Shadow of the Fortress," in *Confronting Tyranny*, eds. Toivo Koivukoski and David Tabachnick (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p. 233. Strauss sums up that "the opposite of tyranny is not creativity; the opposite of tyranny is freedom." *Ibid.*, p. 240.

³⁸ Xenophon, *Hiero or Tyrannicus*, 2: 4-5, p. 8.

Why does this matter? How does a tyrant's unhappiness and lack of hope affect his political behavior and even his foreign policy? Or, perhaps more crassly, what is the relationship between policy and the fact that the tyrant is a hedonist who is unable to enjoy pleasure? The darkness of a tyrant's soul is no merely private predicament because it alters his outlook, and hence his behavior. The inability to hope leads to a lack of appreciation of the future. The expectation of a better tomorrow – whether in terms of more scrumptious food, future greatness, or a more just and peaceful political environment – can create incentives to moderate one's behavior in the present as a means of achieving such goals. Or to be more precise, expectation makes personal sacrifices possible: One works hard to build something for tomorrow, or to save money to acquire a possession later on. But a tyrant lacks this sense, according to Hiero's argument; his is a barren soul, incapable of understanding the benefits of personal sacrifice.

The result is neither inaction nor peace. On the contrary, a hopeless tyrant is "insolent" and lives off constant and destructive plunder. The poet Simonides understands this about the tyrant when he explains that "it is inbred in some human beings, just as in horses, to be insolent in proportion as the needs they have are more fully satisfied."³⁹ Insolence increases the more satisfied one's whims are. Aristotle took this argument even further, writing that "the greatest injustices are committed out of excess, not because of the necessary things – no one becomes

³⁹ Ibid., 10:2, p. 18.

a tyrant in order to get in out of the cold.”⁴⁰ Through Hiero, Xenophon admits that “tyrants are compelled most of the time to plunder unjustly both temples and human beings, because they always need additional money to meet their necessary expenses. For, as if there were a perpetual war on, [tyrants] are compelled to support an army or perish.”⁴¹ Incapable of hope, living in fear of losing what he has, the tyrant is impelled constantly to prey not only on his own subjects, but also on the subjects of neighboring states.

The tyrant’s hopelessness leads, therefore, to a desire of constant acquisitiveness. Such greed may only manifest itself in private behavior, or even limit its reach just to the affairs of the small circle of the tyrannical court, or it may stop short at the frontiers of the tyrant’s state. But greed, by its very nature, has no built-in boundaries. Tyrants by definition are thus never satisfied; a tyrant’s state is, by virtue of its leader’s nature, not a status quo power.

There is another source of the tyrant’s hopelessness and resulting strategic myopia implied in the above description. Tyrants are perennially insecure. This is due not only to the fact that they may have enemies who are perhaps temporarily incapable of acting but who retain the motivation to do so. The mere fact that the tyrant’s primary, and ultimately only, preoccupation is to keep power continually trumps all other considerations. It is a necessary

⁴⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), Book II, Chapter 7, p. 68-69.

⁴¹ Xenophon, *Hiero or Tyrannicus*, 4:11, p. 12.

concern that is immediate and daily for the tyrant; it does not allow the tyrant to peer too much into the future. This is analogous with states in general: An insecure state, facing a clear and present threat, does not have the luxury of pondering a long-term strategy of development. Its needs are urgent, and dictated to it by the geopolitical circumstances. A tyrant is like an insecure state; he is under constant threat, with a limited possibility to think beyond today. As Xenophon puts it pithily, the “largest and most necessary expenses [of tyrants] go to guard their lives.”⁴²

The tyrant’s insecurity travels with him and knows no borders. Xenophon describes this fear with which tyrants must travel: they all “proceed everywhere as through hostile territory.”⁴³ Whereas all men tend to experience risks in foreign territory, only tyrants “know that when they reach their own city they are then in the midst of the largest number of their enemies.”⁴⁴ A tyrant is therefore a “soul distracted by fears,” who believes he sees “enemies not only in front of [him], but on every side.”⁴⁵ The Athenian tragedian Euripides similarly observes, in a fragment of a lost tragedy, that the “tyrant must ruin his friends and put them to death; he lives in very great fear that they will do him harm.”⁴⁶

⁴² Ibid., 4:9, p. 11.

⁴³ Ibid, 2:8, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 2:9, p. 9.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 6:5 and 6:8, p. 13.

⁴⁶ Euripides, *Fragments*, ed. and trans. Christopher Collard and Martin Cropp, Loeb Classical Library 504 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), #605, p. 68-69.

The tyrant experiences his life as being constantly at risk. There may be no tomorrow for him if today the tyrant stops increasing his domination of others, relentlessly acquiring greater wealth, accumulating more power, and consequently plundering ever more. The future is irrelevant to him because the present is perennially at risk. A tyrant is a shark who perishes when he stops swimming; he dies (or rather, is eliminated—few tyrants retire peacefully) the moment he stops dominating others. A slightly different way of putting this is that the tyrant is a narcissist whose only preoccupation is his own wellbeing and survival. No matter what the costs may be, the future is circumscribed to his own personal survival.

Two lessons, relevant for how we assess strategic interactions with today's tyrants such as Putin or Xi Jinping, arise from this ancient wisdom.

First, threatening a tyrant with future costs is ineffective. In *War and Human Nature*, Harvard professor Stephen Rosen observes, "Tyrannies have shorter time horizons within which strategic costs and benefits are calculated. Specifically, tyrannies [are] prone to be strongly affected by incentives and disincentives that appear near in time to the moment of choice."⁴⁷ What speaks to a tyrant is costs or pain that can be imposed here and now, that he will personally experience; tomorrow is less relevant. In practical terms, this may mean that imposing economic

⁴⁷ Stephen P. Rosen, *War and Human Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 135.

sanctions on a tyrant is less effective—if effective at all—because the costs of such punishment only become a reality slowly, at some far future point. As such, sanctions are not likely to alter a tyrant's behavior even in the immediate future.

Perhaps more worryingly, given the tyrant's short-term time horizons, it may be difficult to deter him in any given circumstance. Deterrence is based on the promise of future costs to be imposed on, and borne by, the attacker. Hence, in order to be deterred, the tyrant first has to be willing and capable of making the long-term calculation that his actions today will carry costs that he himself will experience at some point in the future. Despite how this dynamic might be read, the problem is not the absence of the tyrant's rationality: In fact, the tyrant is constantly engaging in cost-benefit analysis, only with a different, considerably shorter, time horizon than the average political leader. He is rational but short-sighted.

Second, tyrants do not understand the concept of peace. The tyrant of Syracuse, Hiero, complains to the poet Simonides that "for private men, relief from war is brought about both by treaties and by peace. Whereas for tyrants peace is never made with those subject to their tyranny; nor could the tyrant be confident trusting for a moment to a treaty."⁴⁸ The constant, perennial war that the tyrant himself causes means that even when he has killed the enemy he had feared, he cannot rest and be glad.⁴⁹ In brief, Hiero

⁴⁸ Xenophon, *Hiero or Tyrannicus*, 2:11, p. 9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:18, p. 19.

intimates that one would be foolish indeed to trust a treaty or ceasefire or even a “peace” with a tyrant. He is inherently incapable of respecting it.

For the tyrant, there can be no discontinuity between war and peace. By virtue of his nature, the tyrant is locked in a perpetual conflict. A tyrant’s strategy, therefore, is to maintain a posture of hostility toward everyone, internally and externally. Any pause in violence is at best a moment of respite, in which the tyrant seeks to improve his own position in order to strike further — and at worst, it is simply a cover for a continuation of war using other means.

Tyrants are not just local thugs

If tyrants lack hope, become frequently myopic, and tend toward imprudent decisions based on short-term considerations, are they not more properly viewed as at most regional threats, whose actions are circumscribed to their dominions? Such an assessment reduces tyrants to being local thugs with a reduced impact on international stability, based on the premise that they only act within a geographically constrained theater. If we applied this interpretation to today, the suggestion would be that a tyrant like Putin presents a local problem, and that, for instance, a decision like his to invade Ukraine in 2014 or again, with greater violence, in 2022 creates at most regional tiffs. A tyrant’s aspirations, according to such a view, do not transcend above altering a small parcel of territory, and do not have globally sized designs.

It is surely more complicated than that. Tyrants are certainly concerned with their immediate surroundings, threatened as they are by their own subjects and having a hold on power that they fear to lose if they embark on distant adventures. And yet, we know that tyrants are at the same time never satisfied, that they are constantly seeking expansion, and that they are unable to rest on the laurels of their conquests. They are as restless in their domestic political arena as they are in the wider international theater.

The idea that tyrants are local rascals rather than actors with a wider systemic impact stems in part from Thucydides. In the first book of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, while giving a brief historical excursus of the years before the great conflict between Athens and Sparta, Thucydides explains that it was the tyrannical nature of Greek cities that limited their ability to fight large wars. They were capable of engaging in border disputes, but nothing comparable to the eventual war between Athens and Sparta was possible because of the inherent limits that their tyrannical rule imposed upon them. As Thucydides put it,

Wherever there were tyrants, their habit of providing simply for themselves, of looking solely to their personal comfort and family aggrandizement, made safety the great aim of their policy, and prevented anything great proceeding from them; though they would

each have their affairs with their immediate neighbors.⁵⁰

Self-centered, preoccupied with their personal survival and wealth, fearful of domestic rebellions, and even more, perennially watchful of ambitious members of their own entourage, tyrants cannot go far away from the locus of their power. A tyrant on a distant expedition risks denuding his own lands of the armed men necessary to instill fear, propping up his power. Fear among the populace is much more real when the imperial guards are in the city, not outside of it. A tyrant's (and his forces') absence chips away at his hold on power. Not surprisingly, every time a modern tyrant, whether Putin or Kim Jong-un, has not been visible in public for a prolonged period of time, his control over the state is questioned. Being present is half of tyrannical power. To use the classical analogy of a state as a ship, and of the political leader as the captain—a tyrant is perennially fearful of his own crew. The navigation of the ship to conquer distant shores is an ancillary concern and, in fact, turns out to be often a dangerous distraction that can result in the elimination of the (tyrannical) captain.

There is an additional risk to the tyrant from embarking on a war abroad: It may bring glory to, and wet the political appetites of, the military commanders. The logic of tyranny insists that only the tyrant be the author of martial success; a defeat, on the other hand, must be ascribed to the cadres in charge of operations. And so there

⁵⁰ Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, ed. Robert Strassler (New York: The Free Press, 1996), I.17, p. 13.

are dangers for the tyrant in both victory and defeat, since in the case of the former, the commanders may be jealous of the tyrant appropriating undue glory; and in the latter instance, they may be angry at being offered as expiatory sacrifices. Wars, in brief, are risky for tyrants, who as a result have strong incentives to stay home. In Thucydides' phrasing, nothing "great" can come out of such wars for tyrants.

The Greek historian, of course, did not claim that tyrants were peaceful. But historically they were geopolitically timid, at most engaging in "border contests." Meanwhile "of distant expeditions with conquest for object we hear nothing among the Hellenes."⁵¹ Thucydides notes additionally that these tyrants were also incapable of establishing large and lasting alliances—"there was no union of subject cities round a great state, no spontaneous combination of equals for confederate expeditions." Their inability to build strong alliances, it turns out, is tied to their inability to understand friendships. As Plato put it, "tyrannical characters pass their lives without a friend in the world; they are always either master or slave, and never taste true friendship or freedom."⁵² For such characters, alliances have to be dependencies—states that are not equal and free to make their own decisions, but appendages of the tyrant's will.

This means that whatever wars a tyrant embarks upon tend to be small because they are constrained by the

⁵¹ Ibid., I.15, p. 12

⁵² Plato, *Republic* (New York: Penguin, 1987), IX, 576a, p. 397.

means at the disposal of the political thug. Hence, “what fighting there was consisted merely of local warfare between rival neighbors.”⁵³ Reading this, it is easy to infer that Thucydides’ assessment of tyrants is that they are no more than local, inward-looking thugs with limited means.⁵⁴

There is undoubtedly something to such a view. But it is arguably also incomplete and imperfect.

First, tyrants do expand their domains, not with long-range projections of power but rather pushing through contiguous lands. A democratic Athens, safe in its internal stability, could hop to distant islands. Tyrants have to be more gradual, seeking to project their dominions in concentric circles in order to keep their armies relatively close to home, at the ready to return to quell rebellions. Yes, their constant concern about their own domestic hold on power binds them to small wars—border contests, as Thucydides put it. But there is a risk that others perceive such small wars as insignificant little games rather than as the plodding aggrandizement they actually may be. In fact, the geographic expansion of a tyrant’s dominion occurs through a sequence of local wars: Each conflict in itself may be trivial (of course, not for the populations directly involved), but the accumulation of several such conflicts is not a trifle.

⁵³ Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, I.15, p. 12.

⁵⁴ David Tabachnick, “Tyranny Bound,” in *Confronting Tyranny*, eds. Toivo Koivukoski and David Tabachnick (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p. 28.

Perhaps more importantly, the “tyrant as a local thug” view is inherently faulty because it ascribes to the tyrant an overly calculating mindset. It assumes that the tyrant values his own personal safety enough to resist the allure of aggrandizement. He is assessed to be geopolitically parochial because his supposed fear of what a war may bring must trump his desire and perhaps even his need for constant expansion. But according to many classical texts, the tyrant, while afraid for his personal survival, is also never satisfied and constantly requires more.

To return to Xenophon’s *Hiero*, the argument there is that a tyrant has a rapacious mind. Hiero, the strongman of Syracuse, admits it: “I believe myself that to take from an unwilling enemy is the most pleasant of all things.”⁵⁵ New lands and new populations present prime targets for the tyrants to seek this type of pleasure. Of course he wants to survive, and of course he fears that his subjects will start hating more than fearing him. But his desire for personal safety must compete with his desire to seek the pleasure of ever-wider domination. As the blind Theban prophet Tiresias puts it to the increasingly more tyrannical Creon in Sophocles’s *Antigone*, “the whole race of tyrants lusts for filthy gain.”⁵⁶

The tyrant, we come to understand through reading classical texts, is an archetype of immoderation, bringing a great deal of unpredictability to his behavior. The tyrannical man is, according to Plato, “one who, either by birth or habit

⁵⁵ Xenophon, 1:34, p. 7.

⁵⁶ Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, *Antigone* #1172, p. 114.

or both, combines the characteristics of drunkenness, lust, and madness.”⁵⁷ He is somebody who cannot control himself, but is in control of others—a combination that is lethal to the population under him, and very risky to those in his vicinity. A lusting and mad drunk, the tyrant is in effect a slave to his passions. These can lead him in many directions, including in search of greater foreign conquests—despite all the negative costs that such adventures may carry.

Conclusion

The most famous of ancient female heroines, Antigone, points out that tyrants have “ruthless power to do and say whatever pleases *them*.”⁵⁸ The “whatever pleases them” has few constraints, the desires changing from day to day and by definition, having a tenuous connection to a real assessment of existing conditions. We like to separate the personal behavior of leaders from their political behavior, as if they were hermetically separated. In non-tyrannical regimes, the personal virtues or vices of a leader are most often curtailed by other individuals who hold positions of authority and power—giving some grounds to the feeble hope that crooks in private life can still produce decent policies, not because of the remnants of their virtues but because of the countervailing presence of other political

⁵⁷ Plato, *Republic*, IX, 573c, p. 394.

⁵⁸ Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, Antigone #566-7, p. 84.

leaders. In a tyranny there are no such individuals. They have already been eliminated by violence or are blinded by the proximity to absolute power. We really cannot separate, therefore, the lack of moderation and lust for domination that the tyrant demonstrates in his private life from how he behaves in politics.

In his domestic policy, the tyrant has almost no limits to seeking “whatever pleases him”: He pays no heed to written or natural law. He has eliminated all competing sources of power. And he treats his population as slaves (even though they may feel content). But such unopposed rule also has consequences on a tyrant’s external behavior. The lack of internal or domestic opposition from among his immediate followers, because they are too afraid of the tyrant’s wrath or too eager to court his favor, may indeed lead to great immoderation in his foreign policy. He can pursue “whatever pleases him” as far as he finds vigorous opposition, which outside of the city must be found only in the willingness of foreign powers, not subject to him, to say “no more.” Unconstrained internally, a tyrant encounters resistance only abroad.

Sophocles described this contrast between a tyrant that faces no internal antagonism (and thus is likely to indulge in hubris, deadly to him, his subjects, and his neighbors) and a city that is characterized by internal strife (and thus, perhaps, more capable of self-restraint internally and externally) in the words of a Theban chorus:

Pride breeds the tyrant
violent pride, gorging, crammed to bursting
with all that is overripe and rich with ruin –

clawing up to the heights, headlong pride
crashes down the abyss – sheer doom!
... But the healthy strife that makes the city
strong –
I pray that god will never end that
wrestling.⁵⁹

It is too simplistic, therefore, to suggest that tyrants are simply local, self-limiting nuisances. Such a view harbors the naïve hope that a tyrant is self-defeating and thus needs no consistent and forceful opposition. The ancillary argument is that democratic regimes are structurally more lasting, capable of long-term vision and long-range power projections, and ultimately, possessing a certain historical inevitability of greatness. The reality is different. Tyrants can last for a prolonged period of time precisely because they eliminate their opposition, while they are simultaneously constantly pushing their control outward. Since tyrants are prone to seek domination of ever-larger possessions, their only constraint is the effective obstruction supplied by outside powers. If they are not combated, tyrants may be highly disruptive to international stability.

Tyrants are short-term calculators who are rapacious and never satisfied, and therefore they present long-term threats. They are in a constant state of war, internally and externally, unable either to understand or to enjoy peace. Consequently, they are a perennial source of

⁵⁹ Ibid., *Oedipus the King* #963-970, p. 209.

international instability both because they are always at war and because they are difficult to deter through the promise of future costs. And while they should be opposed and defeated, they, as a category or type of rulers dominating a polity, will not disappear from history. As the philosopher E. M. Cioran observed with some sarcasm, a “world without tyrants would be as boring as a zoo without hyenas.”⁶⁰ They are part of mankind’s past, present, and future. Their nature and mindset deserve to be studied not because they are *sui generis* oddities, but because they are strategic actors who behave in peculiar ways that demand particular responses.

⁶⁰ E. M. Cioran and Richard Howard, “Learning from the Tyrants,” *Mississippi Review* 15, no. 1/2 (Fall/Winter 1986): p. 16.

"I never yet feared men who set apart a place in the middle of their city where they perjure themselves and deceive each other. They, if I keep my health, shall talk of their own misfortunes, not those of the Ionians." He uttered this threat against all the Greeks, because they have markets and buy and sell there; for the Persians themselves were not used to resorting to markets at all, nor do they even have a market of any kind."
Cyrus, Persian King, in Herodotus
(I.153)

Chapter 4:

Aeschylus and how to know the enemy

Good strategy requires a sound understanding of the rival. The rival is, in a sense, the interlocutor, and to engage him in a debate, one must understand his speech and his reasoning. Without that knowledge, the proffered words cannot have an impact; the conversation is pointless. So it is

in strategy. It is futile to engage in a competition with a rival without having at least an inkling of his thoughts, fears, and desires. While it is impossible to predict with great precision an enemy's response, it is nonetheless important to understand the spectrum of his possible reactions. And to do so, there is no alternative but to try to read his mind – unique, perhaps convoluted, but certainly different from one's own.

Despite the modern penchant for trusting in the equal rationality of all, a rival's response to one's own strategy is not simply a logical reaction that can be generalized and thus grasped with relative ease. Each rival state or group will respond to a similar action differently, based on its particular culture, worldview, history, and the proclivities of its leaders. Good strategy requires, therefore, putting oneself inside the rival's mind – becoming the rival, so to speak. Or, as Bernard Brodie put it, "good strategy presupposes good anthropology and good sociology."⁶¹

One of the earliest examples of "good anthropology" – or rather, of the capacity to assume the mental disposition of the enemy – is in a fifth-century B.C. Greek tragedy written by Aeschylus, *The Persians*.⁶² This dramatic play recounts the moment when the Persian court and queen dowager learn the devastating news that the

⁶¹ Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 332.

⁶² The translation used here is from the 2008 Loeb edition. Aeschylus, *Persians, Seven against Thebes, Suppliants, Prometheus Bound*, ed. and trans. Alan H. Sommerstein, Loeb Classical Library 145 (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 2008).

Greeks had defeated their emperor, Xerxes, in the naval battle near the island of Salamis (the year, 480 B.C.).⁶³ *The Persians* ends with the arrival of Xerxes himself, in rags and with few remaining men, lamenting his enormous loss inflicted by “triple banks of oars,” –the fearsome Greek triremes. The uniqueness of Aeschylus’ tragedy is that it is told entirely from the Persian perspective without any Greek characters present. A perceptive study of the Persian mindset and political regime, beyond its dramatic characteristics *The Persians* is arguably also a Greek assessment of the Persian enemy.

The Persians is a historical drama, “the sole surviving member of a sub-genre that never flourished in Athens,” and it attests to the difficulty and the emotional toll of trying both to relive the past and to understand the motivations and decisions of the various parties involved.⁶⁴ A few decades prior to Aeschylus’ offering, Phrynicus had authored the play *The Capture of Miletus*, also as a historical drama, recounting the Persian conquest of the Athenian colony of Miletus. Herodotus in his *Histories* recounts that *The Capture of Miletus* brought the audience to tears. Given that it reminded the Athenians too much of this past calamity, they forbade future productions. It is plausible, however, that the pro-Persian faction in Athens was responsible for banning the play, because they were afraid

⁶³ For an excellent description and analysis of the battle, see Barry Strauss, *The Battle of Salamis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

⁶⁴ William G. Thalmann, “Xerxes’ Rags: Some Problems in Aeschylus’ *Persians*,” *The American Journal of Philology* 101, no. 3 (Autumn 1980): p. 260.

of the strong anti-Persian feelings that the drama, now lost, generated in the city.⁶⁵

Aeschylus similarly composed his tragedy after the historical event that inspired its writing, producing *The Persians* eight years after the Battle of Salamis. A young, twenty-three-year-old Pericles (he of future Thucydidean fame as the leader of Athens at the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War) financed the play. Pericles' own father, Xanthippus, had commanded the Athenian navy in the battle of Mycale in 479 B.C. (a year after Salamis), and he had brought back to Athens some of the cables that had held together the infamous pontoon bridge over which the Persians had crossed the Hellespont (the present-day Dardanelles). This time, historical drama earned a different fate than it had for Phrynicus: Aeschylus was awarded the first prize in Athens' Dionysia festival for *The Persians*. Perhaps the award was in part a recognition of the awareness, even then, of the pivotal historical moment that the Battle of Salamis was for Athens and for Greece. Other great Athenian playwrights, Sophocles and Euripides, would also be intertwined with Athenian memories of the Battle of Salamis: Sophocles led a youth chorus celebrating the success of the naval battle; Euripides was born on the very day of the battle.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ See also Attilio Favorini, "History, Collective Memory, and Aeschylus' *The Persians*," *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 1, Ancient Theatre (March 2003): pp. 99-111.

⁶⁶ William C. Kirk, Jr., "Aeschylus and Herodotus," *The Classical Journal* 51, no. 2 (November 1955): p. 85.

The intellectual superiority of the Greeks

The Greeks defeated the Persians because of Aeschylus. I do not mean, of course, that Aeschylus alone clobbered the “barbarians” coming from the east. He was certainly an active participant in the successive wars that pitted the vast and wealthy Persian empire against the motley of Greek city-states. At Marathon in 490 B.C. he fought opposite the armies of the Persian Darius I as a young foot soldier. That battle stopped the Persian onslaught in a lopsided victory for the Athenians (according to Herodotus, only about 200 Athenians—among them Aeschylus’s brother—were killed, while more than six thousand Persians lost their lives). As a middle aged and by then famous poet, it is probable that he also fought at Salamis, perhaps waiting on shore to finish off Persian sailors seeking safety from their sunken ships. But his material contributions to the war efforts were on a par with those of thousands of other Greeks. They were not remarkable. So no, Aeschylus did not win the war singlehandedly.

Aeschylus’s contribution to the war was different. In *The Persians* he shows a unique ability to put himself inside the Persian court, describing the wishes and the fears of those powerful eastern “barbarians,” as well as sensing the dangers that arose for them from their defeat in Greece. Besides the haunting beauty of the tragedy, *The Persians* is an exercise in “red team” playing: It is assessing the enemy from the enemy’s own perspective and surmising what is

impossible to know even with the best intelligence—the fears and the dreams, the despair and the hope, of the rival.

An appraisal of material capabilities is inherently limited; it can quantify the tangible assets of the enemy, but not his mind. No high-level spy or communication intercept can unlock the enemy's thinking either: "Signal intelligence" is always susceptible to distortion and disinformation. Even when trustworthy, it requires proper interpretation and analysis. It is not surprising, therefore, that we often rely on measuring the enemy's armies, economy, and population as indicators of what he may achieve. In such an assessment of material variables, the logic is as follows: if the enemy can, he will—and if he cannot, he will not. In contemporary academic parlance, we use capabilities as proxies of intentions.

The Persians did exactly that with the Greeks, and they lost. The Persian Queen Atossa, while waiting nervously for news of the expedition to Greece, asks her advisors several questions, all seeking to measure the material power of the opponent. How many men are in the Greek army? Are they skilled with their arrows and bows? Do they have sufficient wealth?⁶⁷ The Chorus answers her with expert precision: The Greeks have enough men; they use different weapons and tactics than the Persians (close quarter combat); they have plenty of silver. The queen's net assessment of the Greeks focuses first on the material balance of forces. But what is even more telling from her initial questions is what she considers important first and

⁶⁷ Aeschylus, *Persians*, #235-238, p. 41.

foremost: what the Persians have—numerical superiority, bows and arrows, money. Her perspective is that an enemy who does not possess these things has very little chance of defeating the Persians. She learns that the Greeks have money, but not numerical superiority or skilled archers. Only with her fourth question does she begin to change her tone, as she asks: “And who is the shepherd, master and commander over their host?”⁶⁸ The answer from the Chorus is shocking, and the queen has no rejoinder: the Greeks “are not called slaves or subjects to any man.”⁶⁹ For the queen, or the Persian strategist planning this expedition, such an answer must have been another sign that the Greeks were subpar, incapable of presenting a united front to keep in check the large forces commanded by the Persian king.

As we know, despite their calculations of relative material capabilities, the Persians did not prevail at Salamis. The frazzled messenger to the Persian court bringing the bad news of their armies’ defeat expresses the surprise clearly: “So far as numbers are concerned, the fleet of the barbarians would have prevailed.”⁷⁰ Numerical superiority, as well as battlefield tactics and a political regime similar to those of the Persians, would have made sense to the queen and her strategists. Their logical conclusion was that an inferior force, with fewer ships, should have been defeated. That the inferior force won

⁶⁸ Ibid., #241, p. 43

⁶⁹ Ibid., #242, p. 43.

⁷⁰ Ibid., #337, p. 55.

instead was a brutal shock to the Persians, challenging the Persian net assessment and the resulting strategy.

While the Persians did not understand the Greeks, the Greeks—or at least some Greeks such as the Athenian leader Themistocles—did understand the Persians. Aeschylus suggests that the Greeks evaluated their enemies according to different metrics than the Persians did. Above all, he suggests that the Greeks were capable of understanding the Persian mindset. The Greek advantage was not material; it was intellectual.

The proof that the Greeks had assessed the Persians better than the other way around was the Battle of Salamis itself. Obviously, the outcome was a stunning success for the Greeks. But a martial victory can be attributed to a whole host of reasons—including sheer luck—rather than exclusively to a better anthropological understanding of the enemy. It is the Greeks' deception of the Persian Xerxes before the battle that indicates that the former had an intellectual advantage over the latter. As Aeschylus recounts it (through the words of the Persian messenger who arrived in front of the court), the night before the battle a Greek from the Athenian fleet came to the Persian camp, testifying that the Greeks would try to escape with their ships before dawn. Both Herodotus and, later on, Plutarch, recount a similar story. Herodotus adds some details to the story, revealing that the Greek messenger was Sicinnus, a slave of the Athenian leader Themistocles, sent to deceive the Persians but also—by encouraging the Persian fleet to surround the Greek ships—to commit the multilateral and perhaps fraying alliance of the Greeks to battle.

The Greeks' deception of their enemy succeeded because Xerxes, and perhaps the Persians in general, thought that an alliance of semi-equals, such as the one the Greek city states put together, had little chance of maintaining unity when confronted by the Persian might. The Persians ruled over their subordinate groups and allies, while the Greeks had to negotiate with each other. Xerxes naturally thought that his way of diplomatic management based on autocratic rule was superior. Sicinnus thus easily convinced him that the Greeks were a motley rabble of competing cities, each eager to save its own skin even to the detriment of its neighbors. After all, Xerxes knew that without the iron fist of Persian power, the Egyptian, Ionian, and Phoenician contingents would most likely have withdrawn back to their lands. The Ionians had in fact revolted a few years prior, supported in part by Greek cities. Xerxes, mirror imaging the situation, thought a similar dynamic must have been at work in the Greek coalition, because it lacked the god-like rule of an emperor.

Autocrats do not think that unity is possible absent the fear of imperial command. In *The Persians*, Queen Atossa is puzzled when she learns that nobody rules the Athenians; she thinks that such a regime lacks any political order, resulting in a headless mob incapable of strategic action and of martial prowess. Their habitual worldview and way of thinking leads autocrats to misunderstand the resilience of alliances and their wartime effectiveness. Consequently, autocrats often act in ways that make little sense, such as attacking opponents even when they themselves are in a position of tactical or material inferiority.

This is precisely what happened at the Battle of Salamis. Confident that the Greeks were indeed trying to escape, Xerxes ordered his fleet to enter the straits near Salamis. The Persians spent the night awake and alert, eager to attack those among the Greeks whom they expected would try to run away under the cover of night. And yet, dawn found the Persians tired and shocked at the sight of the Greeks, ready to fight and now in an environment that minimized the numerical advantage of the barbarian fleet. The Persians had been fooled. They suffered a massive naval defeat.

No wonder that in *The Persians*, Aeschylus demonstrates a poor opinion of Xerxes. Xerxes allowed himself to be deceived by Themistocles because he had already massively misjudged the Greeks. For his part, Themistocles understood perfectly the mentality of the Persian ruler, and put it to good use. The Persian emperor was guilty of having committed both a strategic and a tactical mistake that cost him dearly. And both mistakes stemmed out of his poor assessment of the enemy.

Xerxes' first strategic mistake was to invade Greece at all. To make that point, the Greek poet evokes the ghost of Darius I, Xerxes's father, as a character in *The Persians*. Darius, too, had suffered his share of defeats, notably in the plain of Marathon. From that disaster he had learned that while the Greeks may appear divided, weak, and poor, when pushed to the brink, they are capable of great feats of military valor and political acumen. Because of these characteristics, Darius states it was better to let them be. Moreover, when invaded by a large army, Darius reminds

Xerxes that Greece had fought back “by starving to death a multitude that is too vastly numerous.”⁷¹ In the relatively confined space of the Greek peninsula, living off the land was not feasible for a vast army such as Persia’s was. Xerxes, however, had been too arrogant to understand this, being (in the words of his queen mother) too eager to demonstrate that he was more than a “stay-at-home warrior.”

This larger, strategic mistake was compounded by the tactical error, the result of Greek deception, to fight a battle at sea under conditions that favored the well-trained Athenian fleet rather than Persian forces. As the Chorus of the Persian court bluntly puts it, “Xerxes handled everything unwisely, he and his sea-boats.”⁷² The commanders of the ships on the Persian side were too afraid of their own king to challenge his decisions about which tactics to employ. Their dread of their commander also kept them awake all night, in fear of letting the Greeks escape, as the deceived Xerxes was expecting to occur. And their fear is understandable — the penalty for failure was decapitation, a penalty that is not unusual in autocracies where commanders are often punished in gruesome ways for their alleged failures on the battlefield. “The harshness of the consequences in this case (...) and especially their universality, underline the Persian conviction that accomplishments can be achieved only through fear of punishment.”⁷³

⁷¹ Ibid., #794, p. 105.

⁷² Ibid., #552, p. 75.

⁷³ Ippokratis Kantzios, “The Politics of Fear in Aeschylus’ ‘Persians,’” *The Classical World* 98, no. 1 (Autumn 2004): p. 14.

When courtiers, commanders, and troops are under compulsion and in a situation of fear, there is no possibility of their offering a different opinion than their sovereign, because it constitutes a disagreement with the king. Fear inevitably generates poor advice, or a lack of advice altogether. Moreover, there is little possibility that honor or nobility might have inspired the Persians to act otherwise, because the Persians had no option but to fight. The Greeks chose to fight; the Persians were compelled to fight through fear of their King.

The autocrat's mind

Aeschylus has two additional insights into the Persian mindset. First, he suggests that an autocratic regime, such as the one headed by Xerxes, has limited accountability and this directly influences its strategy. As the queen mother argues while waiting for news of the Persian troops, were her son Xerxes to succeed, "he would be a very much admired man, but were he to fail – well, he is not accountable to the community, and if he comes home safe he remains ruler of this land."⁷⁴ An emperor is the author of victories but not of defeats. These latter are rather attributed to the meddling of antagonistic gods or the poor performance of incompetent subordinates. Of course, once the news of the Persian defeat and rout arrives, neither Queen Atossa nor the ghost of her husband Darius can fully exonerate Xerxes. But Aeschylus has already made the

⁷⁴ Aeschylus, *Persians*, #212-214, p. 37.

point: Autocrats and despots take risks that leaders accountable to their populations, or even to an elite class, would not. Despots are dangerous precisely because they are unmoored from domestic political constraints, while their advisors are often sycophantic courtiers rather than wise counselors. Perhaps more importantly, since the emperor is not accountable for any military failures, the costs of defeat are borne by imperial subjects, as the long list of Persian names presented by Aeschylus (forty-nine in total) shows. This is in stark contrast to the absence of any Greek names in the play, which is due (as mentioned later) to the fact that the Greek victory was achieved by all of the Greek soldiers, through self-motivation, self-discipline, and a love of their own country and liberty.

The defeated autocrat will, of course, still be distraught. The ending of *The Persians* is a powerful and rapid back and forth between Xerxes and the Chorus, full of despairing and wailing. But there is little self-examination. The more levelheaded analysis is done only by Darius's ghost, who returns to the underground before the arrival of the bedraggled Xerxes. Xerxes musters only despondency in the face of the fact that he has lost so many of his "defenders" and "escorts" (the Chorus adds that they were also "friends," but Xerxes may have understood better than they that emperors have few friends!). Despair is an act of emoting. It is neither an act of analysis nor an expression of a sense of failed responsibility.

Aeschylus' second insight concerns the nature of imperial fears. The Persian empire did not collapse after Salamis; in fact, it outlived Athenian democracy and the

relatively brief harmony that the Greeks had managed to achieve facing the barbarian onslaught. But Aeschylus points out that the power of Persia, or for that matter of any empire, resided as much in its material capabilities as in the image of power. That image had been damaged at Salamis more than Persia's material assets. The Chorus observes that after such a defeat one ought to expect a fraying of imperial ties.

Not long now will those in the land of Asia
remain under Persian rule,
nor continue to pay tribute
under the compulsion of their lords,
nor fall on their faces to the ground
in awed obeisance; for the strength of the
monarchy
has utterly vanished.⁷⁵

The weakness of any despotic regime or empire is that it is held together by the fear it can muster. That fear is a mindset generated by an expectation of retribution, rather than by the constant application of power against rebellious subjects. Such an expectation will understandably decrease when imperial forces have taken a hit in some corner of the empire, however distant. That is why the Persian Chorus can claim that the island of Salamis "holds the power of Persia in its blood-soaked soil."⁷⁶

Aeschylus's prediction—or, more precisely, the despair of the Persian Chorus—that Persia would fall apart

⁷⁵ Ibid., #584-590, p. 79.

⁷⁶ Ibid., #595-7, p. 79.

did not turn out to be fully correct, although various regions under Persian rule did rebel. On the contrary, historically it was Greece that became more divided after the Persian Wars, with a long and bloody war erupting between Athens and Sparta and their respective colonies and allies. But Aeschylus was not forecasting history in *The Persians*. He was describing the worries of the foreign imperial court – the fears of the Persian enemy. Whether those fears materialized exactly as imagined or not is in many ways irrelevant, because people often act on the basis of such fears. Understanding what their fears are or might be is therefore more important than figuring out whether they are correct or justified in having them. In this case, Aeschylus suggests that a despotic regime is always attuned to its survival and, thus when defeated, is likely to focus inward to assuage that fear. This same suggestion may also be a veiled justification for why the Greeks chose not to pursue the defeated armies of Xerxes, lest the Persians turn back in a moment of courage fueled by despair. Arguably, if they had been pushed too hard, their fear of internal collapse resulting from the loss of reputation may have forced the Persians to remain in Greece.

But Aeschylus' observations about this dynamic also suggests that the best way to keep the Persians in check was to stoke rebellions within their empire, as the Greeks had done to a degree with the Ionians, and later on, would do with the Egyptians. The strategic advice implied by Aeschylus was that, unless forced by a hostile army invading their lands, the Greek cities were better off not seeking a direct confrontation with a powerful empire like

Persia. Rather, the Greeks should stoke Persia's fears that its imperial subordinates may "no longer keep their tongue under guard."⁷⁷

The fragile unity of the Greeks

Aeschylus is not triumphalist. He does not shy from celebrating, albeit briefly, the Greeks who were eager to fight because their freedom was at stake. They were, after all, "not called slaves or subjects to any man" as even the Persians admit.⁷⁸ At Salamis, the Greeks fought as one, defending together their liberty from barbarian oppression. Interestingly, Aeschylus names no individual Greeks in his recounting of the Greek fighting, suggesting perhaps that naval victories are products of a well-ordered fleet rather than of individual exploits. A naval defeat results in many sailors dead, with a list of individual Persians killed, but a naval victory has no hero; there are no individual Greeks celebrated.

Despite this recognition of martial and political superiority, there is little triumphalism in the tragedy. In fact, as Alan Sommerstein points out in his preface to *The Persians*, "there are various indications that his audience were not expected to sit back and reflect smugly that this kind of catastrophic folly was only possible among benighted barbarians. In the Queen's dream (181-99), the

⁷⁷ Ibid., #591-3, p. 79.

⁷⁸ Ibid., #242, p. 43.

two women representing Greece and Persia are sisters (185-6), apparently equal in stature and beauty, differing only in their clothing and their willingness to submit to servitude: that one of them is 'Greek' and the other 'barbarian' is due merely to the 'fall of the lot' (186-7)."⁷⁹

Undoubtedly, Aeschylus was aware that Greek unity was a fragile thing. As a historian of the wars between Greece and Persia notes,

Most people regarded the prospect of invasion, not as a common threat to be faced by a united Hellas, but rather as an inevitable if unpleasant disruption of their own personal existence. Such quietism is typified by the anonymous Megarian poet of the *Theognidea* who wrote, with disarming candour: 'We want to make music, to drink and chat and not fear the War of the Medes.' This is an understandable human sentiment—as those who cheered Neville Chamberlain at the time of the Munich Agreement should be the first to admit. Every city's first concern was for its own security: Panhellenism came a very poor second to *sauve qui peut*.⁸⁰

Many of Sparta's allies nourished pro-Persian sympathies, while Sparta itself was notoriously self-

⁷⁹ Preface to *The Persians* in Aeschylus, *The Persians and Other Plays*, trans. Alan H. Sommerstein (New York: Penguin, 2009), p. 8.

⁸⁰ Peter Green, *The Greco-Persian Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 69.

centered, arriving late at battles (such as Marathon) and being very stingy with supporting forces in defense of Greece. Similarly, even Athens was torn apart by internal factions, some of which were eager to strike a grand bargain with Persia, because they considered it to be too powerful to oppose. Against these sophisticated analysts of the balance of power, and against believers in a diplomatic deal with Persia, were “the plain, decent, stupid men: farmers and craftsmen and sailors who were not clever enough to know in advance when they were beaten, men who still placed honour above calculation.”⁸¹ Themistocles and his “never surrender” hard line against the Persian invaders were therefore not the inevitable outcome of a democratic regime and of a liberty-loving people. While clearly appreciating the freedoms of Athens and the self-discipline of his compatriots, Aeschylus does not think that victory was an inexorable product of the values and the political regime of his city.

What is surprising is that, using poetic license but *sine ira et studio*, Aeschylus generates enormous sympathy for the Persians. A member of the victorious army, Aeschylus can summon an astounding capacity to pity the defeated enemy—an enemy that almost two decades prior to the production of the tragedy had caused the death of his own brother in the fields of Marathon. That capacity to put himself on the Persian side, to imagine and intuit rather than to touch and calculate the deepest emotions of the enemy, is not a symptom of relativism. Nor, as modern

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 27.

academia is wont to do, is it something to be criticized as a denigration of the “Oriental Other,” full of stereotypes and negative traits ascribed to the “barbarians.”

The advantage of an Aeschylus

Aeschylus and his *Persians* is an exemplar of the Greek intellectual capacity to understand their enemy in ways that went beyond the simple calculation of the “correlation of forces.” That is what gave the Greeks an advantage against the Persians. They won because of Aeschylus; that is, they won because of their ability to understand the Persian court and emperor. They had to beat their enemy’s mind before they could defeat his forces. And the strategy of Themistocles, conceived in advance and prepared painstakingly, succeeded only because it was based on a sophisticated understanding of how the Persians, and the Persian King in particular, thought. The Greeks employed a strategy that appealed to the Persian preconceptions – their belief in the inherent weakness of the Greek alliances because they were not held together by the authoritarian power of a king, and that banked on the tactical rigidity of the Persian forces, a consequence of their fear of their commander. The strategy also appealed to Xerxes’s vainglory: He was hoping to achieve a great victory that would cement his fame, despite the sound advice of his subordinate Artemisia, who advocated for a slow and calm approach aimed at dividing the Greek alliance.

Another way to put this is that a great power risks defeat when it lacks Aeschyluses, poets who can feel the enemy before they or their countrymen face him in battle. Competition and war are not driven by mathematical equations; they are a clash of minds and wills, fears and desires, which often are only loosely connected to the material capabilities at hand. In the geopolitical competitions that we are facing and are likely to face in the future, do we have Aeschyluses?

*"Cornelius Tacitus teaches very well
those who live under tyrants how to live
and behave prudently, just as he teaches
tyrants the ways to establish their
tyranny."*

Francesco Guicciardini, Ricordi, #18

Chapter 5:

Tacitus and political order

Born in Gallia in 40 AD, Gnaeus Julius Agricola pursued a political career, occupying several positions of importance in Rome and its provinces. Perhaps because of his provincial origin—a *novus homo*, he was a member of the Roman political elite who felt more at ease on the violent frontier of imperial power than among the vicious and shallow intricacies of court life in the capital. In the end, despite a lengthy public service, Agricola is remembered not because of triumphs, statues, or high office, but because of the kind words written by his son-in-law, Tacitus. His greatest success was, in fact, not in quelling rebellions in Britain but back home where, refusing to bow to the corruption of the imperial court, he

preserved his family and his honor. And he achieved that by withdrawing carefully from public life. Paradoxically, his most enduring political success was to abandon politics. In short, Agricola was a frontier governor who put law above the arbitrary use of power; a public servant who placed his family above the temptation of political approval; and, in Tacitus's famous words, he was a great man under a bad emperor.

Tacitus's short eulogy of his father-in-law, the *Agricola*, is divided into two parts: the story of Agricola's career abroad, focusing on his time in Britain, is followed by the description of his return to his family in Rome, a city full of courtesans vying for the emperor's approval. It is a division that may have been dictated simply by Agricola's career, truncated by a jealous emperor for whom the military successes of his commanders were a personal affront and a potential threat to his hold of power.

It is possible to suggest a different, albeit not mutually exclusive, reading. The two parts of the story are written as tragic mirror images. In Britain, Rome imposes law; in Rome, the emperor discards it. In Britain, true rhetoric, the persuasion through reasonable arguments, is still present in the words of the yet unconquered enemy, Calgacus; in Rome, all that is left are *sotto voce* conversations among a few friends. In Britain, public engagement in the defense of Roman interests is possible and honorable; in Rome, the only honorable activity is to eschew public life and court politics.

Read this way, the *Agricola* is a description of a state, Rome, that can defeat rebellious tribes in distant lands but

is fragile and corrupt at home. While stability through law and education is imposed abroad, in Rome they are discarded in favor of the emperor's whim. Following this reading, there are two related questions that Tacitus examines through the figure of Agricola. The first concerns military tactics: how to defeat a rebellion or insurgency. The second is philosophical and practical: how to be a good man under a bad emperor. These two questions at first sight are completely separate—one dealing with foreign policy and military power, the other with a concern for virtue, dignity and honor. But the separation is only superficial. Both the rebellions in Britain and life in Rome are stories of the consequences of unrestrained power, which leads to arbitrary rule and ultimately to instability and lack of freedom.

The key challenge that Agricola faces when he is posted in Britain is the absence of law, a condition that is caused by corrupt Roman authorities, drunk with their military supremacy and unrestrained by weak command. He has the power and authority to change this situation by instilling discipline among his own troops and by establishing a rule of law. When he is recalled to Rome, he faces an analogous challenge, but he lacks analogous power and skills. Rome is at the mercy of the emperor, who seeks his own self-preservation and is blinded by flattery; his whim is the law. The two questions, therefore, start from analogous situations but reach different conclusions. Energetic action is needed on the frontier, whereas in Rome honor and freedom of conscience can be preserved only by eschewing participation in state administration. Agricola

attained glory, and remembrance by posterity, in the seclusion of his home.

Such reading of the *Agricola* may be simplistic, imperfect, perhaps even historically inaccurate. But any useful reading of a classical text must be a bit “unscrupulous” in order to be fruitful.⁸² Tacitus’s *Agricola* is, after all, “enigmatic” as a historian put it.⁸³ The Roman historian’s motives are unclear in this brief book. It may be simply a biography written with admiration and *pietas* toward his father-in-law; it may also have been a political *j’accuse* of corrupt emperors.

But the beauty of reading the classics is that, regardless of the author’s wishes, they inform our lives. We read in the shadow of the present. The benefit of reading *Agricola* is that it raises important questions of a practical and moral nature that are particularly relevant to our age. It is a manual of counterinsurgency, or of small frontier wars, combined with a suggestion of how to safeguard one’s conscience and honor in a corrupt state. The fundamental question posed in this little text, concerning the proper level of political engagement, is one that all reasonable individuals face.

Britain: A Distant and Rebellious Frontier

⁸² George Kateb, “Thucydides’ *History*: A Manual of Statecraft,” *Political Science Quarterly* 79, no. 4 (December 1964): p. 481.

⁸³ Katherine Clarke, “An Island Nation: Re-Reading Tacitus’ *Agricola*,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 91 (2001): p. 94.

The story of Agricola's public service in Britain is straightforward. In that distant region he conducts a prolonged counterinsurgency campaign accompanied by a northward extension of Roman influence. It is a conceptually simple strategy that, however, requires a superior individual to implement.⁸⁴ It is another example of the oft-quoted Clausewitzian wisdom that in war everything is simple, but the simplest thing is difficult.

The foundation of action is knowledge, and Tacitus suggests it is particularly important when dealing with rebellions. The starting point is the recognition that all individuals share a similar primordial desire to be free from oppression, but they—and the groups to which they belong—live in particular circumstances, following their own traditions and codes, laboring and fighting on their own lands. This is the first lesson of the *Agricola*: first-hand knowledge of the province, of the tribes and its leaders, of the customs and the topography is essential.

Abstract, general knowledge, namely, the understanding of a universal yearning for freedom, is without doubt necessary to discern the fundamental motivation of a rebellious group. Without it, a rebellion or, more broadly, resistance to conquest are merely incomprehensible acts of violence against which only superior violence can be applied. Such knowledge, therefore, is necessary. However, the particular and

⁸⁴ On the crucial role of leadership in counterinsurgency, see Mark Moyar, *A Question of Command* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

detailed knowledge of the human and geological landscape is also indispensable to figure out how that primordial desire for freedom will manifest itself, who may shape it into a political program, what priorities it may set for the individuals and groups in question. The absolute, in other words, is in the particular, as Francesco Guicciardini, examined in chapters 7 and 8, advocates.

Agricola had been exposed to those universal ideas by studying philosophy in his youth but without losing the virtue of moderation, an outcome of reason and experience (and of his mother's guiding role, as Tacitus recounts). He complemented it by developing, throughout his career, a knowledge of the particular. This is why the length of Agricola's deployments to the northern edge of the Roman empire, Britain, gave him an advantage. His most extensive professional experience was achieved there, and rising through the ranks he held the position of governor. The "science, experience, and incentive"⁸⁵ he acquired during his first stay in Britain were indispensable for his success.

When Agricola lands in Britain as a governor, he finds the island wracked by rebellions compounded, if not caused, by corrupt Roman administration. The legions had just put down a dangerous rebellion led by a woman, Boudicca, but the Roman victory was tactical, not political. The illusion of peace that followed had the unfortunate effect of relaxing the discipline of the Roman army, leading to great uncertainty about Roman behavior. Roman

⁸⁵ Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, Loeb Classical Library 35 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 35.

administrators behaved arbitrarily, blinded by their superior military power. Noting this, Tacitus points out that “little was accomplished by force if injustice followed.”⁸⁶ Violence has limits in what it can achieve and alone can never suffice to maintain political order. The inability to recognize such limits often means that peace is as dreaded as war because social relations become based exclusively on a balance of force.

Starting from this recognition, Agricola implemented a strategy characterized by four sets of actions, which also represent the basic argument behind a counterinsurgency strategy.⁸⁷ First, he decided to “eliminate the causes of war. He began with himself and his own people” by instilling discipline and order.⁸⁸ The capricious behavior of Roman officials made imperial rule unpredictable, based on the random whims of individuals in power rather than on established and objective rules. The resulting situation was “more intolerable than the tribute itself” because the latter was at least expected while the avarice of individual administrators was limited only by their ability to wield power. In brief, Agricola’s first step was to instill predictability to the Roman administration, thereby decreasing the level of uncertainty experienced by

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

⁸⁷ David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); David Kilcullen, “‘Twenty-Eight Articles’: Fundamentals of Company-level Counterinsurgency,” *Military Review* (May-June 2006): pp. 103-108.

⁸⁸ Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, p. 63.

the conquered population. Uncertainty of rule is the worst enemy of stable and enduring political control.

Second, violence is necessary but should be brief, quick, and devastating. The main objective is to impress the enemy by establishing a reputation for military superiority. Agricola recognized “the necessity of confirming first impressions, knowing that he depended upon the issue of his first campaign to terrorize the enemy for the future.”⁸⁹ The reason was that time was not on the side of the Roman forces, but on the side of the insurgents. The sheer distance of the British frontier from Rome made a large-scale protracted military commitment unfeasible. Even more, the perception of weakness would have generated further rebellions, sapping Roman power. A reputation for military success was thus preferable to the actual use of power.

When necessary, the use of violence had to be swift and brutal. During his time in Britain, Agricola was engaged in constant military action, some in response to rebellions and others in search of new territories. Through combined warfare, by sea and by land, his objective was to deny safe haven to those resisting Roman rule. “It seemed as though the secret places of their seas were being laid bare, and the last asylum barred against the vanquished.”⁹⁰ And when he engaged the enemy, the outcome was devastating. After the last major battle at Mons Graupius, Tacitus paints a spectral scene: “everywhere was dismal silence, lonely hills, houses smoking to heaven... [and Agricola’s] scouts

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 61.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 73.

met no one."⁹¹ The defeat of the enemy was complete and quick, no doubt in part because of their own tactical mistake of fighting a pitched battle.⁹² One way to put this is that the shorter the application of violence, the stronger the reputation and, thus, the more effective the political control.

Third, immediately following a military victory, Agricola "paraded before [the defeated] the attractions of peace."⁹³ Violence is necessary but has limits in what it can achieve. In the constant quest to diminish the need for violence, he engaged in what we now call state-building: his policy was to "assist communities, to erect temples, market-places, houses: he praised the energetic, rebuked the indolent, and the rivalry for his compliments took the place of coercion."⁹⁴ The purpose was both to show to the local population the benefits of not rebelling and to replace the

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 97.

⁹² "Nor can Agricola's fame merely be assessed on the number of pitched battles he fought: that he even fought that of Mons Graupius must have been due to the false strategy of Calgacus rather than Agricola's ability to bring the battle on. Few could name a large-scale battle on the Indian northwest frontier during the period of British rule there, but the fighting was frequent and arduous, and required great abilities on the part of the local commanders. Indeed, it probably argues the greater skill of Agricola that he was successful in conquering so much of Scotland without the routine pitched battle which ancient "text-book" warfare relied upon." A. G. Woodhead, "Tacitus and Agricola," *Phoenix* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1948): p. 50.

⁹³ Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, p. 67.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

source of local authority by concentrating it on the Roman governor.

Finally, for the long term, Agricola began a slow process of assimilation. He educated the sons of local chieftains "in a liberal education," bringing Latin and the toga, then the "the promenade, the bath, the well-appointed dinner table." The British called it culture, but it was a "factor of their slavery."⁹⁵ The idea behind this strategy was that the impulse to oppose Roman power would weaken as the locals became increasingly more similar to their conquerors. If only Britain could be made into Rome's image, rebellions would cease. It was a risky policy because it was difficult to measure the level of assimilation of the targeted tribes. Agricola himself must have been very aware of this as he had to deal with a revolt of the Usipi, a tribal group from Germany, who were with the Romans in Britain. "After murdering their centurions and such soldiers as had been distributed among their companies to instill discipline, and who passed as models and instructors," the Usipi commandeered some ships and sailed around Britain, bringing destruction with them.⁹⁶ Clearly, the Roman attempt to train and befriend frontier tribal forces was in this case a failure, ending in an ancient example of "green-on-blue" attack.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 77.

⁹⁷ Embedding Roman soldiers with the Usipi may have been an early attempt to develop auxiliary forces to augment imperial military power. Later, at the battle of Mons Graupius, Agricola used extensively such forces, sparing Roman legions. I. A.

To sum up, Agricola's counterinsurgency is conceptually simple: build a reputation for strength but also for self-restraint and order, defeat the enemy but make peace attractive, keep military supremacy but also assimilate the conquered population. Virgil summed it up brilliantly: *parcere subiectis et debellare superbos* – to spare the defeated and to subdue the proud.⁹⁸ Military victory is only a prelude to a longer and more difficult series of actions. It allows the employment of other tools, from state-building to education, to achieve stable and enduring control. In the end, however, there is no guarantee that it will succeed. Britain after all remained a frontier province, only partially stable.⁹⁹

Rome: Political Engagement

The straightforward story of Agricola's campaign in Britain ends with his return to the city of Rome. Under Emperor Domitian's suspicious watch, Rome was more dangerous than Britain (or Asia, Agricola's previous

Richmond, "Gnaeus Iulius Agricola," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 34, Parts 1 and 2 (1944): p. 42.

⁹⁸ Virgil, *Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid: Books 1-6*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. G. P. Goold, Loeb Classical Library 63 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916), *Aeneid*, VI, p. 592.

⁹⁹ T. Davies Pryce and Eric Birley, "The Fate of Agricola's Northern Conquests," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 28, Part 2 (1938): pp. 141-152.

post).¹⁰⁰ It was a place where power knew little self-restraint, where there was enormous uncertainty about one's own life and property, where fear had replaced love as a source of social cohesion, where, as a result, inactivity was deemed to be wisdom ("*inertia pro sapientia fuit*"¹⁰¹). One of the tragic figures in Rome was senator Thrasea who, under Nero, let some evil acts of the emperor pass "either in silence or with a curt assent." And when he chose to walk out of the senate because he could no longer support even with his silent presence Nero's matricide, he created "a source of danger for himself, but implanting no germ of independence in his colleagues."¹⁰² In brief, Rome was characterized by the exact situation that Agricola tried to change during his tenure in Britain. What Agricola practiced on the peripheries of the empire was not practiced by his peers and superiors in the capital.

The best analysis of Rome's political life is offered not by Agricola but by one of his Scottish enemies, Calgacus. In a famous speech, allegedly delivered before the last battle at Mons Graupius (AD 83), the Scottish rebel describes that world of corruption brought by the arbitrary use of power. The immediate setting of the speech appears to indicate that Calgacus is railing against the Roman empire, making it into one of the most famous examples of anti-imperial, anti-Roman oratory. It is certainly a cry for freedom from Roman oppression. But Tacitus was no

¹⁰⁰ Ronald Syme, *Tacitus*, Vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 21.

¹⁰¹ Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, p. 36.

¹⁰² Tacitus, *The Annals*, Book XIV, p. 127.

opponent of the Roman empire as such. In fact, the empire was for him a source of stability that was only right to defend and expand. As Roman general Petillius Cerialis, who preceded Agricola in Britain, argued in a different setting:

For if the Romans are expelled—which Heaven forbid!—what else will result but world-wide war in which each nation's hand will be turned against its neighbor? The good luck and good discipline of eight hundred years secured the erection of this imperial fabric, whose destruction must involve its destroyers in the same downfall.¹⁰³

Rather, Tacitus uses Calgacus's speech as an indictment of the politics in Rome, corrupted by capricious power that has been detached from positive and natural law.¹⁰⁴ It is a well-constructed speech, in pristine Latin, and following the best of classic oratorical skills. It is far superior to Agricola's own few words to his troops. The beauty and power of this speech indicates that oratory, the ability to use eloquence to reason, was dead in Rome and that freedom of

¹⁰³ Tacitus, *The Histories*, trans. Kenneth Wellesley (New York: Penguin, 1975), p. 266.

¹⁰⁴ A similar view is expressed by a historian. "Calgacus is representative of the fact that Old Rome is to be found in the most remote parts of the Empire, or even beyond the Empire's bounds. Old Roman virtues and grand Latin speeches are located at the edge of the earth, in the most peculiar world of the Oceanic islands, and as far from Rome itself as one can imagine." Clarke, "An Island Nation: Re-Reading Tacitus' 'Agricola,'" p. 106.

speech was possible only far away from the Forum, in lands not yet corrupted by court intrigues and power. As Tacitus observes in his *Dialogue on Oratory*, “how is it that ... our generation ... lacks distinction in eloquence... so much [that we are] ... calling good speakers of the present day ‘pleaders,’ ‘advocates,’ ‘counsel’ – anything rather than ‘orators.’”¹⁰⁵

In a corrupt polity, speech is at the service of power, and is replaced by flattery, the use of words to obtain something from the other. Words are thus tools of power, not of dialogue and conversation, as they assume the meaning most useful at the moment and to the nature of the transaction at hand. They are no longer directed toward truth, but toward a preferred outcome, and hence silence was often the only option for those willing to resist a tyrannical power.¹⁰⁶ A Roman, thus, could no longer give a speech calling things as they are. Oratory was impossible and speeches were meant only to achieve this or that political objective. As Josef Pieper writes in a short and poignant commentary on Plato and his views of sophists, “Public discourse, the moment it becomes neutralized with regard to a strict standard of truth, stands by its nature

¹⁰⁵ Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, p. 231.

¹⁰⁶ Roberta Strocchio, *Simulatio e dissimulatio nelle opere di Tacito* (Bologna: Pàtron Editore, 2001); Roberta Strocchio, “I significati del silenzio nell’opera di Tacito,” *Memorie dell’Accademia delle Scienze di Torino, Serie V*, Vol. 16 (Gennaio-Dicembre 1992).

ready to serve as an instrument in the hands of any ruler to pursue all kinds of power schemes.”¹⁰⁷

Calgacus, the true orator, does three things in his rousing speech: he describes arbitrary power, defines the sources of Rome’s social order, and proposes an alternative political model.

First, in one of the most famous lines of Roman history, Calgacus describes Roman actions: “To plunder, butcher, steal, these things they misname empire: they make a desolation and they call it peace.”¹⁰⁸ The Romans are the “robbers of the world” and “if their enemy have wealth, they have greed; if he be poor, they are ambitious.” It is a searing accusation of Rome, but more generally it is a description of power exercised simply because of itself. The motivation behind such actions derives from the mere ability to perform them. According to Calgacus’s portrayal, the Romans seem to say – “yes, we can and thus we will do it.” Power supplies, in this case, its own motivation, shallow and yet tempting. And it all happens under the mantle of noble words: who can be opposed to “peace,” or in our times, to “equality” or “rights”? Beneath those words, severed from an objective truth, there is only the desolation imposed by the most powerful.

The obvious problem with a self-motivating power is that its only limit is itself. That is, unrestrained power will stop plundering, butchering, and stealing only when it runs

¹⁰⁷ Josef Pieper, *Abuse of Language, Abuse of Power* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1992), p. 31.

¹⁰⁸ Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, p. 81.

out of capabilities, or alternatively when it is met by an equal power. In either case, the outcome is a desolation. Such a result was exactly what Agricola tried to change when he arrived in Britain, recognizing that, short of total annihilation of the opponent, violence cannot establish lasting stability.

The fact that a polity, or an individual, can do a lot is not a sufficient justification for action. Capabilities must be tempered by recognizing their moral limits. St. Augustine famously observed that “without justice, what are kingdoms but great robberies? For what are robberies themselves, but little kingdoms?”¹⁰⁹ Calgacus appears to be formulating a similar idea, pointing to the consequences of a power exercised without justice, without any restraints other than itself. Such power, in the end, only destroys its target as well as its wielder.

Calgacus’s words apply most immediately to Rome’s foreign policy, but they are mirrored by Tacitus’s description of Rome in which he clearly indicates that the emperor exercised power without any respect for law or tradition. This leads to the second thing that Calgacus does in his speech, which is to define the sources of Roman order. In the moment power provides its own purpose, it not only wants to, but it must mold, redefine, and break existing realities in order to sustain itself. The impediments put in front of arbitrary power are the limits imposed by law, tradition, and the existing social bonds. Therefore, these

¹⁰⁹ Saint Augustine, *The City of God* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), Book IV, p. 112.

limits and ties need to be destroyed. Friendship, for instance, threatens such capricious power because it nurtures a space of freedom, outside of the whims of those in high positions. Tacitus observes that basic social interactions were seen as a menace to the court because they established spaces of independence, more difficult to control and thus more likely to generate opposition. No doubt aware of this and wishing to avoid attracting unwanted attention from the emperor's courtesans, Agricola was careful to have only one or two friends with him in Rome.¹¹⁰ The outcome was that people were "deprived ... even of the give and take of conversation."¹¹¹ Aristotle correctly pointed out that "in a tyranny there is little or no friendship."¹¹² *Solitudo* was the condition in Rome, too.

Love is politically dangerous. Aristotle writes that tyranny "will not be overthrown before some persons are able to trust each other."¹¹³ That is why a corrupt emperor prefers to establish a society based on fear, which splits and atomizes individuals leaving them alone to face power. The state, in its tyrannical mode, can control the masses on the *piazza*, less so friends and families at home. Even in the most efficient tyrannies, aided by sinister science, the family is the last bastion of freedom and, thus, of opposition.

The political order built on fear is brittle because to generate fear requires expending resources, which are

¹¹⁰ Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, p. 101.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹¹² Aristotle, *Ethics* (New York: Penguin, 1976), #1161, p. 278.

¹¹³ Aristotle, *Politics*, #1314a1, p. 175.

never unlimited. When they run out, fear will end, too. At that point, as Calgacus notes, “they who have ceased to fear will begin to hate.”¹¹⁴ While fear immobilizes people, hate spurs them to bring down those who exercised that power. Unrestrained power, therefore, contains the seeds of its own demise as sooner or later it will unleash the emotion of hatred that is difficult to control and that will be extinguished only when that power collapses.

Under Domitian, Roman society was based on bonds of fear, which only increased the closer one was to the emperor. Agricola was much safer in Britain than in Rome, and fear (or veiled hatred) of the emperor and his court was most pervasive on the banks of the Tiber. Tacitus’s description is again reminiscent of St. Augustine who in the *Confessions* recounts a story told by a court official, Ponticianus. In it, Ponticianus wonders whether getting closer to the court and the emperor is worthwhile. He asks rhetorically:

in all this hard work which we do, what are we aiming at? What is it that we want? Why is it that we are state officials? Can we have any higher hope at court than to become friends of the emperor? And is not that a position difficult to hold and full of danger? Indeed does one not have to go through danger after danger simply to reach a place

¹¹⁴ Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, p. 85.

that is more dangerous still? And how long will it take to get there?¹¹⁵

Life at the court, near the center of power, as “friends of the emperor,” is dangerous. The closer one gets to arbitrary power, the less predictable one’s life becomes because it is more directly at the mercy of the imperial whims. Closeness to unrestrained power does not bring freedom, but stronger fear. Public servants in a state ruled by unrestrained power are only servants, tools in the hands of the most powerful.

Even worse, in some cases, closeness to the emperor brings dishonor because it tempts the courtiers into an unwillingness to restrain arbitrary imperial power. The fear of losing access to the court or of not being allowed greater public positions may overcome the impulse to oppose the emperor’s caprices and even to defend one’s peers. The fact that the emperor can grant greater benefits or exemptions from sanctions increases the material value of being close to the court, and leads the beneficiaries to abandon respect for law or tradition. The capital—whether Rome or any other center of power—attracts but dehumanizes and threatens one’s honor. In a moving passage, Tacitus does a *mea culpa* by describing the Roman political class “put to shame” by the gaze of their colleagues who were led to prison or to be killed.¹¹⁶ Fear that causes inaction leads to shame and dishonor.

¹¹⁵ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* (New York: Signet Classic, 2001), Book 8, p. 162.

¹¹⁶ Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, p. 111.

What, then, should one do in such a political situation? How can one lead under arbitrary power a life that does not lead to dishonor nor consume one's soul in hatred? Can one be a great man under a bad emperor?¹¹⁷ What are the limits of public engagement in a state characterized by arbitrary and corrupt power? Tacitus's work, in general, and the *Agricola*, in particular, can be seen as a series of answers to these questions.¹¹⁸

The answer can be gleaned, again, from Calgacus, who proposes an alternative approach to the corruption of political power. This is the third thing he does in his speech. Nature, he says, wanted everyone to hold as dearest his children and kin.¹¹⁹ The family, in short, is the most important, the dearest, entity that needs to be defended and that serves as the fundamental motivation behind political action (including, as in the case of the Caledonian rebels, a military engagement of dubious tactical wisdom). The primacy of the family, and of generations (Calgacus ends

¹¹⁷ In Tacitus's famous phrase, "*sub malis principibus magnos viros.*" Ibid., p. 106.

¹¹⁸ See also Arnaldo Momigliano, "The First Political Commentary on Tacitus," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 37, Parts 1 and 2 (1947): pp. 91-101.

¹¹⁹ The Latin version ("*Liberis cuique ac propinquos suos natura carissimos esse voluit*") is translated with some small variations. The Loeb edition has it as: "Children and kind are by the law of nature each man's dearest possessions." Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, p. 81. The Penguin version: "Nature has ordained that every man should love his children and his other relatives above all else." Tacitus, *Agricola and Germania* (New York: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 81.

his speech by encouraging his followers to “think upon your ancestors and upon your descendants”¹²⁰), subordinates the emperor, the mandates of power, and the existing political order. It is not a new idea, and Calgacus (or, rather, Tacitus) does not claim it to be; indeed, it is simply a restatement of self-evident, time-tested truths that others have and will continue to point out. To wit, Aristotle: “the family is an older and more necessary thing than the *polis*.”¹²¹ To put it differently, the protection of the family serves as the yardstick of politics. I think this is the concluding, and most important, insight of Tacitus’s *Agricola*, and it supplies the answer to the question of how to be a great man under a corrupt political regime.

Calgacus’s argument—or Tacitus’s argument as presented by Calgacus—is straightforward. The political regime fails in its primordial purpose when it no longer respects a higher law, including the law of nature that holds the family as the dearest entity for man. Any state act that is against the family is an act against the order of nature. C.S. Lewis put it very clearly when he wrote that it

is easy to think the State has a lot of different objects—military, political, economic, and what not. But in a way things are much simpler than that. The State exists simply to promote and to protect the ordinary happiness of human beings in this life. A husband and wife chatting over a fire, a

¹²⁰ Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, p. 87.

¹²¹ Aristotle, *Ethics*, #1162, p. 280.

couple of friends having a game of darts in a pub, a man reading a book in his own room or digging in his own garden—that is what the State is there for. And unless they are helping to increase and prolong and protect such moments, all the laws, parliaments, armies, courts, police, economics, etc., are simply a waste of time.¹²²

In various moments in history, states may have attempted—and continue to do so—to destroy or to redefine the family. Regardless of the motivations of such attempts, the outcome is the same: the collapse of the family paves the way for a more pervasive role of the state. It removes a key, and often last, hindrance to the expansion of state power. To put it bluntly, the end of family is the culmination of state slavery.

The result is material, but also cultural and spiritual, devastation because the state cannot replace or recreate the family according to its whims. The emperor can only destroy families and friendships; he cannot produce new ones in their stead. Love does not arise because of state policy or an emperor's fiat. As a result, the political order that takes shape is weak, conditional only on the continued exercise of a power that has already reached beyond its limits.

Hence, when facing a power that attempts to destroy the family and its foundation, marriage, by violence

¹²² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 171.

or by redefinition, the most politically significant act one can pursue is to defend the family. It is an act of resistance against an overbearing and controlling state because it sustains a social reality that comes before and above the state and the emperor. It is also a strategy of survival because it maintains spaces outside of the gaze of power where individuals can be educated to freedom, where true conversations are possible, and where love and courage can be fostered. Even under a bad emperor, in a corrupt polity, it is possible therefore to be truly engaged in politics in an honorable way. It may be not in the forum or in the halls of the court, but in the modesty of one's own home. But that is where the restoration of a corrupted state will find its seeds. The salvation of a polity resides less in the plans of its administrators and leaders, and more in its citizens' courage and willingness to cherish and defend the political foundation of it – the family.

Calgacus opposed Roman expansion and was defeated decisively in battle. And yet the threat to family bonds that he described followed Agricola upon his return to Rome. In an apparent political defeat, at the end of his British command, Agricola chose to retreat to the privacy of his home. A quick explanation could be that he simply realized that further political advancement was unlikely and perhaps even risky given the inevitable jealousy that his successes were generating at the emperor's court. The payoff was low, the potential costs high; a basic calculation of a politician.

But another explanation is also very plausible: Agricola withdraws from Rome's politics because higher

political positions would have made him a simple servant of the emperor, not of the law. The corruption of the emperor and his court resided in the fact that they wielded power for power's sake, with no regard for any objective truth and with no respect for any "ancient customs" including bonds of friendship and family.¹²³ To participate in that would have dishonored Agricola and contradicted his political vocation.

To divine Agricola's intentions is impossible, but Tacitus clearly indicates that his father-in-law was first and foremost a family man. His devotion to family was a constant throughout his career. His piety for his mother (killed by marauding pirates), his love for his son (who died while he was in Britain), and his dedication to his wife, his daughter, and his son-in-law Tacitus always guided his actions. Arguably, Agricola fought along the imperial frontier not for an abstract "Rome" and certainly not for the emperor, but for the safety of a state that guaranteed order and security to his own kin. Security from external aggression and internal stability are goods that may be worth preserving even when the leadership is corrupt, arrogant, and engages in the arbitrary use of power. That is, the defense of state frontiers protects the family from external threats. The emperor (and the court) may be bad, but the state has a purpose and role that may justify continued political involvement. There is a distinction,

¹²³ "[P]rinces may know that they begin to lose their state at the hour they begin to break the laws and those modes and those customs that are ancient, under which men have lived a long time." Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, III:5, p. 217.

therefore, between the emperor and the state, and the corruption of the former does not necessarily lead to the rejection of the latter. This is why Tacitus suggests that the farther one is from Rome, the greater the likelihood one can keep his dignity intact in political action because there is a value in enhancing the security of the state. The lesson is that “[l]ike Agricola, one should avoid the inflammatory setting of the Senate House and fight for Rome in the provinces: there honor is still attainable.”¹²⁴

However, as we have seen, there is less room for honor in a public position in Rome. We should be clear that withdrawal from participation in state administration is not the same as withdrawal from the political life of a state. Agricola retreated from the machinery of the state but his act was a political one. Indeed, it was the political act *par excellence* because it addressed the very basis of any polity: the family. All his actions in Rome, as in Britain, aimed at the preservation of his immediate family. In Britain, he used the tools of the state, the legions, to increase the security of the empire. In the capital, he led a modest life in order not to attract the court’s jealousy and wrath. In a shrewd move, he even named the emperor a co-heir because, as Tacitus points out, a good father would not leave his property to any emperor if not a bad one.¹²⁵ The two geographic realms of his actions, Britain and Rome, were united by his constant concern for the family. The difference lay in the fact that the spectrum of honorable action shrinks as Agricola moves

¹²⁴ Ronald Mellor, *Tacitus* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 13.

¹²⁵ Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, p. 108.

from the imperial frontier to its center. In the end, all he can do is to protect in the most immediate form his family.

Tacitus does not draw a clear line between corrupt and just politics. Consequently, he does not provide an unambiguous answer to the question about the rightful political participation in state activities. At some points in history, the answer may be abundantly clear: a Hitler's Germany or a Stalin's Russia, or Domitian's Rome, leave no room for honor at the court. But barring those extremes, it is a question that can be resolved only "in the tangle of his mind," to use words from Robert Bolt's play on Sir Thomas More. Agricola resolved this question by retreating from the Forum to his home.

The *Agricola* is suffused with pessimism, stemming from the belief that human affairs, and politics in particular, are violent and often do not let the best and most virtuous ascend to positions of power. Tacitus, after all, focuses on men and their actions, noble and evil, motivated by lofty ideals and by base desires, spurred by honor and lust. Unsurprisingly, then, the best, like Agricola, are often subject to suffering and perhaps, as Tacitus insinuates, to a suspicious death. But pessimism is not a call to do nothing, or to accommodate one's own life and beliefs to the "times," including to the wishes of a powerful and whimsical emperor. We are not called to be "like those miserable animals that are content to lie and doze so long as food is put in front of them."¹²⁶ On the contrary, such difficult times

¹²⁶ Tacitus, *The Histories*, p. 171.

call for courage and honor.¹²⁷ The outcome – the survival of virtue and dignity – is possible, even though not necessarily in terms appreciated by the courtesans, the emperor, or the prevailing opinion. In the end, “some great and notable virtue has overcome and surmounted the vice common alike to small states and great – ignorance of what is right and jealousy.”¹²⁸

Agricola, then, may quite well be a man for our times. The frontiers of our power are unstable, and are likely to be more so with the retrenchment of U.S. influence. Back home, the state is growing in its arbitrariness (“government by waiver,” as Richard Epstein called it)¹²⁹ and reach, for example the 2012 Health and Human Service Department's mandate that essentially removes freedom of conscience from the public square. Tyrannies in the past have tried to break friendships and families; the state now removes (or redefines) them from the public square in the name of neutrality. To be sure, the heads of our state are not Domitian, the emperor despised by Tacitus. Maybe they are more like Galba whose short reign was marked by massive

¹²⁷ This is why, despite Edward Gibbon's imitating the style of Tacitus, the two historians are different. As Peter Gay notes, “Tacitus was an outraged moralist, Gibbon an erudite cynic. Like all human beings, both historians had something to hide: Tacitus, a tormented politician's guilt; Gibbon, a professional bachelor's conflicts.” Peter Gay, *Style in History* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 25.

¹²⁸ Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, p. 27.

¹²⁹ Richard Epstein, “Government by Waiver,” *National Affairs* (Spring 2011): pp. 39-54.

increase in taxes and who, according to Tacitus, was capable of power, had he not ruled.¹³⁰ But the question of political participation is one that all reasonable individuals must constantly ask themselves, whether they live under Domitian, Galba, or any other worldly leader.¹³¹

The challenge that we face now is that the family is increasingly seen as socially expendable, infinitely redefinable, and at the service of individual whims or preferences. If the family becomes a rarity, the spectrum of political engagement outside of state activities will be limited even more than under Domitian. The social vacuum will be filled, out of necessity, by the state, in a reversal of order: what was the foundation of the state, and what was “older and more necessary” than the state—the family—would gradually become expendable and be replaced by the state.¹³² A childless society of singles is one where the state reigns supreme and provides its own purpose.

¹³⁰ Tacitus, *Histories: Books 1-3*, Loeb Classical Library 111 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), I:49, p. 82.

¹³¹ James V. Schall, SJ, “Political Withdrawal?”, *The Catholic Thing*, February 21, 2012, <https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2012/02/21/political-withdrawal/>; Joseph R. Wood, “Political Withdrawal, Reconsidered,” *The Catholic Thing*, June 9, 2012, <https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2012/06/09/political-withdrawal-reconsidered/>.

¹³² As Aristotle points out, “it is in the household that we first see the origins and sources of friendship, political regimes and justice.” Political organization arises from within the household or family, not the other way around. Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*,

The decline of the family is therefore not merely a demographic and economic challenge, which certainly should not be underestimated. An aging population and costly retirement programs are only the material symptoms of a deeper problem that affects the political well-being of a state. A recent study puts it this way: “A society that is increasingly single and childless is likely to be more concerned with serving current needs than addressing the future oriented requirements of children.”¹³³ In other words, the decline of the family severely constrains the ability and willingness to think about the future of a polity. In fact, as Agricola’s story indicates, the absence of a family deprives us of a powerful motivation for courage, of a political activity that transcends us and our lives. Despite Domitian, therefore, Agricola may have been better off than our societies devoid of families may be in the future. He served his family, not the emperor; he could be free even when the forum was not. What would Agricola have done without the family as a source of love and courage?

trans. B. Inwood and R. Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), book VII, #1242a, p. 142.

¹³³ Joel Kotkin, ed., “The Rise of Post-Familialism: Humanity’s Future” (Singapore: Civil Service College, 2012), <http://www.cscollge.gov.sg/Knowledge/Documents/CGL/The%20Rise%20of%20Post-Familialism.pdf>.

*"An empire founded by arms needs to be
sustained by arms."*

Montesquieu

Chapter 6

Montesquieu and strategy

Regardless of how powerful a state is, the main task of its strategy is how to square finite resources with the prospect of infinite problems. Threats abound and there is always the possibility of a surprising menace arising unexpectedly and demanding full attention and profligate use of resources. The state, because of deeply held national aspirations or changes in regimes, can increase the number or scope of objectives to pursue. The effect is the same: what needs to be done exceeds what the state has at its disposal. Force is limited while demands on it are not.

The role of strategy is to negotiate between these competing demands, maintaining the long-term viability of the state. Without a strategy, states cannot succeed, and if they survive, they do so only at the mercy of others. The question is, of course, what the most appropriate strategy ought to be. One author that considered this question was the French philosopher, Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron

de Montesquieu. In a succinct and incisive masterpiece of analysis, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, Montesquieu examined how the Roman empire was managed or, in modern parlance, what strategy the Romans adopted to build and keep their power.

Of course, the French philosopher was a political theorist rather than a strategist, but his work can be also read as an analysis of international power dynamics and the means to manage them. In particular, two questions are worth examining. First, Montesquieu considers whether Rome's decline was inevitable, driven by impersonal forces that could not be controlled by political leaders—and, related to this, what role individuals, the Romans, played in the history of their own empire. Second, Montesquieu examines the strategy used by the Romans to maintain their supremacy over most of the known world for so long. The survival of the Roman empire depended on a very delicate balance between the use of force and the formation of alliances. To keep power an empire needs allies, but to keep allies an empire needs power.

Romans Made Rome Great

Montesquieu's book is not written in the format of a field manual for a strategist or political leader. In fact, the author is silent regarding the purpose of his book. Nonetheless, the *Considerations* falls into a well-tested category of books, such as Machiavelli's *Discourses*, which analyze history to convey a message directly relevant to

policymakers. Montesquieu's book can thus be seen as a memorandum of sorts, a manual on how to manage an empire or state power in general.

The *Considerations* starts from two assumptions. The first is that the greatness of the Romans, and by extension their decline, was not the result of chance or fate, but of specific policies, formulated and implemented by Rome's leaders. Success and failure are outcomes of strategies, good and bad, and thus the responsibility for them lies in individuals. There is nothing inevitable in the success or failure of a state, no matter how large or how small. The search for the causes of Rome's greatness must begin therefore by examining the strategic decisions taken by the Romans. Montesquieu states this point toward the end of the *Considerations* where he writes that "[i]t is not chance that rules the world. Ask the Romans, who had a continuous sequence of successes when they were guided by a certain plan, and an uninterrupted sequence of reverses when they followed another."¹³⁴

The Romans, not some abstract trend or unknowable fate, are the sources of Rome's power and later on, weakness and decline. As first century AD Roman

¹³⁴ Montesquieu, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1965), p. 169. Montesquieu starts from the same assumption in his *The Spirit of Laws*. In the preface to that work, he writes that he examines "men, and I believed that, amidst the infinite diversity of laws and mores, they were not led by their fancies alone." Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1898), p. xliii.

historian Josephus put it in his *The Jewish War*, a book extensively used by Montesquieu, the Romans “hold their wide-flung empire as the prize of valour, not the gift of fortune.”¹³⁵ It is therefore not by chance that Montesquieu chose to use the term “Romans,” and not “Rome” in the title of his book: Romans are concrete individuals while Rome is an abstract concept.

Montesquieu is, of course, aware that the “Romans,” or men in general, are not omnipotent, and their capacity to shape history is certainly limited. Geography, for instance, prevents men from perfectly implementing their strategic visions. As he writes, “Nature has given states certain limits to mortify the ambition of men. When the Romans transgressed these limits, the Parthians almost always destroyed them; when the Parthians dared to transgress them, they were immediately forced to withdraw.”¹³⁶ And in Montesquieu’s days, the Ottomans, having failed to open the gates of Vienna at the end of the seventeenth century, had also reached the limits imposed on them by geography. The limitations, such as geography or “nature,” are out there to be seen, examined, and respected, and the role of men is to study them and adapt their strategies. But they never impose a specific course of events, determining history and the destiny of empires. The fate of states and empires lies in the strategies pursued by their leaders.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Josephus, *The Jewish War* (New York: Penguin, 1984), III, p. 194.

¹³⁶ Montesquieu, *Considerations*, p. 61.

¹³⁷ For a different view on Montesquieu’s philosophy of history, see David Carrithers, “Montesquieu’s Philosophy of History,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47, no. 1 (January-March 1986): pp.

The second assumption of the *Considerations* is that it is possible to discern general laws of politics, and in particular laws of how to achieve, maintain, and lose power. "There are general causes, moral and physical, which act in every monarchy, elevating it, maintaining it, or hurling it to the ground. All accidents are controlled by these causes."¹³⁸ The actions and policies of the Romans, or of any other population or leaders in history, are specific to their particular time, but carry in them more general principles, which are applicable to other periods of history, including the present, and to other locations. History, therefore, is not simply a compilation of past events, but a study of the principles or laws that rule politics. The past can instruct us in the present, and the present can aid our understanding of the past.

The continuity in human affairs is imparted by the continuity of the passions of individuals. Montesquieu observes that modern history can shed light on the forces at work in history "[f]or the occasions which produce great changes are different, but, since men have had the same

61-80. See also, Roger Oake, "Montesquieu's Analysis of Roman History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 16, no. 1 (January 1955): pp. 44-59.

¹³⁸ Montesquieu, *Considerations*, p. 169. Again, he states in very similar terms the same point in his *Spirit of Laws*. "I have set down the principles, and I have seen particular cases conform to them as if by themselves, the histories of all nations being but their consequences, and each particular law connecting with another law or dependent on a more general one." Montesquieu, *Spirit of Laws*, p. xliii.

passions at all times, the causes are always the same.”¹³⁹ Human nature remains the same and the key motivations of men endure across time. That is why the study of history and of politics has to focus on the study of individuals, their characters, and their actions. In Montesquieu’s case, this means the study of the Romans – the individuals that lived in history and can be discovered through historical texts. They are responsible for the fate of the Roman empire.¹⁴⁰

The *Considerations* hinges on these two assumptions, which also indicate the broader purpose of this book. It is a work of history, recounting Roman imperial strategies, but it is devoted to discerning broad principles of political behavior. Montesquieu, like others before him, is interested in history for what it can teach to his audience, composed of historians, political theorists, and strategists looking at the contemporary international situation. He would have agreed with Polybius who wrote that

if we remove from history the analysis of why, how and for what purpose each thing was done and whether the result was what we should reasonably have expected, what is left is a mere display of descriptive virtuosity, but not a lesson, and this, though

¹³⁹ Montesquieu, *Considerations*, p. 26.

¹⁴⁰ See also David Carrithers, in *Montesquieu’s Science of Politics*, eds. Michael Mosher and Paul Rahe (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), especially the Introduction.

it may please for the moment, is of no enduring value for the future.¹⁴¹

The practical lessons of the *Considerations* are overshadowed by a general pessimism, which at the end of the book turns into outright disgust toward the desirability of an empire. In the last chapters of the book, Montesquieu makes it very clear that Rome was founded on violence and resulted in unspeakable crimes, and he seems to direct the reader away from wishing for an empire. The Roman empire, in his eyes, was a “machine designed for conquest” and lacked any civilizing purpose.¹⁴² Nonetheless, the book is a sharp analysis of how Rome, and by extension any empire, was built and maintained, and it is on this analysis that this article concentrates.

Roman Strategies

Montesquieu points to two main strategies adopted by the Romans in expanding and keeping their empire: military force and alliances. These two strategies are interrelated – that is, force was used to keep the allies, but the alliances served to minimize the use of force – and I will examine this relationship at the end. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to describe them separately.

¹⁴¹ Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1980), Book III, p. 207.

¹⁴² Paul Rahe, “The Book That Never Was: Montesquieu’s “Considerations on the Romans in Historical Context,” *History of Political Thought* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2005): p. 73.

1. Use of force

The first building block of the Roman empire was force. Montesquieu devotes a whole chapter (chapter II), as well as large portions of other chapters, to the “Roman way” of war, placing enormous importance on the capability of the Romans to defeat militarily their neighbors and enemies. In part, this stress on the military capabilities of the Romans stems from Montesquieu’s “Realist” belief in the primacy of force as the main insurance of survival. International relations are the realm of power, and military power in particular is high on the hierarchy of required tools for a state. In a chapter on the Punic wars, Montesquieu observes that the defeat of Carthage was to a large degree caused by the fact that the Carthaginians favored commercial over martial pursuits. The “Romans wanted to command, the Carthaginians to acquire.”¹⁴³

There are two problems with focusing on wealth, rather than arms and martial skills. First, “gold and silver are exhausted, but virtue, constancy, strength and poverty never are.”¹⁴⁴ Given that the latter are also powerful foundations of military power, it is better to develop them rather than material wealth. Indeed, an increase in wealth can lead to a decrease in virtue and in the devotion to one’s country, and result in the weakening of state power. As

¹⁴³ Montesquieu, *Considerations*, p. 45.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

Montesquieu observes, “with possessions beyond the needs of private life it was difficult to be a good citizen.”¹⁴⁵

The second reason why force should be held in higher esteem than wealth is that the former is necessary to defend the latter. A commercial state like Carthage can certainly rise to a position of preeminence, but commerce and wealth alone are not sufficient to protect it. Writing again on Carthage and on the rise of Alexandria as its commercial challenger, Montesquieu notes that

Commercial powers can continue in a state of mediocrity a long time, but their greatness is of short duration. They rise little by little, without anyone noticing, for they engage in no particular action that resounds and signals their power. But when things have come to the point where people cannot help but see what has happened, everyone seeks to deprive this nation of an advantage it has obtained, so to speak, only by surprise.¹⁴⁶

Venice was probably on Montesquieu’s mind as a prime example of his time: a commercial republic that rose to a position of preeminence in Europe and the Mediterranean starting in the eleventh century, developing enormous wealth through trade in various precious commodities. But its wealth was insufficient to muster the force necessary to defend itself against the large continental powers in Western Europe (Spain and France, for example),

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 98.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 47.

as well as the Ottoman empire that nibbled at its frontiers from the sixteenth century until Venice disappeared as an independent political entity in 1797. The greatness of a commercial power has to be backed by the capacity to inflict violence; wealth alone attracts enemies and, unless translated into force, cannot deter or repel them.

Although Montesquieu never defines power, it is clear that he places the capability to defeat militarily other states on the top of his list of vital political tools of a state. Power is obviously a vaster concept than just military force, and, as I will describe later, Montesquieu is aware of this. But the ability of states to achieve their strategic objectives by force, and above all to defend themselves from the military offensives of other states, is the fundamental feature of power.

The Romans excelled in war because “regarding it as the only art, [they] put their whole spirit and all their thoughts into perfecting it.”¹⁴⁷ Montesquieu goes into details of the qualities of Roman soldiers, who were effective warriors even alone, and did not require to be “part of a multitude” to be courageous and have confidence.¹⁴⁸ This innate courage was instilled in Roman citizens by constant practice, so that “idleness was feared more than their enemies.”¹⁴⁹ In fact, citing a famous passage of Josephus’s *The Jewish War*, Montesquieu argues that “war

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 35.

was a meditation for them, and peace an exercise.”¹⁵⁰ The Romans were simply the best fighting force in the world.

The military effectiveness of the Roman soldier was in part acquired through constant drills as well as good organizational and tactical competence. But a key source of Roman military effectiveness was the citizens’ strong desire to fight. There was no gap between the “civilian” population and the “soldiers”; in fact, at least until the advent of the emperors, there was no “civil-military” distinction. “A soldier was equally a citizen”¹⁵¹ and the eagerness to fight stemmed not from pecuniary benefits derived from military service, but from the craving for glory and, above all, from the passionate defense of the Roman polity. Such desire to protect Rome arose from the personal stakes each soldier had in the preservation and enlargement of the state. As Montesquieu describes it, the founders of Rome divided the lands in equal parts so that “everyone

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 37. Josephus observes that the Romans “do not wait for war to begin before handling their arms, nor do they sit idle in peacetime and take action only when the emergency comes – but as if born ready armed they never have a truce from training or wait for war to be declared. Their battle-drills are no different from the real thing; every man works as hard at his daily training as if he was on active service. That is why they stand up so easily to the strain of battle: no indiscipline dislodges them from their regular formation, no panic incapacitates them, no toil wears them out; so victory over men not so trained follows as a matter of course. It would not be far from the truth to call their drills bloodless battles, their battles bloody drills.” Josephus, *The Jewish War*, III, pp. 194-195.

¹⁵¹ Montesquieu, *Considerations*, p. 91.

[had] an equal, and very great, interest in defending his country.”¹⁵² Farmers had land, something concrete and immovable, to protect, and this property also tied them to the state and to its fate. Had Rome been defeated by an enemy, their own property would be put in jeopardy. The citizen-soldier of Rome fought well because of strong patriotic attachment, but patriotism for Montesquieu is obviously not some abstract idea for which one ought to sacrifice his life. It is rather the result of a personal, tangible interest in the survival of one’s state, in this case, of Rome.

The importance of a landowning citizen-soldier is made even more evident by the alternative: a merchant living in a commercial state. Merchants derive their wealth from trading with a variety of partners, outside of their own state, and thus develop often a greater sentimental attachment to a geographically dispersed commercial class than to their own polity. In another swipe against commercial powers, Montesquieu observes that

men like these [merchants] were scarcely fit for war. They were cowardly, and already corrupted by the luxury of the cities, and often by their craft itself. Besides, since they had no country in the proper sense of the term, and could pursue their trade anywhere, they had little to lose or to preserve.¹⁵³

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 39.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 40.

Montesquieu exaggerates the statelessness and lack of patriotism of merchants. Venice again could have offered him a good example of a citizenry that, even though composed of many individuals who never set foot in the city of Venice, was deeply attached to the republic, to the domestic and international order it sustained, and to the benefits they derived from it. But his broader point, put in such stark terms, is that soldiers, in order to fight, must possess a strong attachment to their polity, to a concrete group of people, united by a common civilization and tied to a particular territory.

The moment that such ties weaken, the effectiveness of a state's military force fades. For instance, the geographic expansion of Rome had a negative impact on the ties linking soldiers to the state. Montesquieu puts a very different spin on the well-worn idea of "imperial overstretch." He does not ignore the burden imposed on the financial and military resources of Rome by the growth of its empire, but he suggests that one of the most important effects of imperial expansion is the growing physical and emotional distance between its soldiers and the state, and the resulting decreased ability of Rome to muster force. Patriotism began to diminish among soldiers when armies were garrisoned beyond the Alps and across the sea, and, as a result, the link between soldiers and the city unraveled. The soldiers became gradually more detached from the heart of their state, Rome. Instead of being devoted to their own land, they admired the generals who commanded them. They defined their success not in the preservation of the state but in the personal success of their general who potentially

could, when in a position of greater power, bestow upon them even greater benefits. The soldiers, “were no longer the soldiers of the republic but those of Sulla, Marius, Pompey, and Caesar. Rome could no longer know if the man at the head of an army in a province was its general or its enemy.”¹⁵⁴ In brief, imperial overstretch had a more powerful effect on the internal cohesion, and on “civil-military” relations in particular, than on the fiscal resources of Rome.¹⁵⁵

Developing and maintaining military effectiveness was one way Rome managed force. The second way in which Romans managed military power was the purpose for which it was used. Romans sought to instill such fear and awe that Rome’s neighbors and enemies would consider any opposition to the empire futile and dangerous. Success was when other polities and leaders simply tried to stay away from Rome’s imperial path and acquiesced to its rule and hegemony. As Montesquieu writes,

Since they [the Romans] inflicted unbelievable evils upon their enemies, leagues were hardly ever formed against them, for the country furthest from the peril did not wish to venture closer. Because of

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 91.

¹⁵⁵ A corollary challenge of managing the empire was that when Rome extended citizenship rights to the rest of the Italian cities the internal unity of Rome was weakened. There were simply too many parties competing for the formulation of strategic priorities, and some of the coherence of Rome was lost. “The distracted city no longer formed a complete whole.” Ibid., p. 93.

this, they were rarely warred upon, but always went to war at the time, in the manner, and with those that suited them.¹⁵⁶

On the battlefield, military force was used decisively and brutally to defeat the enemy and act as a deterrent to potential challengers. The result was more than a simple tactical victory. The image of the superior military power of Rome made counterbalancing the empire risky and in the end probably futile. There was simply no other power that thought itself capable of mustering sufficient force to oppose the expansion of the Roman empire. Any attempt to do so resulted in the defeat of the challenger, and often the humiliation of its leadership. Montesquieu observes that

nothing served Rome better than the respect it commanded everywhere. It immediately reduced kings to silence, and, as it were, stupefied them. Not only was the extent of their power at stake, but their own person came under attack. To risk a war with Rome was to expose oneself to captivity, death and the infamy of the triumph.¹⁵⁷

Montesquieu mentions only two powers that opposed Rome. The first was Parthia, which remained outside of Rome's reach because of sheer distance and geography.¹⁵⁸ "The Parthians did what no nation had yet done and avoided the Roman yoke—not by being

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 74.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 61.

invincible, but by being inaccessible.”¹⁵⁹ But Montesquieu also stresses the military capabilities of the Parthians, who fought in ways that minimized Roman tactical advantages. For instance, unlike the Roman legions, the Parthians had a very skilled cavalry that adopted a “hit-and-run” warfare. The heavy legions of Illyria and Germany, which Montesquieu also adds were used “to eating heavily,” were not suited to fight such a highly mobile war. The Parthians, therefore, remained undefeated and continued to improve their military capabilities also thanks to Roman defectors, who “taught [them] what was lacking in their military art, including the use of Roman arms and even their manufacture.”¹⁶⁰ Here Montesquieu points to an important challenge facing an empire: the spread of technology and know-how, including military knowledge, is an often unavoidable by-product of a hegemonic power that supplies public goods such as security, but it also undermines the superiority of the empire because slowly, but inexorably, the more advanced technologies and skills of the imperial power are adopted by its subjects, empowering future challengers.¹⁶¹ Empires spread their own control but also the tools to undermine it.

The second polity that was able to resist Roman military might was led by Mithridates. In a chapter that

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 142.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 147.

¹⁶¹ See, for instance, Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1989); and Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

offers full admiration for the romantic figure of Mithridates, Montesquieu describes his attempt to resist several Roman generals.¹⁶² At times he was successful, drawing strength from Roman deserters and adeptly using his geographic location. But in the end, weakened militarily and betrayed by his own son, Mithridates died, even while he was planning an assault against the core of the Roman empire, Italy. Montesquieu adds that he died “a king” and, in some ways, victorious. Roman expansion that followed Mithridates’s death, in fact, did not increase power and “public liberty was only the more endangered.”¹⁶³

The lesson of these two cases—Parthia and Mithridates—is that an empire, no matter how powerful militarily, must maintain a firm sense of its limitations. In the moment force decreases, or in the place where force cannot reach, threats to the empire arise, putting a further strain on its military resources. Force can “stupefy,” to use Montesquieu’s term,¹⁶⁴ but its effect evaporates when the empire weakens and is unable or unwilling to maintain a high level of respect instilled in others by its overwhelming capacity to use violence. Similarly, in those areas that remain outside of imperial reach, whether because of geography (as in the case of Parthia) or strategic disinterest (the case of the barbarian lands east of the Rhine and north of the Danube is applicable here), challengers are bound to

¹⁶² Montesquieu, *Considerations*, pp. 79-81.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 81. On Mithridates, see Adrienne Mayor, *The Poison King* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

¹⁶⁴ The French phrase is a bit stronger: Rome “*les rendit comme stupides*” — Rome made the kings as if stupid.

arise. The empire constitutes too big a prize, and too great of a potential threat, to be left alone, and any sign of weakness is an invitation to assault it.¹⁶⁵ Romans were able to neutralize threats to their empire as long as they maintained a high level of military preparedness and power. Once their military strength dwindled, the threats, ranging from northern tribes to more organized polities in the east, became increasingly deadly. "When corruption entered the military itself, the Romans became the prey of all peoples."¹⁶⁶

2. *Alliances*

Superior military force is the first component of a successful strategy. The second component follows from the

¹⁶⁵ This is what Pericles had in mind in his famous speech to the Athenians in 430 BC. Sparta was challenging Athenian dominance, but the Athenians were queasy about committing money and forces outside their region. It was left to Pericles, Athens's leader, to convince his countrymen that the empire they had established had to be maintained, and in fact, that the Athenians had no choice but to do so. In a famous speech, Pericles argued that "to recede is no longer possible, if indeed any of you in the alarm of the moment has become enamored of the honesty of such an ambitious part. For what you hold is, to speak plainly, a tyranny: to take it perhaps was wrong, but to let it go is unsafe." Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, 2.64, p. 126. The idea that once the empire has been built, it is impossible to give it away because of the latent resentment against it, has also been called a "law of imperial necessity." See Michael Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

¹⁶⁶ Montesquieu, *Considerations*, p. 170.

first: force is by its very nature finite and consequently needs to be used prudently. This means that it cannot be the only guarantee of survival, especially for a vast empire such as Rome where distance provides a natural and effective limitation to the employment of force. An empire that is maintained exclusively by its own force will sooner or later exhaust its resources, and this exhaustion is hastened by the formation of counterbalancing coalitions whose purpose is to defeat the imperial power.¹⁶⁷

Despite his negative views of the violence used to build the Roman empire, Montesquieu acknowledges that military force was not the only, and perhaps not even the main, tool of imperial management adopted by the Romans. After all, as he writes, “conquests are easy to make, because they are made with all one’s forces; they are difficult to preserve because they are defended with only a part of one’s forces.”¹⁶⁸ Hence, something other than brute force must be adopted to keep control over the conquered territories. In Chapter VI (“The Conduct the Romans pursued to subjugate all peoples”), Montesquieu describes the strategy pursued by the Romans, and in particular by the senate (that “always acted with the same profundity”),¹⁶⁹ in using allies to build and maintain the empire. Together with military force, alliances were the foundation of the Roman empire.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 67.

The broad purpose of alliances was to minimize Rome's expenditure of force through two mechanisms. First, the Romans used alliances to increase their own fighting capability by adding allied forces to their own. Second, alliances reduced the likelihood that challengers to Roman primacy would arise because it was more beneficial to be an ally than an enemy.

The first role of allies was to reduce the military burden on Rome. The Romans were always aware of their manpower limitations, and used their own legions prudently. Most of their legionary forces were kept in reserve, while only a portion were directly involved in combat operations in the territory they wanted to conquer or defend.

Such a sparing use of the legions was made possible by the manpower supplied by Rome's allies. This military role of alliances was a straightforward way to increase Rome's power, or at least to minimize the expenditure of its own power. Military force could be accrued by bringing allies to the battlefield, allowing at the same time the expansion and control over several, widely separated fronts from Asia Minor to Gallia to the Danube river. The Romans, as Montesquieu writes,

never waged distant wars without procuring some ally near the enemy under attack, who could join his troops to the army they were sending. And since this army was never very large, they always made sure to keep another in the province nearest the enemy, and a third in Rome constantly ready to march.

Thus they exposed only a very small part of their forces, while their enemy hazarded all of his.¹⁷⁰

Rome's reliance on allies for military operations did not alter the larger strategic objective of the city: imperial control and domination over the known world. Rome granted rather than negotiated alliances, and never put the survival of the alliance above its own strategic objectives. Alliances were the means, not the goals of Roman diplomacy. Allies, and their manpower, were expendable, and "were used to make war on an enemy, but then the destroyers were at once destroyed."¹⁷¹ In the moment an ally contributed to a victory, it was defeated in turn with the help of another ally. Furthermore, Montesquieu observes that Rome's alliances were simply "suspensions of war."¹⁷² The treaties were signed to postpone the destruction of the ally to a more opportune moment, when Rome did not need the support of the ally in question and felt sufficiently strong to destroy it and bring it under its control.

The second role of allies is, in many ways, more interesting because it is peculiar to a state such as the Roman empire. It was a strategic role, rather than the more tactical one described above; it influenced not just the conduct of war, but the structure and existence of the empire. Allies, in fact, were needed and used to decrease the number of challengers to the empire. To put it simply, given the size

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 68.

and scope of Rome, the other states had a choice to be either with or against the empire. Some, such as Parthia, chose to be against it and succeeded in maintaining their independence. But a clear opposition to Rome sooner or later resulted in a direct, and almost always lethal, confrontation with the empire's military might. From Rome's perspective, it was preferable to avoid using force, limiting the projection of power to the most dangerous spots on the frontier. Hence, the Romans assiduously worked to bring their potential challengers under their control peacefully, by changing their interests rather than by destroying them. In other words, Rome made it more beneficial for potential challengers to side with the empire rather than oppose it. The result was that, "although the title of being their ally entailed a kind of servitude, it was nevertheless much sought after."¹⁷³

Rome offered several benefits, which Montesquieu lists, together with the names of the allies. As he writes, the Romans

had many sorts of allies. Some were united to them by privileges and a participation in their greatness, like the Latins and Hernicans; others, by origin itself, like their colonies; some by benefits, as were Masinissa, Eumenes, and Attalus, who received their kingdoms or the extension of their power from the Romans; other by free treaties, and these became subjects through

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 69.

long-existing alliance, like the kings of Egypt, Bithynia, and Cappadocia, and most of the Greek cities; several, finally, by forced treaties, like Philip and Antiochus, for the Romans never made a peace treaty with an enemy unless it contained an alliance—that is, they subjugated no people which did not help them in reducing others.¹⁷⁴

The traditional, Realist understanding of alliances is that they are “marriages of convenience” for a specific purpose, usually the defeat of a common enemy. Once that objective has been achieved, the alliance loses its *raison d’être* and collapses. But the alliances mentioned by Montesquieu lacked such a common objective. Rather, Rome had its own goal of expanding and maintaining its empire, while the other states, its allies, aimed to obtain a whole range of benefits from associating with the Romans. The two partners of these alliances, Rome and the other state, had therefore very different interests. The strength of their strategic unity depended not on the achievement of a specific objective, such as the conquest of a territory or the defeat of an enemy, but on the ability and willingness of Rome to supply its allies with the benefits they considered preferable to counterbalancing the empire.

Such alliances are peculiar to an empire; they are “imperial alliances.”¹⁷⁵ The power of the empire presents

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ See Jakub Grygiel, “Imperial Allies,” *Orbis* 50, no. 2 (Spring 2006): pp. 209-221.

both a threat to the other states' existence and a potential source of benefits. If the empire is perceived only as a threat, then opposition to it is more likely because states, and their leaders and populations, will seek to maintain their independence, and will attempt to establish counterbalancing alliances to defeat the empire. If, however, the empire is seen as a source of benefits, ranging from security to financial aid and to prestige and glory, other states will be less interested in opposing it and will seek some sort of connection to it that would profit them. This does not mean that Rome simply bought the allegiance of others through its largesse. It obtained these alliances from a position of strength, and it was always clear that the alternative to the alliance was military confrontation and likely defeat.¹⁷⁶ Were a state to choose not to ally with Rome, it would have lost not only the opportunity to receive some benefits and but also its independence. That is why states sought to become allies of Rome even though this meant a degree of servitude.

¹⁷⁶ When Rome started to buy allies from a position of weakness, to avoid being invaded, it only invited further attacks. Montesquieu writes that "sometimes the cowardice of the emperors, often the weakness of the empire, brought about attempts to appease with money the peoples threatening invasion. But peace cannot be bought, because the seller is then in a better position to compel it to be bought again. It is preferable to run the risk of waging an unsuccessful war than to give money to assure peace. For a prince is always respected if it is known that it would take a long struggle to conquer him." Montesquieu, *Considerations*, p. 168. It is impossible and dangerous to appease a rising power.

Finally, these alliances were centered on Rome, and never developed into some sort of multinational coalition of equal members. The allies were connected to Rome, but not to each other, in order to reflect the position of supremacy of the empire and maximize the political effects of the alliances. There was no danger that the alliances would limit Rome's freedom of action because the allies had no possibility of developing tighter relations among themselves to the exclusion of the empire. The Romans' "constant maxim was to divide" because each state, left alone, without the possibility of outside help, was more inclined to accept the superiority of the empire.¹⁷⁷ Solitude was (and is) a source of great vulnerability for states.

The policy of "divide et impera," of dividing and ruling, applied also to the domestic politics of the other states. The Romans were very skilled in using the domestic factions of other polities, and favoring the pro-Roman faction even though maintaining a *de iure* independence of these cities. Montesquieu writes that "when they allowed a city to remain free, they immediately caused two factions to arise within it. One upheld local laws and liberty, the other maintained that there was no law except the will of the Romans."¹⁷⁸ This is a common strategy for imperial powers. Russia, for instance, was always quite adept at manipulating internal factions in its neighboring regions. As historian John LeDonne explains it, Russia seeks friendly relations with "the 'men of power' in the proximate and

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 71.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 69-70.

even intermediate zones, instead of ignoring them and as a result remaining in the dark about their intentions and capabilities.”¹⁷⁹ Then, it becomes the umpire in the internal conflicts that are inevitable in any polity, and by doing so, it privileges those leaders that are more likely to pursue policies beneficial to Russia. But all these lines of effort occur in the shadow of power, threatening to punish them were they to stray from Russian preferred behavior.

The benefits of imperial alliances for Rome were clear. Not only were challengers less likely to threaten Rome, but also the more Rome surrounded itself with allies the more powerful it became. Allies freed Roman strategists from the threat of a rising challenger, allowing them to devote their resources and attention to other parts of the world. Moreover, an increasing number of Rome’s allies left the polities hostile to the empire in growing isolation. Montesquieu, in one of the few direct calls to heed the strategy of Rome, writes:

Please observe the conduct of the Romans. After the defeat of Antiochus, they were masters of Africa, Asia, and Greece with scarcely any cities of their own there. It seemed that they conquered only to give. But so thoroughly did they remain the masters that when they made war on some prince,

¹⁷⁹ John LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 7.

they overwhelmed him, so to speak, with the weight of the whole world.¹⁸⁰

The challenge of imperial alliances was that, albeit indispensable to the management of the empire, they were very difficult to keep. These allies were on the side of the empire not because of a congruence of interests, but because of what the empire could give them as benefits or what it could inflict upon them as costs. In either case, they were on the empire's side because of its force and wealth, not because they shared the same interests of the empire. In the moment the empire became unwilling and incapable of using force and disbursing wealth, the allies began to peel away.

This is the great paradox of Rome, and of empires in general. They can maintain their primacy and attract allies only as long as they maintain superiority of wealth and force. When they cannot wield force effectively and do not have enough wealth to disburse, the imperial alliances, cornerstones of the empires, collapse. A great example of this dynamic is described by Polybius, who recounts what happened to Rome and its allies after their defeat by Hannibal at Cannae. Rome's allies abandoned it, choosing to side with the victorious and more threatening power, Carthage, for the same reasons they had been on Rome's side: the hope of receiving benefits from the greater power. "The Carthaginians as a result of their victory became masters of almost all the rest of the coast. The Tarentines immediately surrendered to them, Arpi and a number of

¹⁸⁰ Montesquieu, *Considerations*, pp. 74-75.

other Campanian towns invited Hannibal to come to them, and all eyes were not turned upon the Carthaginians, who for their part cherished great hopes that they could even capture Rome by assault.”¹⁸¹ The choice for these cities was essentially the same, namely obtain benefits or suffer the costs from a greater power. But the perception of who that great power was changed: it was no longer Rome, defeated in a dramatic battle, but Carthage. It was a quick reversal of fortune with an equally speedy readjustment of the diplomatic chessboard.

Montesquieu has no good answer to this paradox of needing allies to maintain the empire while at the same time needing the empire’s wealth and power to keep the allies. The decline of Rome was in large measure due to its inability to maintain its alliance structure, and to the resulting rise of a *de facto* anti-Roman bloc. “Rome was destroyed because all nations attacked it at once and penetrated everywhere.”¹⁸² But the collapse of Rome’s imperial alliances, which prevented an attack of all against the empire, was due to the growing internal weakness of the city and, consequently, its inability to wield its power to divide and control potential challengers.

In the end, the reader of the *Considerations* is left with a sense of the enormous challenge of managing Rome or any empire. Empires, as St. Augustine wrote, “may be

¹⁸¹ Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, Book III, p. 275. For an excellent analysis of this challenge of empires in the context of the Punic wars, see also Arnold Toynbee, *Hannibal’s Legacy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), vol. II, pp. 109-110.

¹⁸² Montesquieu, *Considerations*, p. 181.

compared to glass in its fragile splendor”¹⁸³ because they depend on a finely tuned strategy – in this case, of keeping allies in order to save power and of using power in order to keep allies. Any change that may tilt the strategy away from maintaining a high level of force or toward a more intensive use of it, to the detriment of alliances, is bound to lead to disaster.

Lessons of a Great Paradox

Despite his appreciation for the strong character of the Romans, Montesquieu is not enamored of Rome and its empire, and does not convey any feelings of sadness at its demise. The Roman empire, like any empire, required a good dose of violence to build and maintain; the objective of any empire is often simply the material betterment of its core population. As he writes in a powerful passage, “For not even the justice of brigands, who bring a certain honesty to the practice of crime, was to be found among the Romans. A thousand crimes were committed just to give the Romans all the money in the world.”¹⁸⁴ Montesquieu, therefore, does not seem interested in teaching how to establish, and certainly how to maintain, an empire. In fact, the *Considerations* can be read as an admonition to those nourishing imperial ambitions, which, as Montesquieu indicates, will lead to indescribable calamities both for those

¹⁸³ Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, Book IV, #3, p. 111.

¹⁸⁴ Montesquieu, *Considerations*, p. 74.

subject to the empire as well as for those building it.¹⁸⁵ The seeds of Rome's destruction were sown in the very expansion of Rome.

But Montesquieu is also interested in uncovering the policies underlying the political success of the Romans. First of all, it was the Romans, not some abstract force, that made and sustained Rome. Second, their strategy was therefore the cause of success and, later, failure. And the core reason for their success was their ability to manage the paradox of great powers: how to economize their own force while maintaining allies.

Two lessons in particular are worth underlining especially in light of the ongoing debate in the United States on the purpose of alliances. First, polities do not spontaneously join another power simply because of some harmony of interests that links them in a community of shared values. They become allies because a great power coaxes them to join its side. Alliances are made and kept by a great power through a conscious effort that has to be sustained for the duration of the alliance. In the moment the vigor of that effort wanes, because of disinterest or inability on the part of the great power, the alliance will collapse. And what is even worse, those polities will likely turn toward another great power that is capable and willing of providing an analogous organizing effort. Another way to put this is that alliances are not outcomes of some large systemic balancing mechanism but are the products of

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 219.

carefully conceived and consistently implemented strategies of powerful states.

The second lesson is that alliances arise because the great power uses both threats and benefits to bring others to its side. The attractiveness of a great power is directly related to its ability to both threaten and benefit its allies. Benefits alone drain the resources of the great power while generating contempt for it; threats alone are costly if they have to be put in practice and can stir up hatred and opposition from the targeted polities. A mix of both, however, presents a choice for these states: they can either benefit from siding with the great power or they can incur serious costs for opposing it. The task of the great power is to put that choice clearly and credibly in front of their potential allies and, once they are allies, to keep that choice alive. Alliances that are based only on either threats or benefits are fragile: they are either colonial possessions or parasitic appendages. And both are too costly for even the greatest power in the world.

*"Peace... is a sweet and holy thing
when it brings security, when it does
not increase the power of enemies, when
it does not pave the way to a more
dangerous war; but when it entails these
effects, it is bitter and pernicious."*

Francesco Guicciardini

Chapter 7

Guicciardini and history as the statesman's training

The modern veneration of the abstract is dangerous. Abstraction requires simplification, a process of censoring information deemed not relevant or too specific to the particular case. Naturally, such a process may eliminate the wrong information, leading to surprises and, more generally, to a reduced understanding of the object of study.

The more complex the reality under examination, the more hazardous simplification and abstraction are.¹⁸⁶ It is undoubtedly appealing to find that one universal pattern or that eternal rule of strategic behavior because such a discovery obviates the need to develop deep knowledge of the opponent.

It may be, however, that we need to know the particular more than the abstract. While it has always been important to know the particular, the need to do that is becoming more pronounced. For example, the age of the universal ideology is being replaced by the age of particular national models. Universal ideologies, the trait of the 20th century, are not appealing to nations, which seek their own particular political expressions that are difficult to understand only in reference to an abstract model. Abstractions assume a uniformity of behavior that does not exist. It is essential, therefore, to understand “the realities of the mentalities of the localities,” as James Kurth put it.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Even more dangerous is the modern tendency to seek to implement the abstraction rather than using reason to understand reality. From the French Revolution on, for instance, modern ideologies have tried to create political realities to match the abstract concepts upon which they are based. Instead of discovering permanent realities, the modern mind seeks to create them.

¹⁸⁷ This is an often-used quote by James Kurth, the origins of which are however unknown. Cited, for example, in Walter A. McDougall, “Art of the Doge?”, Foreign Policy Research Institute, January 9, 2017, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/01/art-of-the-doge-2/>.

Similarly, in order to understand political and security challenges it is increasingly more necessary to possess some knowledge of a variety of topics, from technology to demographics that are likely to be more influential and informative than an overarching abstraction. The metrics of power are not just population and territory (or coal and pig iron) but a growing spectrum of variables, from intellectual property to rule of law and social cohesion. To understand, and thus to act in, politics, one needs to be a Renaissance man rather than only an Enlightenment man.

In this context it is useful to study a forgotten, but not irrelevant, author from the Renaissance, Francesco Guicciardini. He has been unduly overshadowed by his friend Niccolò Machiavelli, whose fame is perhaps one of the reasons for Guicciardini's absence in the field of international relations.¹⁸⁸ Machiavelli is appealing for his pithy lines and for his big claim to have discovered the "effectual truth" of politics, the universal iron rules of power. But, without demoting Machiavelli, Guicciardini is a richer writer, offering a deeper and more complex perspective on international politics and statecraft.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ For an examination of Guicciardini's fate in history, see Vincent Luciani, *Francesco Guicciardini and His European Reputation* (New York: Karl Otto & Co., 1936).

¹⁸⁹ The friendship between Guicciardini and Machiavelli was long and deep, as their letters attest. They exchanged comments on politics and shared praises of unknown to us ladies of dubious virtue. See Roberto Ridolfi, *Vita di Francesco Guicciardini* (Milan: Rusconi, 1982), p. 166-7.

In his copious writings, Guicciardini is the advocate of the “*particolare*,” of the study of particular realities and interests that cannot be reduced to general rules applicable to all circumstances. As the Italian historian Federico Chabod puts it, the “*particolare*” is that belief that “every thing is a world in itself, not responding to *a priori* rules, according to prefix schemes.”¹⁹⁰ A relentless critic of abstraction, Guicciardini was also deeply aware of the fragility and complexity of political order, mutable because of domestic changes in leadership and at the mercy of the wider international balance of power. Political realities are unique, each with their own peculiar characteristics and each with individual causes of their brittleness.

By focusing on the “*particolare*,” Guicciardini may appear pessimistic about man’s ability to understand politics and thus to shape political realities. The vast spectrum of factors influencing politics is unknowable in all of their complexity and, as a result, leaders often seem at the mercy, rather than in charge, of events. But Guicciardini does not suggest that man is a passive spectator of the unfolding of history; he would not have agreed with Tolstoy’s description of the randomness of events and the unaccountable grand movements of nations. On the contrary, the role of the statesman is essential to the existence and survival of a polity. Political action is neither futile nor impossible. It is merely imperfect because man’s capacity to control events is limited, and political leaders

¹⁹⁰ Federico Chabod, *Lezioni di Metodo Storico* (Bari: La Terza, 2012), p. 124.

should steel themselves to surprises and outcomes that are far from their plans and desires. This leads Guicciardini to appreciate the difficulty of statesmanship, which requires a sense of the tragic. The study of history is, therefore, not a search for universal rules but a form of training that prepares political leaders to face the complexity of reality and the tragedy of unwanted outcomes.

Guicciardini is not a modern thinker and his arguments are not reducible to a generalizable theory that can be tested. It is not surprising therefore that Guicciardini has not broken into the pantheon of accepted intellectual fathers of the study of international relations. The established founders are limited in their numbers: Thucydides, Hobbes, and Machiavelli are the main political thinkers that have had an impact on our modern understanding of international relations, and of the Realist school in particular.¹⁹¹ The reason for their historical success is the simplicity of their explanations – simplicity that, especially in the case of Thucydides, may have been exaggerated by their students eager to find unequivocal rules of strategic behavior in international relations. These authors were made into the proto-theorists of the quintessentially modern quest for simple, even monocausal, explanations. Other authors, whether Tacitus

¹⁹¹ See for instance Michael Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism, and Socialism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997); Steven Forde, "Varieties of Realism: Thucydides and Machiavelli," *The Journal of Politics* 54, no. 2 (May 1992): pp. 372-393.

and Livy, or Saint Augustine and Tertullian, or – the subject of this chapter – Guicciardini, did not fit neatly into this search for the ancient intellectual roots of the modern simplification and abstraction. They are more complicated and, for the most part, they clearly reject the possibility of simplifying too much the variegated nature of political order or abstracting from the particular circumstances a set of universal rules of strategic behavior. They would have agreed with historian William McNeill who wrote that “[h]uman behavior, after all, is more complicated than that of pendulums, cannon balls, and planets.”¹⁹² They are also deeply aware of the limits of human action, which cannot mold the social and political environment exactly to the leaders’ liking.

This chapter cannot of course revolutionize how we study foreign policy, and it will not place Francesco Guicciardini’s opus on the same shelf of the other bestsellers of international relations. It can only introduce Guicciardini’s approach, hoping to serve as a small corrective to the intellectual poverty of modern studies of international relations. Guicciardini was primarily a historian of Italian and Florentine politics, and in many occasions professed his skepticism of the possibility of arriving at laws, rules, or precise patterns of political affairs. He is a narrator of history, but with clear assumptions regarding human nature and interactions among states, as well as strong policy preferences.

¹⁹² William McNeill, *The Shape of European History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 22.

Who was Francesco Guicciardini?

Francesco Guicciardini was born in 1483 in a family associated with the Medici, a powerful clan that had an enormous impact on Florentine politics. Francesco's father, Piero, was politically well connected in Florence and was very close to many humanist thinkers, including the Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino. Being part of the Florentine elite, Francesco studied law in Florence, Padua, and finally Pisa, putting him on a path toward political leadership. And in 1508 he began his career as a lawyer, entering political service a few years later as Florence's ambassador to Spain (1512-1514).

His stay at the court of the Spanish King, Ferdinand II, was a formative experience that, beyond elevating his status back home in Florence, taught him the art of statecraft, and even more so, the art of acquiring power and building a state from a position of weakness.¹⁹³ Guicciardini recounts that Ferdinand's secretary had told him a Castilian proverb that the rope breaks from the weakest side. This meant that the weakest state would suffer the most, regardless of justice or reason, and whoever negotiates from a position of weakness ought to remember this. It was a lesson similar to that of the Thucydidean Melian Dialogue

¹⁹³ Francesco Guicciardini, *Ricordi e Storie Fiorentine* (Milano: TEA, 1970), #144, p. 47. On Guicciardini's "Ricordi," see Olivia Holmes, "Reading Order in Discord: Guicciardini's Ricordi," *Italica* 76, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): pp. 314-334.

in which the Athenians tell the weaker Melians that power, not justice, is the decisive variable in politics. In another snippet of political wisdom, Guicciardini notes how a leader can deal with a bureaucratic organization. Ferdinand of Aragon, for instance, when he wanted to embark on a great venture, let his objective be known to the court well in advance so that his advisors and courtiers would begin organizing and supporting it before he officially announced it. Power is so much more effective when it convinces people that they want to do what their leaders desire.¹⁹⁴

Guicciardini never planned to be a historian or a political thinker, and since an early age was more interested in politics and had a strong ambition to advance in the Florentine *cursus honorum*. Ambition for him was the necessary drive to accomplish great things, and as long as it was directed toward the public good, rather than mere personal glory, it was to be praised. The desire for honor moves a man to great things because he “does not care about difficulties, dangers, or money.” Guicciardini admits that he himself felt such a desire, and that without this “stimulus” the “actions of men are dead and futile.”¹⁹⁵ The selfish desire to be revered by others could never be eradicated because, as he put it in his typically blunt manner, those who are honored and held in high esteem

¹⁹⁴ Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, #77, p. 28.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, #118, p. 40.

“come close or become almost similar to God, and who doesn’t want to be similar to Him?”¹⁹⁶

With the Spanish diplomatic mission behind him in 1514, Guicciardini served in various positions in Florence, climbing the political ladder and reaching the most prestigious offices, including in the Signoria, the highest magistracy. He was also close to the Medicis, and once Lorenzo the Magnificent’s son became Pope Leo X in Rome, Guicciardini occupied important administrative positions in the dominions of the Church.

His career came to an abrupt end in 1527 when Charles V’s army sacked Rome “with infinite homicides and cruelty,” and the Medicis lost power in Florence.¹⁹⁷ This event caused great consternation throughout Italy, which was again, as it had been in the 5th century AD, at the mercy of foreign forces – an object in a European balance of power. For Guicciardini this geopolitical disaster also carried a personal cost: the restoration of the Republic in Florence led to his political marginalization because he was seen as part of the disgraced Medici political tribe and was ostracized and even put on trial in 1529. The Medicis returned in 1530, allowing Guicciardini to return to a few positions of political responsibility, including the dubious task of

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., #16, p. 9: “...quanto più gli uomini sono onorati, reveriti e adorati, tanto più pare che si accostino e diventino quasi simili a Dio; al quale chi è quello che non volessi assomigliarsi?”

¹⁹⁷ Guicciardini’s letter to Francesco Maria della Rovere on 10 May 1527, in *The Defeat of a Renaissance Intellectual: Selected Writings of Francesco Guicciardini*, ed. Carlo Celli (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), pp. 100-103.

punishing those in Florence who had opposed the Medici family.

Perhaps justifying his own political involvement during these times, Guicciardini argued that serving tyrants, or more precisely, serving the state under an absolutist regime, was a duty for a patriotic citizen. The polity had an interest in having good people in positions of authority in all circumstances, and “even though the ignorant and the passionate of Florence never understood this, the rule of the Medicis would have been much worse had they had only crazy and bad individuals around them.”¹⁹⁸ As a student of Tacitus, Guicciardini comes close to the Roman’s view, put forth in the *Agricola*, that it is possible to be a great man under a bad emperor.¹⁹⁹ Of course, proximity to a tyrant is dangerous because the tyrant, fearing for his personal and political security, is constantly seeking to understand what is inside one’s heart. Thus, a prudent course of action is to be close to a tyrant to benefit from his successes, but not to be an intimate friend of his so that “when he falls, you can hope to save yourself.”²⁰⁰ A few years later, however, relegated to a marginal role by a young Cosimo de’ Medici, Guicciardini retired to his villa near Florence to write his history of Italy and, almost forgotten by his peers, died in 1540.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, #220, p. 71.

¹⁹⁹ In Tacitus’s famous phrase, “sub malis principibus magnos viros.” Tacitus, *Agricola*, *Germania*, *Dialogus*, p. 106.

²⁰⁰ Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, #100, p. 35.

²⁰¹ For a classic biography of Guicciardini, see Ridolfi, *Vita di Francesco Guicciardini*. While I use this Italian edition, an English

Why don't we read Guicciardini?

Guicciardini never attained the posthumous success of his predeceased friend, Machiavelli, even though in the 19th century there was a vigorous renaissance of interest in his writings and most of his vast opus was discovered.²⁰² Voltaire suggested that Guicciardini was the Italian Thucydides, “or rather its Xenophon, for he often commanded troops himself in the wars he recounts.”²⁰³ But even with that renewed attention, Guicciardini never broke into the canon of authors to be read by those interested in politics or foreign policy. Machiavelli's works are required readings for students of national security as well as business, while Guicciardini remains a niche author for scholars of the Renaissance.

It is entirely possible that Guicciardini's work lacks the depth of insight into politics and strategic interactions that others had. Guicciardini was incredibly prolific

translation of an earlier edition of this book is *The Life of Francesco Guicciardini* (New York: Knopf, 1968). For a brief intellectual biography, see Mark Phillips, *Francesco Guicciardini: The Historian's Craft* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), pp. 3-17.

²⁰² For example, Enrico Zanoni, *Vita Pubblica di Francesco Guicciardini* (Bologna: Ditta Nicola Zanichelli, 1896).

²⁰³ Quoted in Athanasios Moulakis, *Republican Realism in Renaissance Florence: Francesco Guicciardini's Discorso di Logrognò* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), Introduction, p. 31.

describing, analyzing, and commenting on his daily political experiences but, unlike Machiavelli, did not publish any of his writings during his lifetime.²⁰⁴ Guicciardini's reluctance to publish his writings stemmed from his view that the written word was not a means to ingratiate himself with the leaders in power. He thought of himself as a man of action rather than of leisurely thought. In fact, with his typical perspicacity, he observed that those who claimed to be content with a life of leisure, far from the circles of power, were lying, and given the opportunity to jump back into the political arena, "leaving the so highly praised quiet life, they jump back with the same fury of a fire that burns dried and greasy things."²⁰⁵

Despite his urge to be involved in the affairs of the state, once the vagaries of Florentine politics excluded him from power, Guicciardini did not seek to reopen the doors to influential positions by writing. Therefore, his stylistic preference was toward historical treatises that are interspersed with sharp observations about specific leaders, human nature, or relations among states – rather than short, pithy booklets composed expressly to give advice to the busy prince.²⁰⁶ Guicciardini's work is closer to Machiavelli's *Discourses* than *The Prince*, and similarly less studied. In brief, he may have been excluded from reading lists of strategists and statesmen because he did not write a memo

²⁰⁴ Ridolfi, *Vita di Francesco Guicciardini*, p. 153.

²⁰⁵ Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, #17, p. 10.

²⁰⁶ But Guicciardini, like Tacitus or Gibbon, sought to be interesting while being respectful of historical truth. He wrote with a sharp pen.

for posterity (but plenty of memos to his superiors in Florence and Rome). Style, rather than substance, are to blame.

But there is perhaps a greater reason for his relative obscurity: his approach to history and to the related study of politics. As a writer, he is first and foremost a historian, and his main works study the history of Italy and of Florence in the 14-15th centuries.²⁰⁷ Albeit part of a wider revival of historiography in the Renaissance that tried to draw moral lessons from the past, Guicciardini appears deeply skeptical of the possibility of such lessons. In fact, he is a harsh critic of those who, including his friend Machiavelli, use history to learn lessons for the present.²⁰⁸ For him, it is certainly worthwhile to study history but it rarely offers clear guidelines of how a statesman should behave in the particular situation he may find himself.

Guicciardini's work is permeated by the understanding that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to draw generalizable rules of behavior from a history of a city or an empire or of the actions of a leader. Every historical event, every political action, every polity is particular, contingent on the circumstances peculiar to each case that

²⁰⁷ Mark Phillips, "Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and the Tradition of Vernacular Historiography in Florence," *The American Historical Review* 84, no. 1 (February 1979): pp. 86-105. Also for a commentary on the main historical works of Guicciardini and on his development as a historian, see Phillips, *Francesco Guicciardini: The Historian's Craft*.

²⁰⁸ Donald J. Wilcox, "Guicciardini and the Humanist Historians," *Annali d'Italianistica* 2 (1984): pp. 19-33.

will not be repeated. Guicciardini is therefore very careful not to present some iron rules of politics, and prefers the study of the particular case because each episode in history has its own causes, patterns, and effects.

Historical analogies are also dangerous guides. Guicciardini writes that “governing oneself by examples is undoubtedly very dangerous if similar circumstances do not correspond, not only in general but in all particulars, and if things are not managed with similar judgement, and if, aside from all other fundamentals, one does not have similar good fortune on one’s side.”²⁰⁹ Guicciardini’s biographer, Ridolfi, comments that the Florentine’s writing style matched his views on the risks of generalization and abstraction: Guicciardini wrote as somebody “who walked more willingly on earth rather than on clouds.”²¹⁰

Because of this belief in the “*particolare*,” Guicciardini was famously critical of Machiavelli’s study of the Romans.²¹¹ It is a great mistake, he wrote, to draw tight parallels to the Romans. “One would have to possess a city with the same conditions they had, and then one would have to govern one’s behavior according to this example.”

²⁰⁹ Francesco Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, trans. Sidney Alexander (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), Book 1, p. 57. See also Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, #117, p. 40.

²¹⁰ Ridolfi, *Vita di Francesco Guicciardini*, p. 52.

²¹¹ On Machiavelli and Roman historians, see Ronald Syme, “Roman Historian and Renaissance Politics,” in *Roman Papers*, ed. E. Badian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), Vol. 1, pp. 471-476.

But this is akin to an “ass taking the path of a horse.”²¹² Guicciardini also wrote but never completed a book of commentaries on his friend’s *Discourses*, in which he criticized many details of Machiavelli’s work as too distant from the historical truth, suggesting a deep skepticism towards his friend’s approach that sacrificed historical precision to the desire of drawing generalizable lessons. Machiavelli extracted general rules from particular events, whether of ancient Rome or 15th century Italy, and Guicciardini was almost allergic to this. Even though Guicciardini’s intellectual sensibility was quite distant from that of his Florentine friend, the two friends undoubtedly had a deep respect for each other and read each other’s works.²¹³ A few weeks before his death in 1527, Machiavelli wrote in a letter: “I love mister Guicciardini, and I love my fatherland more than my own soul.”²¹⁴

For Guicciardini, it was risky to extract clear lessons from the Romans because his contemporaries had become

²¹² “Quanto si ingannono color che a ogni parola allegano e Romani! Bisognerebbe avere una città condizionata come era loro, e poi governarsi secondo quello essempla: el quale a chi ha le qualità disproporzionate è tanto disproporzionato, quanto sarebbe volere che uno asino facessi el corso di uno cavallo.” Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, #110, pp. 37-8. See also Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth Century Florence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), footnote #25, p. 279.

²¹³ Felix Gilbert, “Guicciardini, Machiavelli, Valori on Lorenzo Magnifico,” *Renaissance News* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1958): p. 111; Ridolfi, *Vita di Francesco Guicciardini*, pp. 260-1.

²¹⁴ Ridolfi, *Vita di Francesco Guicciardini*, p. 336.

less virtuous than the ancients. Following many other writers of his time, he believed that men were simply not the same as those of past centuries. He describes, for instance, how the King of Naples, who was hoping to receive his kingdom back from the King of Spain, was also “not considering that in our century it was vain to hope for so magnanimous a restitution of so noble a realm, such examples being rare even in ancient times when men were much more disposed than now to acts of virtue and nobility.”²¹⁵ Because the men of his time were no longer capable of behaving as virtuously as those of past ages, it was useless to study how the Romans acted; their actions were not replicable in Guicciardini’s age.

But the difficulty of learning generalizable rules of behavior from the past is not limited to ancient history. We have a hard time learning from our own experience. For instance, Guicciardini writes that Christian leaders were unable to respond to the Ottoman threat, which became all the more pressing after the fall of Rhodes in 1522, because they had not learnt from the mistakes of their own earlier policies. And there was little reason to hope they would learn for the future. As he writes:

Thus ended the year 1522, ignominiously for Christendom; such fruit reaped the discord of our princes, which would have been tolerable if at least the example of the harms suffered had served them as a lesson for the

²¹⁵ Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, Book 6, p. 187; Phillips, *Francesco Guicciardini: The Historian’s Craft*, pp. 85-87.

future. But the disagreements among our princes continued, and therefore the troubles of the year 1523 proved no less than before.²¹⁶

In other words, even if there may be lessons in history, we do not learn them easily and often commit the same mistakes. History therefore is a problematic source of knowledge because it does not repeat itself with precision while we are incapable of drawing lessons from it.

And yet, studying history is far from pointless for Guicciardini. Its role is to train our minds and, perhaps more appropriately, to steel our wills to perennially changing conditions that prevent us from achieving what we desire and plan. Felix Gilbert argues that for Guicciardini history instills a “philosophical attitude” more than giving us specific directions for future actions.²¹⁷ In front of such a complicated reality, determined by inscrutable forces outside of our comprehension and our ability to oppose them, humility and a sense of the tragic are the only attitudes possible.

Guicciardini often seems to suggest that human impotence is more common in politics than man’s creative capacity, an attitude that is strikingly different from Machiavelli’s (as well as many other Renaissance thinkers).²¹⁸ Men are very limited in what they can achieve

²¹⁶ Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, Book 15, p. 335.

²¹⁷ Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, p. 290.

²¹⁸ Another difference between Guicciardini and Machiavelli is their relationship with faith. Guicciardini was very reserved and rarely let his inner thoughts and emotions percolate into his writings, even in his personal letters. At the news of his

because the outcomes of their actions are rarely what they wanted initially. Or, to be precise, they achieve things that they neither expected nor desired. In a moment of deep sadness, he wrote that he wanted to see three things before his death but he doubted he would be able to do so: "to live in a well ordered republic in our city, an Italy freed from all the barbarians, and a world freed from the tyranny of these damned priests."²¹⁹ Guicciardini's vision of history, and of

daughter's death, he only writes to his brother: "What an unexpected disaster!" (See Ridolfi, *Vita di Francesco Guicciardini*, p. 243.) But it is clear that he believes in God who has a profound, albeit inscrutable, influence over world affairs. His faith in God is also a source of his enormous scorn for the Popes and their secular power. In a long excursus tracing the origins of the secular power of the Popes, Guicciardini writes that the popes, "raised to secular power, little by little forgetting about the salvation of souls and divine precepts, and turning all their thoughts to worldly greatness, and no longer using their spiritual authority except as an instrument and minister of temporal power, they began to appear rather more like secular princes than popes. Their concerns and endeavors began to be no longer the sanctity of life or the propagation of religion, no longer zeal and charity toward their neighbors, but armies and wars against Christians..." Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, Book 4, p. 149. In another passage, Guicciardini writes that the election of the pope could not have been guided by the Holy Ghost, "as if the Holy Ghost, which above all loves the purest hearts and spirits, would not disdain to enter into souls full of ambition and incredible greed, and almost all dedicated to the most refined, not to say most dishonest, pleasures." Ibid., Book 14, p. 331.

²¹⁹ In Ridolfi, *Vita di Francesco Guicciardini*, p. 243. See also Francesco Guicciardini, *Dialogue on the Government of Florence*, ed.

man's role in it, is tinted with a tragic pessimism because of the inherent limits of human action. Man is not a creator, even of political realities, but history is useful because it can train him to accept these limitations. History serves as an indispensable check on man's arrogance.

The key virtue for a statesman is "*discrezione*," a version of prudence, the ability to do the right thing in various circumstances. An ambassador, for instance, has to be able to use this quality and pursue the right course of action even when lacking precise instructions from his city. Given that, as noted earlier, it is impossible to know from general rules how to behave in particular circumstances, the political leader has to develop his "*discrezione*" from experience and knowledge of history combined with a love of his country (of which a bit later).

Given such an understanding of history, and of human action in it, it is not surprising that Guicciardini did not enjoy the same fame that his friend Machiavelli had. It is possible, albeit wrong, to interpret Guicciardini's work as mostly an antiquarian effort. There is no call in Guicciardini to grab "*fortuna*" and force her to mold herself to man's wishes. But Guicciardini is not a mere raconteur of past events. He treats history as the fields where political minds can acquire the necessary training for the tragedy of political action.

Alison Brown (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Introduction, p. xxviii.

History for policy

Guicciardini was not an apostle of passivity, inaction, or hopeless political leadership. Nor was he a skeptic that discounted all possibility of useful knowledge. After all, he himself was an active participant in Italian diplomacy and Florentine politics, seeking to keep his city independent from the vagaries of European power dynamics. As a historian, therefore, he is not merely a narrator of facts but is concerned with the workings of the underlying causes of events in domestic and international politics.²²⁰ And he is preoccupied with the role of individual leaders, and with the characteristics and virtues needed to be effective in politics.

Guicciardini's work examines the historical period in Italy between the 13th and 16th century. It was a critical moment in Italy's history marking the gradual shift of power from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic shores of Europe with the resulting weakening of the power and influence of Italian cities. By the early 1500s, the Alps in the north and the Mediterranean in the south were no longer sufficient to protect Italy from foreign interventions, in particular from Spain and France. As political dynamics on the Italian peninsula became subordinate to Spanish and French power, Italy experienced a dramatic decline in its geopolitical heft. As Guicciardini writes at the beginning of his *The History of Italy*,

²²⁰ Maurizio Viroli, *From Politics to Reason of State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 200.

I have determined to write about those events which have occurred in Italy within our memory, ever since French troops, summoned by our own princes, began to stir up very great dissensions here: a most memorable subject in view of its scope and variety, and full of the most terrible happenings; since for so many years Italy suffered all those calamities with which miserable mortals are usually afflicted, sometimes because of the just anger of God, and sometimes because of the impiety and wickedness of other men.²²¹

The geopolitical change experienced by Italy, and Florence in particular, was so shocking that Italian political thinkers became more introspective, searching for the causes of the troubles in the peninsula. Guicciardini was driven, however, by more than intellectual curiosity: the analysis was, for him, the first step toward action. Foreign powers that entered Italy presented a clear challenge to Italian political leaders and not just a puzzle to its analysts.²²² Moreover, the domestic politics of Italian cities, including of Florence, were now shaped by the foreign intervention of distant powers, and the changes in regimes (Guicciardini experience four such changes in Florence in

²²¹ Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, p. 3. For a similar justification, see also Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, 1.1, p. 3.

²²² See also Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, pp. 226-35; Phillips, *Francesco Guicciardini: The Historian's Craft*, p. 120.

his lifetime²²³) were results of events outside of natural internal dynamics.

Given the new political situation, what should Italian politicians do? How should they respond to this new equilibrium of power? By asking such questions, Guicciardini was no longer simply a historian, but a student of politics with a strong interest in learning (or teaching) lessons for practical purposes. Like Machiavelli, Guicciardini wanted to discern the most effective policy that could preserve the independence of Florence, and of Italy as a whole. He was a politician before being a historian, and his study of history was at least in part forced upon him by his expulsion from the active political life of Florence.

Guicciardini was painstakingly precise in his writing of history. He wanted to be as objective as possible because only in this way could he claim to offer useful policy advice. For example, after a long and passionate excursus on the secular power of the popes, he felt obliged to apologize and recognize that he was “deflected [from his goal] ... more ardently than truly pertains to the laws of history.”²²⁴ To study history *sine ira et studio*, as Tacitus put it, without anger and without partiality, was difficult because it is impossible to remove emotions from politics, but – also like Tacitus – Guicciardini tried his best to

²²³ These four regime changes in Florence were: the 1494 end of the Medici rule (tied to the French invasion), the 1512 return of the Medici (with the help of the Spanish army), another republican regime in 1527, and another return of the Medici in 1530.

²²⁴ Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, Book 4, p. 150.

discover what drove historical events. History was a way to understand politics and an indispensable tool for political leaders.

Humility as a virtue

What are then the lessons that Guicciardini draws out of history? The first and foremost lesson of history is that statesmen need humility. The study of history shows that political dynamics are constantly changing and often unpredictable. Consequently, the actions of the military commander as well as of the statesman are limited in what they can achieve. If politics is meant to be the art of the possible, it is necessary to understand what is possible and what is not. Like Machiavelli, Guicciardini is concerned predominantly with the things that can be achieved, and not with those that ought to be achieved. But even what is possible is not necessarily achievable by implementing a clear policy.

What, then, can political leaders actually achieve? For Guicciardini, the state, and politics, are products of man's actions.²²⁵ Political action, thus, can result in marvelous outcomes, generating wonder in observers. Concluding the *Discorso di Logrogno*, the purpose of which was to describe the most effective way to organize Florence's political regime, Guicciardini writes that the

²²⁵ Chabod, *Lezioni di Metodo Storico*, p. 38.

work of leaders such as Lycurgus, founder of Sparta, was superhuman

because reforming a city in disarray and reforming it in such a praiseworthy manner is more the work of gods than of men. We are left to wonder and exclaim at such a remarkable feat, but it is beyond our power to accomplish the same, indeed hardly within our capacity even to desire it. Coming back, therefore, to the things within our power...²²⁶

Awareness of what is “in one’s own power” is the first step to meaningful political action and, while there may be rare lawgivers such as Lycurgus, most of us have no ability to achieve such wondrous feats.

In the first paragraph of his history of Italy, Guicciardini writes that the study of history is valuable because “from a knowledge of such occurrences, so varied and so grave, everyone may derive many precedents salutary both for himself and for the public weal.”²²⁷ More precisely, historical examples “will make it plainly evident how mutable are human affairs, not unlike a sea whipped by winds.”²²⁸ To narrate history means to describe constantly changing, unpredictable, and surprising circumstances.

²²⁶ Moulakis, *Republican Realism*, p. 148.

²²⁷ Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, Book 1, p. 3.

²²⁸ Ibid.

Because change and unpredictability are the principal features of human affairs, political leaders need experience. Only through experience, in fact, can statesmen develop the humility needed to face the vagaries of politics. They have to understand the limitations of power, and of our ability to foresee the future and gauge the effects of human actions.

Of course, experience is a hard thing to obtain and history is a substitute for it, a training ground for the mind of the statesman. It prepares him to pay attention to small, often obscure, events that might have important consequences: the low-visibility but high-risk event. Guicciardini writes that political decisions

don't follow prescribed rules or a determined course; rather, they are subject to daily changes according to what's happening in the world. The decisions that have to be made almost always have to be based on conjectures; and very often things of the greatest importance depend on one small movement, the weightiest consequences often deriving from beginnings that are scarcely noticeable. So the ruler of a state must be a man of great prudence, he should watch every minute happening with extreme vigilance, and after weighing up all possible eventualities he should try above all to prevent new things

beginning and exclude as far as possible the power of chance and fortune.²²⁹

Large forces, uncontrollable by one man, are certainly at work in history. Tectonic changes, such as the rise of Spain and France in the 15th century, occur not because of one decision or action of a single individual or a single state. But small actions can affect, often in dramatic ways, the course of events. That is why individual statesmen can have a profound impact on the political fate of a state either by their prudent use of power or by their ambition that blinds them to the needs of the state and the requirements imposed by the circumstances. As Guicciardini writes, “by failing to take account of the frequent shifts of fortune, and misusing, to the harm of others, the power conceded to them for the common welfare, such rulers become the cause of new perturbations either through lack of prudence or excess of ambition.”²³⁰

The effects of a decision by an individual, no matter how seemingly trivial, are more visible in the military realm. In a battle, an individual's actions can turn the fight in unexpected directions because

a badly understood command, or a poorly executed order, or an act of rashness, or a false rumor, sometimes coming from even the simplest soldier, will often bring victory to those who already seem to be defeated;

²²⁹ Guicciardini, *Dialogue on the Government of Florence*, Book I, p. 58.

²³⁰ Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, Book 1, p. 3.

and where innumerable accidents unexpectedly occur which cannot be foreseen or controlled by the captain's order.²³¹

A military victory or defeat, a result of the decisions of particular individuals, can have lasting consequences on the geopolitical situation, as the Italians found out facing the French and Spaniards in Guicciardini's time.

In the end, there is always a gap between plans and outcomes. As Guicciardini comments on a strategy implemented by Florence,

this enterprise [a complicated and ambitious plan to cut Pisa off from the sea by Florence in 1504], which was begun with the greatest hope and carried on with even greater expenses, proved to be in vain: because as often happens, although such-like projects may be almost palpably demonstrated in the measured plans, yet experience will find them failing (which is the most certain proof of how great a distance there is between planning things and putting them in operation).²³²

The main value of history, therefore, is to show to the future policymakers the inevitability of this "great distance" between plans and action. History should not make political leaders less ambitious because ambition, as

²³¹ Ibid., Book 2, p. 102.

²³² Ibid., Book 6, p. 186.

indicated earlier, is part of human nature and can be used for political goods. But it should lower the expectations of the overly ambitious individual who believes only in the power of his own actions while strengthening the confidence of the overly doubtful who resigns himself to the impersonal forces of history.²³³

The desire to dominate

Guicciardini places so much value on the study of history because of his views of human nature. Human beings are driven by ambition or, more precisely, by the desire to be above others. Altruistic ideals rarely motivate men to act, and are more likely to be used as covers for selfish actions. In the Dialogue on the Government of Florence, Guicciardini writes that

men have a natural desire to dominate and be superior to others; there are normally very few people who love liberty so much that if they had a chance to make themselves lords or superior to others they would not do so willingly. And in fact one sees this happening every day, not just among those who are unrelated to each other, such as princes or republics, who continually try to

²³³ Guicciardini observes "Nothing flies away faster than opportunity, nothing more dangerous than to judge other people's intentions, nothing more harmful than immoderate suspicions." Ibid., Book 11, p. 261.

obtain lordship over neighbouring lands and states, but even among those who form part of the same body.... Those who enjoy leading positions in the city do not primarily seek liberty as their objectives as much as increase of power and making themselves as superior and outstanding as possible. As long as possible, they strive to conceal their ambition with this pleasing title of liberty.²³⁴

Guicciardini does not argue that human nature is intrinsically evil. In fact, all else being equal, men choose to do good more than to do evil. But they are also “very fragile and can be diverted from the straight and narrow path by the slightest opportunity, and that the things that lead men astray – that is, lusts and passions – are so many and are so powerful against a nature as weak as his, that if there were no other remedies apart from what everyone can do for himself, very few would not be corrupted.” The purpose of laws within an ordered state is to establish rewards and punishments, an incentive structure to enhance the inclination toward good.²³⁵

Such a structure is needed because statesmen do not always act with the purpose of achieving the best for their state. Ambition, passions, and other causes of “weakness” lead them astray from the most effective and rational course of policy. Guicciardini wrote that the French King Charles

²³⁴ Guicciardini, *Dialogue on the Government of Florence*, Book I, p. 36.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

died after having led “a life which, motivated more by impetuosity than virtue, had upset the world, and was threatening at the time of his death to upset it again.”²³⁶ The King did not necessarily seek to sow instability in the world, but he proved to be incapable of reigning in his “impetuosity,” resulting in a policy that did not carefully weigh the risks of particular decisions. Wisdom (of which a bit later) is often defeated by greed, ignorance, and desires of glory. In modern parlance, men are not “rational” and the outcome of the policy is not always beneficial for the state or the leaders in question.

One thing is certain, however: power therefore is the indispensable tool of politics, and it determines political relations. Because men constantly desire to be superior to others, security can be achieved only by being more powerful than others. Guicciardini writes that

Political rule and command are nothing but violence over subjects, occasionally mitigated by a pretense of decency. Wanting to uphold them without weapons and without forces of one’s own, but with the help of others, is like wanting to exercise a profession without the tools of the trade. In brief, who lives unarmed is hard to put to overcome others, and hard put to defend himself.²³⁷

²³⁶ Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, Book 3, p. 127.

²³⁷ Moulakis, *Republican Realism*, p. 121. For a commentary on this point, see also Viroli, *From Politics to Reason of State*, pp. 192-4.

Guicciardini shares with Machiavelli a strong dislike toward those who are unarmed but who nevertheless seek political influence. Politics and power are inseparable. In fact, without power, it is impossible to achieve any political goal. For instance, freedom, both of an individual and of a state, is an empty concept if it is not backed by power. You cannot be free without sufficient power because others, whether states or individuals, will encroach upon your realm and strive to become your rulers. "If you lost your dominion, you would also lose your freedom and the city itself, which would be attacked, and you would lack the means to defend it." Paying attention only to your domestic political order is insufficient because states do not live in isolation. "Being just," he adds, "distributing offices well, having good laws that were well observed, these things wouldn't defend you."²³⁸

The indispensability of power does not result, however, in the inevitability of constant expansion. Power does not expand automatically, simply by virtue of being. As a tool, power is used by policymakers and states for different purposes, and consequently there is nothing preordained in the way power "behaves." Power does not demand more power if it is not strictly necessary to preserve what one, individual man or state, has. In reality, as Guicciardini observes in his writings, this distinction between power as a tool and power as an end is not always maintained. Policymakers, out of greed, ambition, or sheer

²³⁸ Guicciardini, *Dialogue on the Government of Florence*, Book I, p. 70.

ignorance, often pursue more power than it is required to protect their interests or to pursue their ideals. The result is the unintentional loss of security because other states will act accordingly, and try to thwart the rising state. It is a classic security dilemma and Guicciardini warns against such unnecessary expansion of power. It is “better for a city to live content with its freedom, if it could be enjoyed without wanting dominion” than “think about creating empire.”²³⁹ Expansion of power can be a strategic mistake because it exposes the state unnecessarily to the attacks of others.

Moreover, an overly ambitious state can further destabilize the regional equilibrium because it will seek the support of other great powers. Their introduction into local politics creates new power dynamics, detrimental to the independence and survival of the existing states – including of the state that has sought their alliance in the first place. A particular equilibrium of power, in fact, is a guarantee of security to its members; a change in it is likely to alter the safety and independence of those states. Guicciardini constantly reminds his readers that the intervention of foreign powers in Italy led to the demise of the liberty of Florence and of the other city states on the peninsula. And these foreign interventions were caused by the unchecked ambition of some Italian leaders, who in order to pursue such ambitions had invited French and Spanish armies to enter Italy. The outcome was deadly. “With only Italian powers left in Italy, you wouldn’t need to fear whether you

²³⁹ Ibid., Book 2, p. 154.

would be able to keep what you had acquired. And even if you incurred envy, it couldn't do much damage, since you'd find it easy to defend yourself from your equals."²⁴⁰

While power is necessary, it is also insufficient to maintain a state. First, human beings are motivated by ideals or interests other than power, and the naked use of power against or upon them can be counterproductive. Guicciardini observes that "[t]hose who on various occasions have wanted to usurp power have known ... that it was impossible to eradicate liberty altogether and that tyranny could be maintained only feigning at least a shadow or semblance of liberty."²⁴¹ Because of men's attachment to certain ideals, such as freedom, political influence has to be grounded in the respect, however superficial, of them. In a phrase reminiscent of Machiavelli's advice to the prince, Guicciardini writes that "To base one's rule entirely on violence when able to stay in power by a mixture of love and force is something tyrants should never do unless forced to it."²⁴² Power has to be accompanied by its acceptance, which can be attained by "love" or the perception of being legitimate and protective of the others' interests and ideals.

Second, the image of power is as important as actual power. An aura of being powerful minimizes the need to

²⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 155.

²⁴¹ Moulakis, *Republican Realism*, p. 141.

²⁴² Guicciardini, *Dialogue on the Government of Florence*, Book I, p. 75. See also Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince and the Discourses* (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), *The Prince*, Chapter XVII, pp. 60-2.

use force, and as such it enhances the influence an individual or a state has. To keep such a reputation, a state needs to be constantly vigilant. Writing about the Venetians, the great competitors but also temporary allies of the Florentine republic, Guicciardini notes that they were afraid to give up anything because “[o]nce having begun to yield anything, no matter how small, would diminish the reputation and ancient splendor of their Republic; and hence greatly increase their peril.”²⁴³ Such need to be firm in the exercise of power and to maintain one’s territory or possessions is especially pronounced for those who are becoming weaker. In other words, an image of power is needed to compensate for the loss of material power. In fact, it is incomparably far more difficult for one who has begun to decline, to maintain what he still has, even against the most minimal dangers, than for one who strives to keep his dignity and degree, and thereby acts promptly, making no sign whatever of willingness to yield, against whoever seeks to oppress him. Hence, it was necessary either courageously to reject those first demands [to give up some territories], or yielding to them, to keep in mind that they would have to consent to many others. And from this would result in a very short time

²⁴³ Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, Book 8, p. 200.

the total annihilation of their domains,
followed by the loss of their own liberty.²⁴⁴

Finally, Guicciardini thinks that what is true of individuals is also true of states. Speaking about the cyclical nature of history, Guicciardini writes that “the same happens to families and the nobility as happens to cities and worldly things: they grow old, decline and for various reasons die out, and to fill their place others must necessarily rise up and begin again.”²⁴⁵ In part the similarity between states and individuals stems from the fact that the majority of polities described by Guicciardini were principalities or kingdoms where the rule of one individual decided the policy direction and the fate of the state. To describe the characteristics of the prince meant to describe the characteristics of the state, which was his personal possession.

But in part the identity of state and individual behavior is due to the similar nature of the two. States, like individuals, are prone to be “weak” or “fragile” in the sense that they do not always pursue the most effective policy to defend their interests. The irrationality of states is due not only to their leaders’ shortcomings but also, in the case of republics, to the confusion and ignorance of the masses. This is not to argue that states are in some way independent from individuals. Guicciardini never lifts the responsibility

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Guicciardini, *Dialogue on the Government of Florence*, Book I, p. 46.

for state action away from its leaders, and does not believe that states act without human input.²⁴⁶

Conclusion

The impermanence of earthly things, including of political action, paradoxically elevates the role of the statesman. For Guicciardini, the statesman's actions come with severe limits, often resulting in undesired outcomes: the gap between aspirations and results, plans and outcomes, is great. But the statesman is indispensable to maintain the security and thus the freedom of a polity. He may fail even though his intentions and his plans are impeccable. But without trying, there is little hope.

History is a great tool to prepare the statesman for such a risky and tragic task. History is the realm of the contingent, of the "*particolare*," that demands detailed knowledge of individual cases (we could say that Guicciardini would have been a proponent of regional studies!). A student of it can train his mind to the relentless possibility of tragic outcomes, preparing himself for the political arena.

²⁴⁶ "According to Guicciardini, ruling or reforming a city requires the same competence that many citizens have acquired through the practice of commerce and the administration of their families and estates. It is basically a talent of making good choices, a skill that presupposes a deep knowledge of men." Viroli, *From Politics to Reason of State*, p. 179.

Guicciardini is, thus, the political writer of the great paradox: men are driven to seek power and they need it to survive, but at the same time they have to recognize the limits and dangers of power. Power is best married with humility.

"Guicciardini is perhaps the only modern historian who has understood men and has thought deeply about events, following a knowledge of human nature rather than a certain political science, separate from the science of man and mostly chimerical."

Giacomo Leopardi, *Pensieri*

Chapter 8

Guicciardini's policy suggestions

What are the policy implications of Guicciardini's writings? Despite being first and foremost a historian, Guicciardini is in fact deeply preoccupied with the political welfare of Florence and, in one of the first moments of aspiration for Italian unity, with the fate of Italy as a political entity. His main concern was how to guarantee the political survival of Italy (and its various cities) once the peninsula became part of the wider European balance of power.

Throughout his writings, Guicciardini offers three sets of policy advice. First, because Guicciardini sees the collapse of Italy's equilibrium as caused by the decisions of individual, foreign and Italian, leaders, motivated by greed and ambition, he stresses the importance of good advice or

counsel. Military force and political power are insufficient; the correct use of power is what states need. The second policy advice concerns the most effective source of policy wisdom and leadership. Guicciardini debates at length the pros and cons of policy decisions made by the masses versus those made by a few select individuals (the “wise men”) and leans toward the latter. Finally, Guicciardini suggests that an equilibrium of power is the best source of the security of individual states. But an equilibrium of power is not the automatic result of the international system, requiring instead the conscious efforts of individuals. That is why Guicciardini famously sees Lorenzo de’ Medici as the leader who had skillfully managed to maintain a salutary equilibrium of power in the Italian peninsula as well as in Europe.

Power used well

Guicciardini’s first policy suggestion stems from the recognition of the limits of power. Power alone is not sufficient to achieve even the most basic purpose of the state, namely its security. The material resources of a state are a meager consolation if its leaders are stupid. Power is simply a political tool, and it can, and often is, misused. The worst quality political leaders can possess is ignorance, not lack of power. “For what is done deliberately usually has weight and measure; but ignorance is blind, confused, without limit or rule, hence the proverb that it is often better to have to deal with someone who is evil than someone who

is ignorant.”²⁴⁷ Ignorance, the absence of the knowledge of a purpose (good or evil), makes action random, and thus, unpredictable and meaningless. Ignorance leads to purposeless action. In other words, it is both very difficult to respond to an action that has no calculated purpose because it is unclear what the next step might be, and it is dangerous to conduct such a random policy because it will not increase or maintain the security of one’s state.

Power needs direction and purpose. And purpose can be given only by what Guicciardini calls “wise advice” or counsel. “Wise advice” consists above all of helping the policymaker overcome the vagaries of “*fortuna*.” Because of the constantly changing nature of human affairs, political leaders should follow goals that are based on more than a calculation of what appears to be the reality. Such a calculation is highly subjective and depends on the ability of the leaders in question to discern the trends of history, or the real intentions and actions of other states. As Guicciardini never tires to repeat, it is “pernicious, almost always to themselves but always to the people, [to implement] those ill-advised measures of rulers who act solely in terms of what is in front of their eyes: either foolish errors or shortsighted greed.”²⁴⁸ The fact that few, if any, can discern the reasons behind events and history means that rulers, no matter how wise and perspicacious, need constant help in reading the political reality and

²⁴⁷ Guicciardini, *Dialogue on the Government of Florence*, Book I, pp. 44-45.

²⁴⁸ Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, Book 1, p. 56.

formulating and implementing the most appropriate response.

Those who reject advice, and even worse, claim to have understood the most profound meaning of history are not only wrong but dangerous. Guicciardini does not spare his contempt for Pope Alexander Borgia (1492-1503) who was a

powerful example to confound the arrogance of those who, presuming to discern with the weakness of human eyes the depth of divine judgments, affirm that the prosperity or adversity of men proceeds from their own merits or demerits: as if one may not see every day many good men unjustly vexed and many depraved souls unworthily exalted; or as if, interpreting it in another way, one were to derogate from the justice and power of God, whose boundless might cannot be contained within the narrow limits of the present, and who – at another time and in another place – will recognize with a broad sweep, with rewards and eternal punishments, the just from the unjust.²⁴⁹

Similarly, the demise of Florentine power and of the Medicean regime in 1494, at the time of the French invasion of Italy, was caused in large measure by Piero de' Medici's "rash policy." Piero's mistake was that he placed "more

²⁴⁹ Ibid., Book 6, p. 166.

faith in himself and in the advice of counselors who were bold and arrogant in times of peace and useless in times of peril, rather than in citizens, friends or relatives who had given him wise counsels.”²⁵⁰

Guicciardini never specifies, disappointingly, the details of what constitutes a wise advice or counsel. It is simply a rational calculation of the most effective policy that one can pursue. The purpose of that policy can be good or bad, beneficial to one individual or a state, to one city or to the whole Italian peninsula. But the advice needs to be motivated by a purpose and by a prudential judgement on how to pursue it. Power needs wisdom to be used effectively and with a purpose. And statesmen need wise men to pursue effective policies.

The wisdom of many or of the few?

But wisdom and wise counsel are rare according to Guicciardini. The problem is twofold. On the one hand, there are few people who are capable of giving good advice. On the other, there are few people who are willing to listen to wise advice, and who can choose the right advisors.

The first problem concerns the source of wise advice. The solution seems to be to give greater influence to the citizens or to a large part of the population of a state. Popular involvement in policymaking spreads the risk of an unwise decision. The more people are involved, the less

²⁵⁰ Ibid., Book 1, p. 56.

likely it is that one madman will take over the republic. Guicciardini writes that

Such amplitude [of popular involvement in the government] means that some mad and many ignorant and evil people are included but, nonetheless, majority decisions are not, on the whole, beyond the bounds of reason. Keeping in mind that nothing is quite perfect, but that we must prefer what has fewer faults, even if some decisions are unreasonable, they must be borne as the lesser evil, for it is better to live like this, with a degree of disorder, than to see all good and evil placed in the hands of a single man.²⁵¹

Guicciardini argues that popular involvement in politics does not demand great wisdom from each individual because popular opinion, widely shared by the people, is an excellent approximation to wisdom. The “election of officials, though important, does not require great power of judgment. The people choose according to the reputation of men and to the regard they have for them, relying less on individual judgment than on a common opinion that is rarely mistaken and whose mistakes, when they occur, are not always serious.”²⁵² The choice made by the people, that is, is relatively good, relying not on individual decision but on a shared common opinion, a sort of average.

²⁵¹ Moulakis, *Republican Realism*, p. 122.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 123.

Nonetheless, Guicciardini's faith in the wisdom of the masses is qualified, making him a weak supporter of democracy. In a different book, he argues that people do not appoint the right men. "Instead of appointing wise men who are capable of governing, often those appointed to the top offices will be men who are incapable of governing their households... People often give more reputation to those who earn it by doing nothing and keeping their mouths shut than to those who have deserved it by their know-how."²⁵³ Those who have taken positions of responsibility and acted – and thus have experience – are less likely to be appointed than those who have been quiet and had chosen a path of inaction.

The risk associated with choosing the wrong individuals to be in charge is particularly great when it comes to foreign affairs.²⁵⁴ This is a high risk, high consequence situation. For Guicciardini, when the decisions to be taken concern the national security of a state, they should be limited to a small group of people. Understanding the international arena and conducting diplomacy are arts that require a particular knowledge, developed through the study of history and an appreciation of the tragedy of political action. Not many can achieve that. Guicciardini writes:

²⁵³ Guicciardini, *Dialogue on the Government of Florence*, Book I, p. 41.

²⁵⁴ See also Marco Cesa, "Machiavelli and Guicciardini: international politics, foreign policy and domestic politics," *Quaderni di Scienza Politica*, Issue 1 (January-April 2021): pp. 3-33.

The real nature of such affairs can only be understood by the truly wise, and mistakes in their regard are likely to undermine the city's government and its power. There is no doubt that in ancient republics such as Rome, and especially Athens, great troubles arose from decisions in such matters being made by the people, and one reads of the many disasters that befell the government as a result.²⁵⁵

In the Dialogue on the Government in Florence, Guicciardini seems to prefer the rule of one wise man, maybe like the first Medici regime. The reason is that when there is one ruler it is more likely that a decision will be taken. When there are many co-equals in power, it is much more difficult to reach a decision. Every individual has his own opinion of how to run the affairs of the state and, if a consensus is required, a large group will likely take a weak decision, if at all. Committees are the perfect means to avoid a decision, especially if it is a hard choice. "If you put even

²⁵⁵ Moulakis, *Republican Realism*, p. 124. The problem with the "masses" is that they are prone to follow a strong leader. "Experience shows and reason confirms that as a result of its weakness the multitude is never ruled by itself, but always seeks an allegiance and a prop. It will most likely attach itself to a man who has a powerful office and great prestige rather than to anyone else..." Ibid., p. 125. The role of the "wise" is to guide the state - "the entire weight of government ultimately rests on the shoulders of very few. This has always been the case in every republic, ancient or modern." Ibid., p. 137.

eight or ten wise men together, they will generate so many different opinions that they will be deemed mad.”²⁵⁶ The result is that government of many is less likely to intervene when necessary. In a strongly worded passage, Guicciardini writes that

the multitude don't think, don't concentrate, don't see and understand nothing until things are reduced to the point where they are obvious to everyone. And then only with the greatest difficulty and danger, and with intolerable expense, is it possible to correct what could initially have been provided for safety, and at little cost or effort.... The masses always hold the opinion that men of excellence are not content with a free republican way of life and so continually desire wars and troubles to have the change of suffocating liberty – or at least to make the city employ them more than they do in peacetime. So the masses are unmoved by the authority of these men, because they don't trust them; they are not persuaded by their arguments, because they don't understand them. Because of this fallacy many republics have been ruined, a great many have lost splendid opportunities for increasing their dominions, and infinite

²⁵⁶ Guicciardini, *Dialogue on the Government of Florence*, Book I, p. 62.

numbers of them have been enmeshed in vast expenses and dangers.²⁵⁷

The danger of popular involvement stems from the fickle nature of the masses. People are easily carried away by emotions and are attracted by extremes. If they are poorly led and do not have the proper habits, they will “make insolent use of their liberty.”²⁵⁸ They will be purposeless, so to speak, and will act randomly. In domestic politics, one day they will support some strong leader, only to reject him and seek another one the next day. In foreign policy, they will pursue high ideals without considering the costs of doing so, or they will refuse to oppose a rising threat because of short-term considerations.

People are prone to wild emotions. In a paragraph describing the throngs of people that descended on Rome in 1503 to see Pope Alexander’s corpse, Guicciardini writes that they were “unable to satiate their eyes enough with seeing spent that serpent who in his boundless ambition and pestiferous perfidy, and with all his examples of horrible cruelty and monstrous sensuality and unheard-of avarice, selling without distinction sacred and profane things, had envenomed the entire world.”²⁵⁹ Similarly, commenting on the changing attitude of the people of Naples toward the occupying forces of France, the Florentine writes that “such is the nature of the people, who

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 59.

²⁵⁸ Moulakis, *Republican Realism*, p. 126.

²⁵⁹ Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, Book 6, p. 166.

are inclined to hope more than they ought to, and tolerate less than is necessary, and to be always dissatisfied with the present state of affairs. Especially is this true of the inhabitants of the kingdom of Naples, who among all the peoples of Italy are most noted for their instability and thirst for innovations.”²⁶⁰

Also, the people as a group are very fickle, changing their opinions with astounding speed. Describing Savonarola’s execution in 1498, Guicciardini writes that the population of Florence was attracted to the gruesome sight, even though days before they went on the streets in order to watch Savonarola perform a promised miracle. “To this spectacle of degradation and torture there thronged no less a multitude of men than those who, on the day appointed for the experiment of entering into the fire, had rushed to the same place in expectation of the miracle which he had promised.”²⁶¹ In another episode, when Lodovico Sforza is arrested by the French King, “a great multitude of people flocked to see a prince who had now fallen into such misery from a state of such greatness and majesty, recently envied by so many for his felicity.”²⁶²

The second problem of wise advice – the flip side of the previous point – is the dearth of wise listeners. Not only must the giver of advice be wise, but also the listener must be open to receiving such advice. The receiver of the advice must be wise himself. The statesman, therefore, must be

²⁶⁰ Ibid., Book 2, p. 90.

²⁶¹ Ibid., Book 3, p. 131.

²⁶² Ibid., Book 4, p. 155. For another example of mass frenzy, this time in Bologna, see also Ibid., Book 9, p. 227.

“the prudent man, capable of shrewd and reasoned judgment, informed by a worldly experience normally associated with high social standing.”²⁶³ As Guicciardini writes,

Nor is there any question that advice is less necessary to wise men than to unwise; and yet, wise men derive much more benefit from taking counsel. For, whose judgment is so perfect that he can always evaluate and know everything by himself, and always be able to discern the better part of contradictory points of view? But how can he who is asking for counsel be certain that he will be counseled in good faith? For, whoever gives advice (unless he is bound by close fidelity or ties of affection to the one seeking advice) not only is moved largely by self-interest, but also by his own small advantages and by every slight satisfaction, and often aim his counsel toward that end which turns more to his advantage or is more suitable for his purposes; and since these ends are usually unknown to the person seeking advice, he is not aware, unless he is wise, of the faithlessness of the counsel.²⁶⁴

There is a shortage of disinterested advice. And only a wise man can evaluate the value of the counsel he receives.

²⁶³ Moulakis, *Republican Realism*, p. 22.

²⁶⁴ Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, Book 1, p. 63.

The wise, that is, will also be able to receive wisdom from others.

The equilibrium of power

The third policy implication of Guicciardini's work is the importance of tending to the balance of power. Guicciardini lived during, and wrote about, a turbulent period of Italian history, characterized by a dramatic change in the power equilibria of the peninsula. Italy was becoming the playground of foreign powers, mainly Spain and France, vying for control, trying to weaken each other, and eager to solidify their own Mediterranean positions. The cause was the "ambition of two most mighty kings, puffed up with mutual jealousies and hatred, which incited them to exercise all their power and all their disdain in Italy."²⁶⁵ The Italian cities were too small to be able to oppose individually these larger and more organized proto-national states. And because of their petty divisions, Italian cities had a hard time coalescing in a peninsular alliance that could have perhaps expelled the French and Spanish powers. As a result, Florence lost its position of independence and political importance, to Guicciardini's despair.

Guicciardini is one of the first writers to consider the impact of a wider geopolitical context on the domestic and foreign politics of a state. His *The History of Italy* is path-

²⁶⁵ Ibid., Book 14, p. 326.

breaking in that it does not focus on a single region, Italy, but considers developments in several states and on how they shaped each other's behavior.²⁶⁶ Not without justification, then, Guicciardini is considered to be responsible for establishing the idea of a great historical transition in Italy, moving from a period of order under Lorenzo de' Medici's guidance, to an age of foreign interference and disorder. The year 1494 saw the French invasion of Italy, and a few decades later in 1527, Spanish troops entered Rome and anchored themselves in the southern half of the peninsula.

The 16th century "time of troubles" in Italy demonstrated to Guicciardini that Italian political dynamics were no longer exclusively Italian. States do not act alone, in a vacuum, but in a strategic relationship with other states. The actions of one state influence the fate and the behavior of others. Once extra-Italian powers introduced themselves into peninsular affairs, the strategic nature of foreign policy becomes even clearer because of the violence, speed, and effects of the competition. The constraints on a state's freedom of action – its liberty and sovereignty – become sharper as the power differentials are more pronounced. As Guicciardini puts it,

The preservation and expansion of the dominion depend on outside factors, that is, the behaviour of the other powers, who

²⁶⁶ Introduction, in *Debating Foreign Policy in the Renaissance: Speeches on War and Peace by Francesco Guicciardini*, ed. Marco Cesa (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 13-14.

continually think of expansion and usurping the territory of others; those in no position to hope to do this, do everything possible to preserve what they have. Incredible diligence and industry are necessary to defend oneself from the machinations of the first and to overcome the vigilance of the second. To do so, counsel and force are required.²⁶⁷

Peninsular autarchy was impossible after the 15th century. Italy became part of the European balance of power and the Alps no longer served as ramparts preventing foreign invasions.²⁶⁸ Thus, Guicciardini writes extensively on France, Switzerland and Spain “because our concerns are affected by what has occurred there [in France], and because the successes of one are often conjoined with the successes and decisions of the other, I cannot pass over French events in silence.” A policy of isolation was no longer feasible, and knowledge of distant states and their strategies was indispensable to survive. It is no wonder then that Guicciardini, perhaps in a way comparable only to Dante Alighieri, is a master geographer, showing great appreciation for names of towns and specific locations.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷ Guicciardini, *Dialogue on the Government of Florence*, Book I, p. 58.

²⁶⁸ Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, Book 11, p. 268. See also, *Ibid.*, Book 12, pp. 279-283.

²⁶⁹ Emanuele Cutinelli-Rèndina, “La geografia nella Storia d’Italia,” in *La Storia d’Italia di Guicciardini e la sua fortuna*, eds.

The particular knowledge, the “*particolare*” again, is necessary to know how to deal with rival powers because their behavior, and our responses to it, will be shaped also by where they occur.²⁷⁰

Guicciardini considered, with a good dose of sorrow, the state of equilibrium that was disappearing at the turn of the 16th century as a “state of felicity”²⁷¹ for Italy. Such an equilibrium of power had allowed Italy to be free from foreign interference and control; Italy was “dominated by no power other than her own.” The concept of the balance of power was elaborated during Guicciardini’s age. While it was not invented by the Renaissance politicians and thinkers, it was “formulated and accepted or discussed” by them.²⁷² Italian thinkers, such as Guicciardini, adopted this concept in response to the disaster they witnessed, “not only the barbarian irruption from the north but also the long-term downward trend of economy in Italy, particularly in Florence where the Medici had begun to socialize their private debts by taking over political

Claudia Berra and Anna Maria Cabrini (Milano: Cisalpino, 2012), Quaderni di Acme #131, pp. 305-328.

²⁷⁰ See, for instance, his detailed report on Spain, rich in geographic descriptions as well as analysis of the local political dynamics, written when he was an ambassador there in 1512-13. In *The Defeat of a Renaissance Intellectual: Selected Writings of Francesco Guicciardini*, ed. Carlo Celli (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), pp. 34-50.

²⁷¹ Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, p. 4.

²⁷² Alfred Vagts, “The Balance of Power: Growth of an Idea,” *World Politics* 1, no. 1 (October 1948): p. 89.

power.”²⁷³ It is a concept that is both aspirational (as something to be desired) and feasible (as something that had been attained but not always preserved in history).

Unsurprisingly, Guicciardini is a big advocate of establishing and maintaining a geopolitical pluralism composed of states in equipoise. Any action that would expressly threaten such equilibrium, either because of the ambition of a leader or the unwillingness of a city to participate in counterbalancing, is, for Guicciardini, a deeply unwise move. International order, based on a balance of power among competing polities, is the best guarantee of their security. But this does not mean that peace ought to be preserved at all costs. Peace and a balance of power are not the same thing for him. In a manuscript on Florence that was published for the first time only in 1945, Guicciardini writes that “Peace... is a sweet and holy thing when it brings security, when it does not increase the power of enemies, when it does not pave the way to a more dangerous war; but when it entails these effects, it is bitter and pernicious.”²⁷⁴

Guicciardini understands the balance of power as a situation of equilibrium that is the result of specific policies pursued by states. Balance is a product of purposeful actions and does not arise automatically out of systemic forces. Consequently, it requires constant and diligent supervision. As Guicciardini puts it, an equilibrium of

²⁷³ Ibid., p. 95.

²⁷⁴ Quoted in Cesa, ed., *Debating Foreign Policy in the Renaissance*, p. 50.

power in Italy was achieved in part by *fortuna*, but in part also by the “marvelous skill” of a leader such as Lorenzo de’ Medici who leveraged the favorable location of Florence, the abilities of its citizens, and the financial wealth of the city in order to maintain the larger state of balance.²⁷⁵ “This could not be achieved without preserving the peace and without being diligently on the watch against every incident, even the slightest.”²⁷⁶ Without careful vigilance, the balance of power cannot be preserved.

One incentive to maintain vigilance was the mistrust leaders and states have of others. In fact, a foreign policy grounded in sentiments of friendship toward other states leads, according to Guicciardini, to a dangerous lowering of vigilance. For instance, the fear of alleged Venetian ambitions to control Italy was a powerful source of unity among the other Italian states,

but it did not unite the allies in sincere and faithful friendship, insofar as, full of

²⁷⁵ Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, Book 1, p. 4. There is a vast literature spawned by the figure of Lorenzo de’ Medici. Several politicians, among them Machiavelli and Guicciardini, were forced to abandon politics and devoted their forced retirement to the praising of the figure of Lorenzo, seen as the guarantor of peace and stability in Florence and Italy. These writers were member of the political class who benefited politically and personally from the period preceding the dramatic changes of 1494 in Italy. “They make the holding of the balance of power between states a grandiose feature in the portrait of the prince. [Lorenzo] becomes a hero to whose foresight and *virtù* the balance is due.” Vagts, “The Balance of Power,” pp. 96-7.

²⁷⁶ Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, Book 1, p. 7.

emulation and jealousy among themselves, they did not cease to assiduously observe what the others were doing, each of them reciprocally aborting all the plans whereby any of the others might become more powerful or renowned. This did not result in rendering the peace less stable; on the contrary, it aroused greater vigilance in all of them to carefully stamp out any sparks which might be the cause of a new conflagration.²⁷⁷

Order is fragile. International equilibria, like domestic political stability, are very precarious and are easily upset. Writing about the internal affairs of Florence, Guicciardini castigates his fellow Florentines when in 1512 the Medici family returned to the city because the city lost its liberty due to its internal disagreements and also because the citizens had, "in recent times, so neglected public

²⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 8. "The Venetians strove for *bilancia*, with its careful diplomatic watch and negotiation, 'lest the scales of the balance tended to any one side'. This formula of Venetian diplomacy, which could put ever less weight of its own into the scales of European power politics, came into use in the late 1550s, that is to say, slightly ahead of the first publication in book form of Guicciardini's *Storia*. ... Through the superb medium of Venetian diplomacy, the balance of power concept was put, rather slowly on the whole, into European circulation. It became one of the trading formulae for diplomats among themselves." Vagts, "The Balance of Power," p. 99.

affairs.”²⁷⁸ And once broken, an equilibrium, domestic or international, is very difficult to restore. The collapse of the international equilibrium in Italy, brought about by the arrival of the French, had an immediate impact on the domestic politics of Italian cities, introducing “so much disorder into Italian ways of governing and maintaining harmony, that we have never since been able to re-establish order, thus opening the possibility to other foreign nations and barbarous armies to trample upon our institutions and miserably oppress us.”²⁷⁹ And any attempt to remove this foreign power from Italian politics, restoring an equilibrium of power and permitting liberty to survive in Italy, was exceedingly difficult. As he put it, “[c]onsidering how difficult it was to defend liberty when there were no foreign princes in Italy, it seems all the more so now with such large birds preying on her entrails.”²⁸⁰

While maintaining an equilibrium of power is a task for the individual ruler, a broken order is often beyond the capabilities of one leader. Restoring international order is too challenging for a single individual because of the multiplicity of causes and the forces at play, many of which are outside of the control of one state or leader. For instance, in 1513, “neither the changing of the pope nor other

²⁷⁸ Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, Book 11, p. 267. See also Riccardo Fubini, “The Italian League and the Policy of the Balance of Power at the Accession of Lorenzo de’ Medici,” *Journal of Modern History* 67, Issue Supplement: The Origins of the State in Italy, 1300-1600 (December 1995): pp. 166-199.

²⁷⁹ Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, Book 1, pp. 48-49.

²⁸⁰ Moulakis, *Republican Realism*, p. 117.

accidents of fortune sufficed to establish tranquility in Italy; rather, it was already becoming clear that things were heading more toward war than toward peace.”²⁸¹ No single action can by itself alter “things”, trends caused by many individual decisions that have a cumulative impact that is difficult to reverse. Maintenance is easier than restoration.

Moreover, attempts to restore a balance of power often generate new problems because they lead to overcompensation and do not extinguish the reasons behind the change in the equilibrium. Guicciardini again shows here his sense of the tragic, which is not the same as pessimism about human abilities but rather acknowledgement of the never-ending strife characterizing politics. Politics is not a science of solving problems but an art of managing tragic choices. Writing about the troubles of the peninsula, he notes that

[t]he diseases of Italy were not such, nor their forces so little weakened, that they could be cured with simple medicines; rather, as often happens in bodies overflowing with corrupt humor, a remedy employed to cure disorder in one part generates even more pernicious and dangerous ills. (...) The reasons for such ills, generally considered, was as almost always, the ambition and greed of princes; but considering the matter more closely, these troubles originated from the rash and

²⁸¹ Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, Book 11, p. 276.

overly insolent actions of the Venetian Senate.²⁸²

Interestingly, Guicciardini is not sanguine about alliances as tools for the restoration, or even the maintenance, of the balance of power. The different members of an alliance rarely share the same objectives, and are motivated by a variety of often conflicting interests – and rarely do they share a common objective of restoring an equilibrium. As mentioned above, fear and mistrust can serve as a powerful motivating factor, but are not always sufficient to give a clear and strong purpose to a group of states. Moreover, alliances among states that do not share much in common are not very credible, failing to instill fear in the targeted power and thus failing to alter its behavior. Writing about the anti-Venetian League of Cambrai, Guicciardini observes that

the minds of the other allies were not of the same disposition, because the Catholic King [of Spain] had adhered to it unwillingly, and the Pope showed obvious signs of his usual vacillations and suspicions. Therefore the League of Cambrai was no more to be feared than those alliances made at other times at Trent and later at Blois with equal ardor by the selfsame Maximilian and King Louis, since many difficulties stood in the way of the execution of things which had been

²⁸² Ibid., Book 8, p. 191.

decided upon, which by their very nature were almost impossible to be carried out.²⁸³

²⁸³ Ibid., p. 199. Guicciardini is very ambivalent about Venice. On the one hand, by pursuing an overly ambitious foreign policy in Northern Italy, Venice was responsible for some of the troubles of the Italian peninsula. On the other, with its wealth and power, Venice offered the first defense of Italy. After the League of Cambrai and the 1509 defeat at Agnadello, Venice began its long but dramatic decline. "For now there no longer remained any check whatever against the fury of those nations from beyond the Alps: the fall of Venice meant the cutting off of their most glorious member, that Italian state which more than any other maintained the fame and reputation of them all." Ibid., p. 203. Guicciardini, like many other Florentines, looked upon Venice with admiration because of this city's internal stability, which was in marked contrast with the turbulent politics of Florence. Venice succeeded in preserving its liberty, understood both as domestic freedom from the authoritarian decisions of a tyrant or a small group of people as well as freedom from foreign domination and dependence. Florence had been less successful at this task, and Venice attracted a lot of veneration from Florentine thinkers, especially those around the Medicis. Machiavelli was perhaps the only Florentine who did not appreciate Venice because he thought that this city, due to its constitution, was ambitious but without the necessary prerequisites of power; it had the desire to expand in Italy but not the will to build the required military power. He was too critical of Venice, however, driven more by the desire to demonstrate the feebleness of an aristocratic regime than by the historical evidence. See Felix Gilbert, "The Venetian Constitution in Florentine Political Thought," in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), pp. 463-500; Federico Chabod, *Machiavelli and the Renaissance* (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1958), pp. 81-2. On Guicciardini's ambivalence toward Venice, see

Guicciardini's work is permeated by a sense of nostalgia for the age of an exclusively Italian balance of power. For him, it was preferable to have Florence fighting against Venice without any foreign, non-Italian, intervention, than to have them in conflict (or even in alliance) with each other under the French and Spanish shadow. The small Italian city-states were no match for these European great powers that could play the balance of power game on a continental scale. France could intervene in Italy but Italian cities could not do the same in France; Florence could shape the peninsular political dynamics but not the European ones. Moreover, the chronic divisions that plagued the Italian peninsula made difficult the establishment of a unified power, capable of counterbalancing Spain and France. Given such a political situation, it is understandable why Guicciardini thought so highly of the necessity of having an equilibrium of power, and yet was so pessimistic about its feasibility.

Conclusion

Robert Finlay, "The Myth of Venice in Guicciardini's *History of Italy*: Senate Orations on Princes and the Republic" in *Medieval and Renaissance Venice*, eds. Ellen E. Kittell and Thomas F. Madden (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), pp. 294-326; reprinted in Robert Finlay, *Venice Besieged: Politics and Diplomacy in the Italian Wars, 1494-1534* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2008).

Guicciardini is a complex writer, whose style and worldview reflect the weathered political operative who witnessed a dramatic geopolitical change. Skeptical about the possibility of constructing generalizable laws of behavior in international politics, he favors the study of the "*particolare*" – the particular interests and circumstances that one needs to take into account when deciding where and how to act. There was no science of politics possible for him.

At the same time, however, history and politics are not the realm of chaos, where every action and reaction are random and devoid of meaning. The fact that something remains unknowable does not mean that it lacks some sort of order, but only that the human mind is incapable of discovering it. An order of things exists even if we do not fully comprehend it and do not possess the capacity to alter it.

A temptation to face such a world – undiscoverable in its complexity – with an attitude of pessimism and resignation undoubtedly lurks in some of Guicciardini's writings. But it is only a temptation that he never embraces and that he certainly does not advocate as a model of behavior for statesmen. On the contrary, when facing the hardships of politics and especially of international politics, the more appropriate attitude is one of courage. Ambition, wisdom, knowledge of geopolitics, and skill in using power are all crucial but insufficient to guide the statesman because they do not provide the indispensable courage that

he will need when outcomes are not what he aspired to and when his success is likely to turn quickly into failure.²⁸⁴

Few leaders cultivate courage as a virtue. Such a virtue is possible only when the leader sees himself not as autonomous individual seeking personal glory but as part of a polity for which it is worth sacrificing. As Guicciardini put it,

There is in my estimation no greater prize for a noble spirit than to be head of a free city, having gained that position not by means of force, family connection, or party affiliation, but because of the respect, authority, and reputation resulting from being known for prudence and love of city. I believe this distinction, which several men achieved in the republics of antiquity, and, above all, Pericles in Athens, i.e., the knowledge that one is esteemed and great due only to one's gifts and virtues, is worth more than all the power and authority of tyrants. Happy are the souls of those who feel this flame, which burns only in very noble hearts. Fortunate are the republics in which such ambition abounds, for it is here that the arts flourish, leading to great achievements.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁴ See his "Consolation," in Celli, ed., *The Defeat of a Renaissance Intellectual*, pp. 104-123.

²⁸⁵ Moulakis, *Republican Realism*, p. 143.

The impossibility of a science of international relations brings the necessity of patriotism, the love of a country that gives us a purpose greater than ourselves and our ambition. Science gives the illusion that actions lead to the desired outcomes: pulling a lever will have an effect known *a priori*. Scientists require knowledge, not courage in light of a wide spectrum of possible outcomes. But politics is not the realm of physical laws. An action will have unintended consequences, and may even not achieve the desired result at all. Facing such a possibility, the statesman needs courage, the ability to withstand unpredictable results. And to have such courage, he needs a cause greater than his own personal aggrandizement.

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