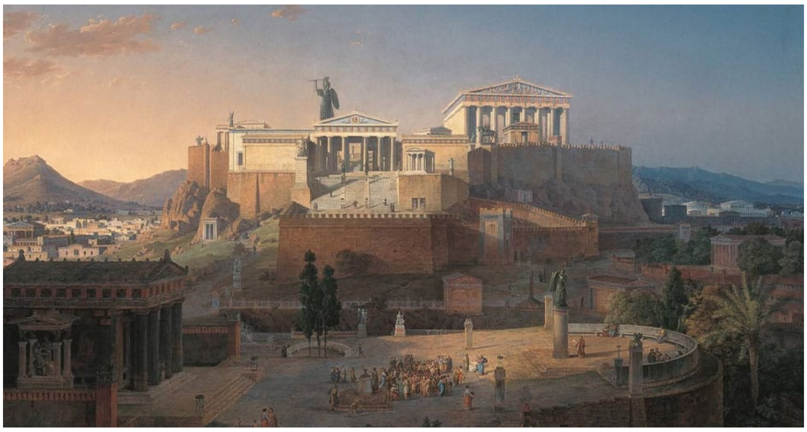
New American

Written by **Charles Scaliger** on November 19, 2021

Published in the December 13, 2021 issue of the New American magazine. Vol. 37, No. 23

Athens: A Cautionary Tale of Democracy’s Failures



Athens today is just another mid-sized European city, capital of one of Europe’s least-developed countries, tucked away in a southwestern corner of the continent far from the modern power centers in Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. But two and a half millennia ago, Athens was, if not the mistress of the world, at least the hegemon of the Mediterranean. The cultural capital of the Aegean, Athens rose to become economically, politically, and culturally dominant among the more than 50 independent city-states that characterized most of classical Greece as a result of two major events: Athens’ reliance on a form of popular government called “democracy,” and her defeat of the supposedly invincible Persian military at the Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C. Athens’ star, though bright, was short-lived, and her decline, ably chronicled by the likes of Thucydides and Xenophon, who both lived during that period, affords many salutary lessons to her modern heirs in the Western world, especially the United States.

Cultural Flowering

Athens was not always the city of philosophers, playwrights, and sculptors of the modern popular imagination. Her exact origins are unknown, but according to legend, she was first propelled to power by the hero Theseus, who enabled the Athenians to shake off the yoke of the superior power of Crete. Those events, if based in fact, took place sometime prior to 1,000 B.C., during the Greek Bronze Age, when Greece, like all other major states of the era, was a monarchy. Following the Bronze Age, however, Greece entered a mysterious dark age of many centuries, during which the Greek world fragmented into many smaller powers, often differing significantly one from another culturally and politically, while being united under a common language. When the curtain rose on the classical age, Greece had become primarily a land of many city-states — Athens, Thebes, Corinth, Megara, Rhodes, and many others — sprinkled across the Aegean islands, the Greek mainland, and western Asia Minor. It was in this last region, called Ionia, that Greece appears to have seen its first major cultural flowering, thanks to pioneering minds such as Thales and Pythagorus. Thales, the “father of science,” was a native of the Ionian city of Miletus, the first Greek center of learning and culture.

But Miletus’s glory came to an end with the rise of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, founded by Cyrus the Great. Cyrus and his son and successor Darius conquered all of Asia Minor, including — despite stiff resistance in some quarters — all of the Ionian Greek city-states. Athens, a close ally of Miletus and other Ionian Greek states, sent continual aid and comfort to them during their struggle against the Persians, encouraging and supplying armed uprisings after Ionia had been incorporated into the Persian Empire, incurring the wrath of Persia. Athens even sent an expeditionary force to Asia Minor that sacked and burned the Persian capital of Sardis. As a result of this affront in particular, the second Persian emperor, Cyrus's son Darius, resolved to end the pesky Athenian meddling, and assembled a large invasion force tasked with crossing the Aegean and reducing Athens to ruins. The huge armada island-hopped its way toward Athens, overwhelming one Greek settlement after another, before landing on the Greek coast near the broad plain known as Marathon. The Athenians, meanwhile, along with a single ally, the Plataeans, were encamped a few miles away under the leadership of Miltiades, the first great historical Greek military hero.

Free Men vs. Subjects

Although outnumbered and outclassed (the Persians relied on their professional shock troops, the Immortals, who supposedly numbered 10,000), the mostly civilian Athenian soldiers, scantily armored, lightly armed, and relatively untrained and untested, decided to fight the Persians in an unconventional manner. According to Herodotus, the primary source for all of the Greco-Persian wars, they ran barefoot across the plains of Marathon in a sudden winner-take-all onslaught that took the Persians by surprise. They encircled and defeated the Persians, many Athenians displaying extraordinary valor and tenacity, such as fighting on even with severed limbs. The vanquished Persians retreated to their remaining boats and sailed down the coast towards Athens. However, news of the Athenian victory reached Athens first (according to tradition, thanks to a runner who ran the 26 miles nonstop, only to collapse and die of exhaustion — but not before uttering the word "Nenikekamen!" "We have won!"). When the Persians arrived, they found the Athenians ready for them, and were forced to retreat back across the Aegean.

The Battle of Marathon, betokening as it did the rise of Athens, is often reckoned as the starting point of Western civilization, with no less an eminence than John Stuart Mill proclaiming the battle more important to English history than the Battle of Hastings in 1066. The battle, with its vivid images of valor against seemingly impossible odds and of amateur philosopher-soldiers such as the Greek playwright Aeschylus (who always regarded his participation in Marathon as his finest moment), has stirred and inspired in the two and a half millennia since it was fought, serving as a memorial and a rallying point for the cultural heirs of the Athenians. Herodotus himself, seeking to explain the improbable Athenian victory, ascribed it to the Athenians' love of freedom, in contrast to the mechanical servitude and top-down despotism of the Persians. Freedom, Herodotus pointed out, is a far greater force than any military of despots or emperors. The Athenians were not subjects, like their Persian counterparts, but free men unwilling to submit to an imperial master.

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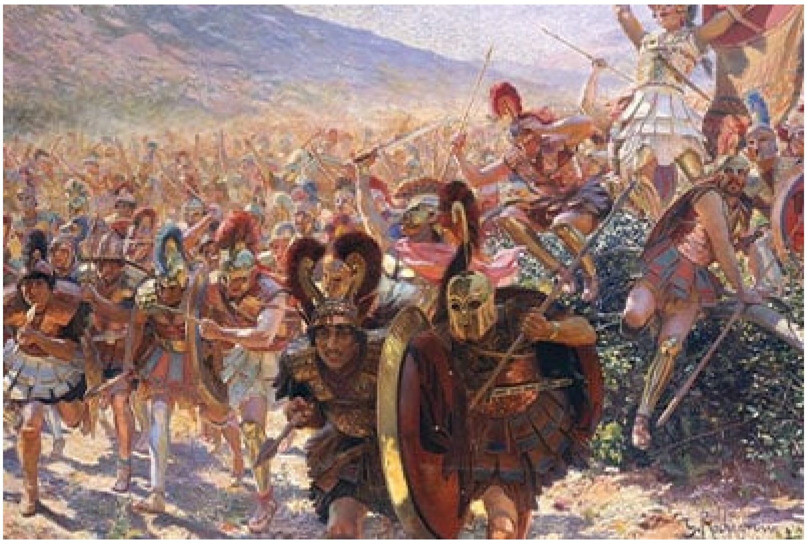


The battle for everything: The Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C., in which the free Athenians triumphed over the much-larger, professional Persian invading force, is considered vindication of the idea that free men are stronger than subjects and slaves. Despite their lack of training, the Athenian army — which included many of Athens' eminent artists and thinkers in its ranks — fought with valor and skill, and saved the infant democracy from conquest by the Persian monarch.

Where did Athenian freedom come from? The idea of democracy was quite widespread in classical Greece, with dozens of Greek city-states, including Syracuse and Megara, having some form of democratic government at one time or another. The father of Athenian democracy was Solon, the great statesman and lawgiver who first drew up a plan for a government intended to eschew monarchy and represent the will of the people by allowing all Athenian male citizens to participate in the workings of the state. Athens at the time was governed by an archon, or supreme ruler, with the advice and consent of the *Areopagus*, a council of oligarchs. The code of law was the rigid code of Draco, one of Athens' most tyrannical leaders. Although he overturned the power of the archon and the *Areopagus*, Solon was unable to institute a stable democracy, resulting in the rise of the tyrant Pisistratus, who established a dictatorship in Athens that he bequeathed to his son upon his death. His son was overthrown, however, and the Athenian democracy was restored and rejuvenated under Cleisthenes.

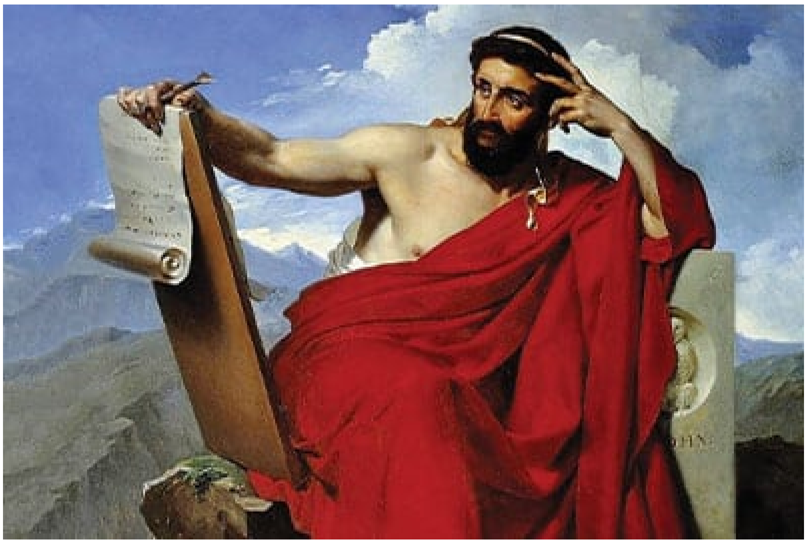
The form of the Athenian government, while not a "pure" democracy, was nevertheless far too democratic to produce long-term stability. The chief governing body, the *Ekklesia* (a Greek word afterwards applied as well to the Christian church), consisted of up to 6,000 members — in effect, between five and 10 percent of the entire eligible male citizenry of Athens. The *Ekklesia* voted to enact legislation proposed by the smaller but still substantial *Boule*, or Council of 500. These two bodies were complemented by the *Heliala*, or Popular Tribunal — essentially an enormous court consisting of another 6,000 Athenian citizens who not only presided over court cases, but also had the power to "legislate from the bench." Finally, the traditional offices of *Areopagus* and archon were maintained for primarily ceremonial functions (like the modern British monarchy), although the *Areopagus* was tasked with adjudicating all homicide cases.

This robust popular government meant that politics and governance were the concern of every Athenian, and that political and philosophical ferment were constant and exhilarating features of Athenian society. But, because most branches of the Athenian government were so populous that measured deliberation was impossible, it also meant that the Athenian government was unstable, prone to periodic attempts both by old Athenian oligarchic families to reestablish the comfortable forms of the past, and by ambitious demagogues to usurp leadership. The same openness and fascination with debate and experimentation that made Athens a magnet for idealists and creative minds of every stripe also made her vulnerable to honey-tongued political opportunists, and it was this, more than any other factor, that would lead ultimately to her untimely demise.

Athens vs. Sparta

Athens' great rival during her glory years was the peculiar city-state of Sparta. Part republic, part military dictatorship, and part proto-communist Utopia, Sparta is unique in world history for its extraordinary longevity while simultaneously being one of the most repressive states. For the Spartans, beginning with their semi-legendary lawgiver Lycurgus, order, stability, and rigid civic virtue were paramount, reinforced by a stark legal and social code designed to maintain Spartans apart from all other Greeks — while guaranteeing their military supremacy.

Lycurgus, who seized absolute power via a conspiratorial uprising against the Spartan monarchy and *Ephorate*, or presiding council, imposed a strict code designed to stamp out all forms of luxury and indulgence, which he viewed as enervating. Spartans wore simple clothing and lived communally. All Spartan males were removed from their parents as boys to endure years of harsh military training; all agricultural work and other forms of labor were performed by non-Spartan males under Spartan rule — slave-like subordinates known as *helots*. Spartans were prohibited from owning gold or silver; all money was made of iron. Spartans were also prohibited from engaging in trade and manufacturing activities of any type, these being reserved for a select number of non-Spartans living in Spartan territory. The Spartan government was essentially oligarchical, consisting of two kings and two small legislative councils, the *Ephorate* and the *Gerousia*, whose members were almost always chosen from the Spartan power elite.



Ahead of his time: The Greek statesman Solon created an early blueprint for republican government, which was partly adopted by Athens and carefully studied by the Romans.

This state of affairs seems to have lasted for many centuries, prompting admirers ancient and modern to hold up Sparta as a model of long-term stability and prestige. Among the ancient Greeks, including among Athenian intellectuals, Sparta was often admired and upheld as the ideal form of state. As with modern leftist would-be Utopias, Sparta had the power to fire the imaginations of those who view the collectivist absolutism as a cure-all for human frailty. It is thus no accident that Hitler and the German Nazis greatly admired Sparta, nor that the modern Chinese Communist Party frequently enjoins Spartan values upon the Chinese; Spartan-themed athletic competitions, such as races, are extremely popular and widely promoted events in modern China, designed to encourage an abstemious lifestyle, physical fitness, and militaristic values among the populace.

As for her extraordinary longevity, the ever-sagacious Machiavelli observed:

> Sparta … was able to maintain herself for the long period she did because, from the country being thinly inhabited and further influx of population [i.e., foreign immigration] forbidden, and from the laws of Lycurgus … being held in high esteem, the citizens were able to continue long in unity. Lycurgus having by his laws established in Sparta great equality as to property, but less equality as to rank, there prevailed there an equal poverty; and the commons were less ambitious, because the offices of the State … were confined to a few.

Sparta, an impoverished but thoroughly militarized hermit regime, thus constituted the great foil for Athenian liberty. Sparta was frequently upheld by sympathizers in Athens as a model of perfect governance, and, in opposition to Athens, gradually assembled an alliance of allies among Greek city-states, such as Corinth and Thebes, in an attempt to offset Athenian power. Still, the Spartans were Greeks first and foremost, and were willing to set aside differences with their Athenian rivals to defend Greece whenever the homeland was threatened by an external foe. Sparta missed the Battle of Marathon by little more than a day, but her relief force, which had marched 140 miles in three days, toured the battlefield and declared it a resounding and admirable victory.

Warrior nation: Sparta is unique in world history for its longevity as a closed, austere, communalistic state of warriors. Urged by the dictator Lycurgus, the Spartans adopted a social and legal code that renounced luxury and commerce and substituted for them a warrior culture requiring all Spartan men to live their lives trained as professional soldiers, while foreigners and slaves carried out the essentials of commerce and agriculture. *(Photo credit: flickr/300themovie)*

A decade later, when Persia, under a new emperor, invaded Greece again — this time by land, from the north — it was the valor of the 300 handpicked elite Spartan soldiers, including Leonidas, one of

Sparta's two kings, who, along with a handful of allies, delayed the huge Persian army long enough at the pass of Thermopylae to allow the rest of Greece to mobilize defenses against the invader. Thermopylae was intended from the start as a suicide mission, and a delaying action at best, and so was such a mission as only the Spartans, with their ancient ethos of absolute self-sacrifice for the state, could have possibly pulled off (not unlike the suicidal Soviet valor at Stalingrad).

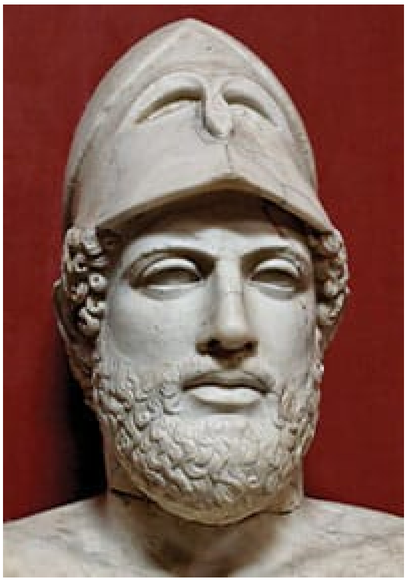
But in the end, Sparta maintained herself apart, secure in her belief of absolute cultural superiority and unrivaled civic virtue. And it was these values, along with their enduring and destabilizing allure to a portion of Athenian elites, that led to one of the most consequential conflicts in history, the Peloponnesian War.

The Golden Age

To call the Peloponnesian War the fault of the Spartans is to misrepresent the facts. It was in fact incited by Athens, at the behest of a silver-tongued demagogue, Pericles, who had risen to power in the mid-fifth century B.C. during the short-lived Athenian Golden Age. Athens at the time was flush with power from her final victory over the Persians in 478 B.C., a victory made possible by an alliance between Athens and many other Greek city-states known as the Delian League. Once the war with Persia concluded, Athens in effect transformed the Delian League into an Athenian empire, subjecting her weaker allies to all manner of exploitation. At the same time, Athens herself prospered, producing one of the greatest assortments of talent ever seen in world history.

The Periclean period of this Golden Age began with the ascension of Pericles, one of Athens' presiding military generals, or *strategoi*, to the leadership of the radical democratic faction of the Athenian government. Pericles, a populist and demogague by nature, curried favor with Athenian citizens by the time-dishonored tactic of bribing them with their own money. A man with large ambitions, Pericles drained the public treasury for lavish public-works projects and for military expeditions against refractory subject-states such as Thebes and Miletus. His big-spending ways and attempts to radically reform the Athenian government in the direction of even more democracy antagonized Athens' conservatives, led by the likes of the statesman Cimon. But Pericles' unparalleled gifts for flattery, manipulation, and double-dealing allowed him to triumph over all his rivals, eventually sending even the redoubtable Cimon into exile.

However, Pericles' power was not absolute, and his ruinous fiscal policies drew the ire of his many enemies in the *Ekklesia*. He eventually found himself formally accused of corruption and profligacy, with the real prospect of a fall from grace and banishment looming large. At this critical juncture, Pericles deployed another tried-and-true weapon in the demagogue's arsenal: In 431 B.C. he started a war to distract attention from his political and economic woes.



Consummate demagogue: Pericles, the Athenian general-turned-politician, was largely responsible for leading Athens into the disastrous Peloponnesian War against Sparta and her allies. *(Photo credit: Jastrow)*

From the start, nothing about the Peloponnesian War went as planned. Although it was the Spartans who invaded Attica (Athenian territory) to formally initiate the conflict, they had been goaded into doing so by Athenian meddling in the affairs of one of their staunchest allies, Corinth, and by Pericles' unceasing rhetoric declaring war with Sparta to be inevitable. As evidence of Pericles' foreknowledge of the Spartans' intentions, the Attican countryside was found uninhabited by the Spartans; Pericles had already brought all Attic Greeks to within the walls of Athens to withstand the initial attack.

Pericles, a seasoned military campaigner as well as a politician, devised a mostly defensive strategy against Sparta designed to wear out the Spartans by relying on Athens' rebuilt walls, superior navy, and refusal to overextend their forces. In the tradition of Athenians since Marathon, Pericles believed that, despite the Spartans' disciplined military valor, Athens would ultimately prevail because of her reliance on individual creativity and freedom rather than collective regimentation.

Possibly Pericles' strategy would have worked, were it not for the appearance, in the second year of the war, of an enemy far more formidable than even the Spartans and their allies. Beginning in the summer of 430 B.C., a terrible epidemic swept through Athens, killing tens of thousands of people. While the exact nature of the "plague of Athens" is unknown to this day (it probably was not, in fact, the plague itself), it devastated the morale, society, and government of Athens. Probably as a consequence of unsanitary, crowded conditions owing to the huge influx of Atticans at the war's outset, the epidemic raged unabated for a couple of years, turning the people against Pericles and the war, and ultimately claiming the life of Pericles himself. Somehow the Athenians survived the disaster without losing the war, but once the epidemic finally subsided, depopulated Athens was a shadow of its former self.

Golden Age No More

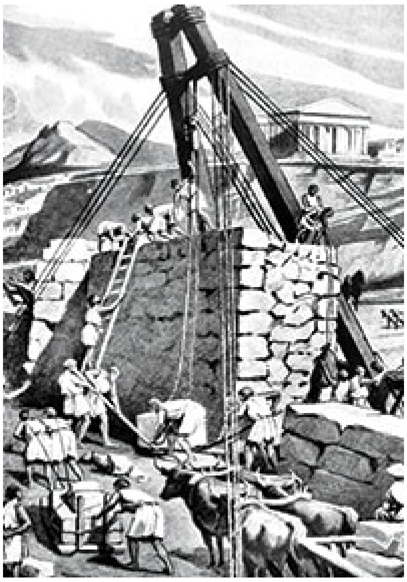
The war continued for two more decades, but Athens continued to be plagued by political instability and by poor military judgment. In 421, a shaky peace was brokered between Athens and Sparta, but it did not last. Another demagogue-cum-military general named Alcibiades had risen to prominence and, like Pericles, was willing to appease his vast ambition by military adventurism. Alcibiades saw his opportunity when Syracuse, a powerful Greek city-state on the distant island of Sicily and a friend of Sparta, attacked a Greek settlement allied with Athens. Alcibiades, seeking to distract from a political scandal in which many of his rivals were calling for his arrest and trial, led a huge Athenian expeditionary force to Syracuse. But when word reached him that he had been relieved of command and ordered to return to Athens for trial, he promptly defected to Sparta and encouraged them to send aid to Syracuse. The Athenians ultimately suffered a terrible defeat at Syracuse, with most of their force wiped out.

Meanwhile, Alcibiades discovered that his penchant for intrigue did not deceive the Spartans. Finding himself beset in Sparta by powerful political enemies, he defected again, this time to Persia, where he ingratiated himself with the Persian government by pretending to be an enemy of both Athens and Sparta. In reality, he sought to manipulate the Persians into weakening Sparta at the expense of Athens, and then use his connections with the Persian rulers to convince Athens to take him back and reinstate him as their leader. Aware that the democratic government in Athens had a long memory, he conspired from abroad with Athenian oligarchs to bring about a *coup d'état* and replace the popular government with an oligarchy. Once this objective was achieved, the shameless Alcibiades returned to Athens and was reinstated as a military leader. In a few months, however, the oligarchic “Four Hundred,” set up by Alcibiades and his co-conspirators, was replaced by a new, broader oligarchic government, the “Five Thousand,” which eventually gave way to full-blown democracy once more.

While all of this chaos was taking place in Athens, the Spartans and their allies had set their sights on final victory over the Athenians. A new leader, Lycurgus, had risen through the ranks and assumed command over Spartan forces in the final years of the war. Unlike his predecessors, Lycurgus was skilled at naval as well as land warfare. A naval victory over Alcibiades was enough to cause the latter's final fall from grace; he fled back to Asia Minor, to the comparative safety of the Persian Empire, where he was killed by a team of assassins — probably sent by Sparta — a few years later.

As for his former Athenian countrymen, Lycurgus soon proved to be the nemesis of Athens, racking up a string of victories and finally wiping out the once-formidable Athenian navy at the Battle of Aegospotami. Facing siege and starvation, the Athenians surrendered their proud city to Lycurgus in 404 B.C., after 27 years of fighting, and the Athenian Golden Age came to an end.

Sparta was relatively magnanimous in victory. Although her two most powerful allies, Corinth and Thebes, urged the utter destruction of Athens, the Spartans, citing Athens' former greatness and service to the common good of Greece, were content to place Athens under Spartan subjugation, the so-called Thirty Tyrants, intending to effect a complete political merger of Athens with the Spartan totalitarian state.



A thing of the past: After Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War and her short-lived bondage under the "Thirty Tyrants," she was able to briefly reconstitute some of her former influence, though she never returned to her former dominance.

But just as Athens' unstable political system had proved its undoing, so too the Spartan high-handedness toward their own allies proved fatal. Having promised an equal share of spoils of victory to her allies, Sparta cavalierly reneged on its promises after the war's conclusion, and kept most of the wealth looted from Athens for herself. As a result, Sparta's allies in the so-called Peloponnesian League soon rose up against her, weakening Sparta enough for the Athenians to regain their independence and, under Thrasybulus, reinstate the Athenian democracy, albeit in enfeebled condition. Athens then embarked, in 395 B.C., on another bitter war against Sparta, but this time, with the help of her former enemies Corinth and Thebes, who had come to regret their support of Sparta. This war, the Corinthian War, might have ended badly for Sparta were it not for the intervention of Persia, which forced the two sides to terms, compelled the Greeks to renounce all future leagues and alliances, and established Sparta, Persia's ally, as undisputed hegemon over Greece.

This time it fell to Thebes, rather than terminally weakened Athens, to finally overthrow the Spartan hegemon. In a long and bitter war, Thebes, under the able leadership of Epaminondas, first threw off the Spartan yoke, and then, slowly but surely, whittled away at Spartan power until, in 362 B.C., the Thebans completely overwhelmed Sparta at the Battle of Leuctra. This established Thebes as Greek hegemon, but her prestige was to be short-lived. Far to the north, the powerful Greek kingdom of Macedon, under the monarch Phillip II, intended to unify Greece under a single empire, as a counterpoise to mighty Persia. Under Phillip, all of lower Greece, including Thebes and Athens, but excluding Sparta, fell under the Macedonian yoke. Phillip's son, Alexander the Great, completed the task, and the great age of Greek democracy had come to a close.

Parallels in History

The Peloponnesian War and its aftermath have since found many parallels in history, especially in the modern age, where, as among the ancient Athenians, a love of individual liberty in the West, including the United States, is increasingly threatened by the allure of Utopian democracy. Just as in ancient Athens, civil unrest, demagoguery, factional strife, and conspiracies in high places rage almost unchecked. Such trends, if not brought under control, may lead to the fatal weakening of Western and American liberties. By a similar token, autocratic regimes from the Nazis to the various communist powers have ever been undermined by their inability to gain and keep allies. The old Soviet Union had only subjugated client states, for example, while North Korea, like ancient Sparta, takes pride in her insularity, absolute lack of friends or allies, dedication to militarism, and national ethos of self-sacrifice for the interest of the state.

As for the legacy of Athenian and Greek democracy, the fledgling Roman Republic adopted many features of Greek popular government (and a few things from Sparta as well), whence they have been transmitted into the modern age, where the idea of a people's government has once again taken root — this time, across a wide portion of the world instead of just a few small tracts of land around the Aegean Sea. In many respects, as the American Founders realized, the example of Athens tells more about how *not* to construct a popular government. The Athenians' trial-and-error democracy was, in hindsight, mostly error. But such is often the lot of pioneers. Taking outrageous risks and committing grave errors in the service of a new ideal often leads to disaster for the originators. But we, their heirs who have with the passage of millennia improved upon their mistakes, nevertheless owe them a debt of gratitude for their flawed
enterprise.

Charles Scaliger, a longtime contributor to The New American *and former academic at an American university, now lives and works in East Asia.*

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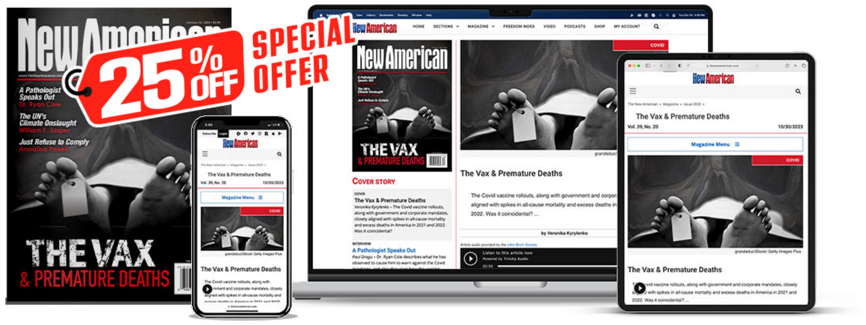

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