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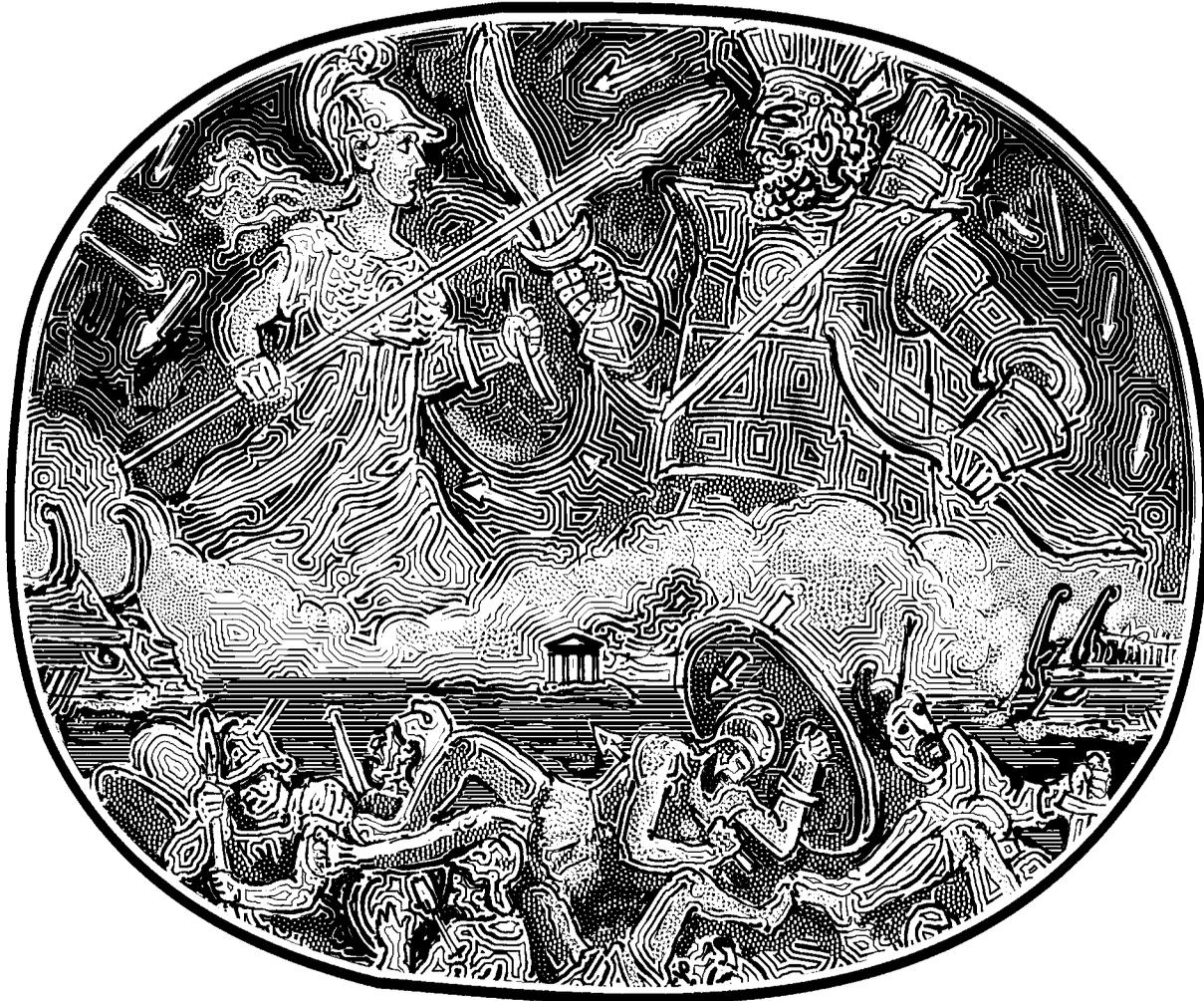
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Essay by Joseph Epstein

WAR FOR THE WEST



OF ALL THE MANY COUNTERFACTUALS, those “what-ifs” posed by history, perhaps the most arresting, if only because the most sweeping, asks: what if the Persians had defeated the Greeks in the Greco-Persian War of 490–479 B.C.? Had this happened, there might have been no Plato, no Aristotle, no Roman Empire, no Christianity, no Western Civilization. A Great King, a lineal descendant of Darius, might still rule the world. All might worship the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda, with men going about in turbans, women remaining at home or in harems. But that, as every counterfactual invariably ends—generally accompanied by a sigh of relief—didn’t happen.

Didn’t happen because the Greeks won the day, and with it freedom for the West. Outnumbered, both in men and ships, they were victorious owing to the combined bravery, endurance, guile, and idealism of a small number of extraordinary Athenians and Lacedaemo-

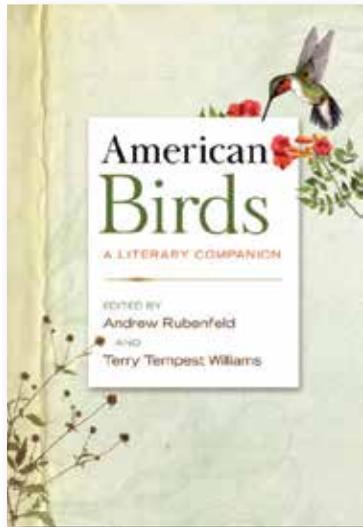
nians, chief among them Miltiades, Leonidas, Aristides, Pausanias, above all Themistocles. These men won out over the best efforts of the Persian warriors Datis, Artaphernes, Mardonius, Masistius, Artemesia (tyrant queen of Halicarnassus), and of course Xerxes, king of kings and the leader of the Persian expedition into Europe.

The Greco-Persian War was, as the British classicist Peter Green put it in his *Xerxes at Salamis* (1970, later reissued as *The Greco-Persian Wars*), “the first great ideological conflict in European history.” Earlier battles had been fought over land and water, treasure and the simple urge to dominate. This war was won owing to Hellenic revulsion from the prospect of tyrannous Persian rule. Not that Persian rule was everywhere crushing. For most countries Persian domination meant paying tribute and recognizing the leadership of Persia. “By the standards of the time,” writes the military historian William Shepherd in *The*

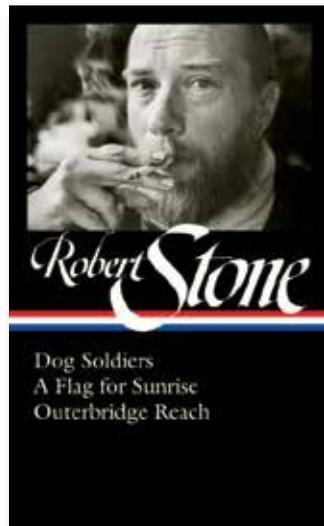
Persian War in Herodotus and Other Ancient Voices (2019), “the Persians were generally just and tolerant as rulers, even liberal, so long as the absolute power of the Great King, exercised directly or through his satraps (regional governors) was unequivocally accepted and taxes, tribute and military service rendered.” Although this could be an economic drain on the conquered countries, the Persians generally allowed conquered peoples to retain their religion and many of their institutions.

When war broke out, as few as 30 Greek city-states of roughly a thousand actually fought the Persians. The two most prominent cities that did were Athens and Sparta, the first a nascent democracy, the other a long-established militarily organized monarchy. Always disputatious among themselves, the Greeks bickered endlessly, the bickering often breaking out into warfare, which is why there could never be a Greek empire approaching that which the more unified Romans later as-

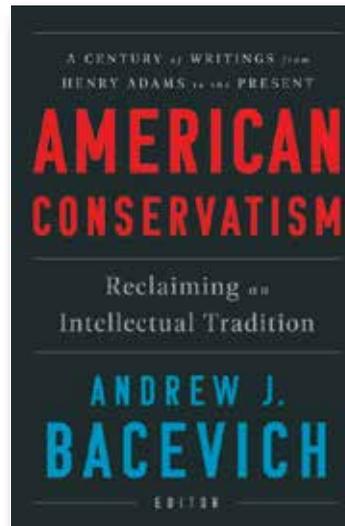
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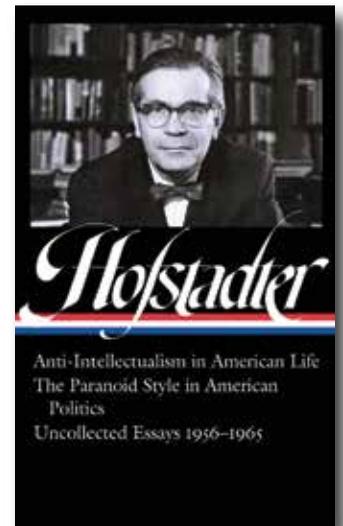
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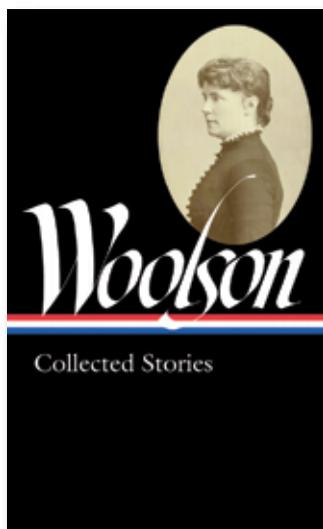
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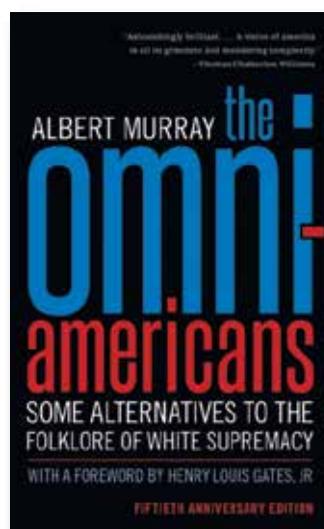
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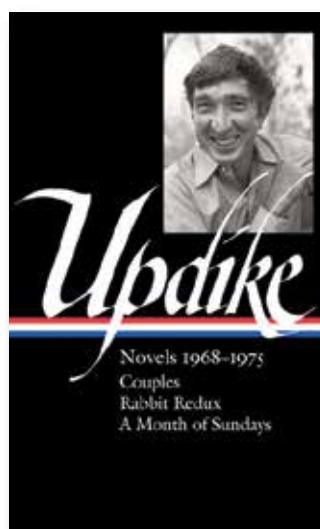
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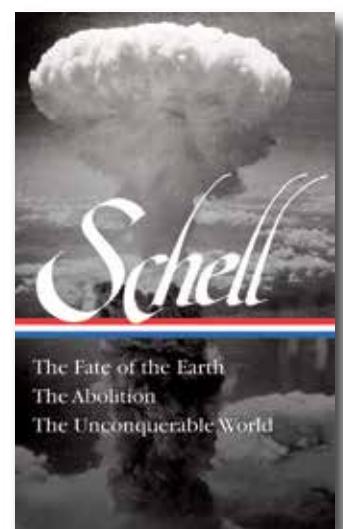
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sembled. This same intramural divisiveness among the Greeks was among the reasons for Xerxes' confidence that he would soon add Hellas to his expanding suzerainty—a suzerainty that already resembled, in Shepherd's metaphor, "a monster with its nose thrust into Europe, its body spanning the Middle East and its tail in the Indian subcontinent."

Xerxes' determination to subdue the Athenians and Spartans was ignited earlier when his father Darius' emissaries to Athens and Sparta, sent to arrange a peace based on their submission through providing land and water to the Persians, were put to death. The Spartans threw these emissaries into a pit (so much for land), the Athenians down a well (so much for water). Such an offense could not be borne—certainly not by the volatile Xerxes, who kept a servant whose task was to remind him never to forget the effrontery of the Athenians. "Furious Xerxes," Aeschylus called him in his play *The Persians*.

Ancient sources for information on the Greco-Persian War, to cite just those mentioned by Shepherd, include Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, Ctesias, Pausanias (not the Spartan general but a 2nd-century travel writer), Pindar, Plato, Thucydides, Aeschylus (who fought at Marathon and at Salamis, and wrote *The Persians* eight years after the conclusion of the war), Cornelius Nepos, Plutarch, Polybius, and of course, primarily and crucially, Herodotus, who wrote his *Histories* 40 years after the war had ended.

Stretching the Truth

MANY PAGES IN SHEPHERD'S *The Persian War in Herodotus and Other Ancient Voices* are given over to corrections of Herodotus' history. Shepherd's criticisms, though useful correctives, are mild in comparison with those of Plutarch, who wrote a lengthy essay called "On the Malice of Herodotus," in which he accuses Herodotus of a great many prejudices: against Themistocles, the Spartans, the Corinthians, and various Greek city-states and peoples. Plutarch ends his essay:

But he [Herodotus] is an acute writer, his style is pleasant, there is a certain grace, force, and elegance in his narrations; and he has, like a musician, pronounced his discourse, though not knowingly, still clearly and elegantly. These things delight, please, and affect all men. But as in roses we must beware of the venomous flies called cantharides; so must we take heed of the calumnies and envy lying hid under smooth and

well-couched phrases and expressions, lest we imprudently entertain absurd and false opinions of the most excellent and greatest cities and men of Greece.

The ground on which Herodotus is perhaps most vulnerable to criticism is his overestimates of the size of the Persian forces. His figures are not merely exaggerated but wildly so. He sets the number of Xerxes' triremes at 1,207, plus the number of non-combatant ships (penteconters) and other vessels, for a total of 3,000 ships, which may have been accurate. But the number of Persian troops, aboard ships and land army combined, he sets at 2,317,610. Adding in the troops from other countries under Persian rule and those Greeks who had "medized," or gone over to Xerxes, the number, according to Herodotus, rises to 5,283,220. More than once Herodotus refers to the advancing Persian troops drinking entire rivers dry.

Books mentioned in this essay:

The Greco-Persian Wars, by Peter Green.
University of California Press,
344 pages, \$85 (cloth)

The Persian War in Herodotus and Other Ancient Voices, by William Shepherd.
Osprey Publishing, 512 pages, \$30

Persian Fire: The First World Empire and the Battle for the West, by Tom Holland.
Doubleday, 418 pages, \$17.95 (paper)

Most recent scholars do not take these numbers seriously. Whenever numbers arise in Herodotus, Shepherd usually enters a disclaimer. Herodotus claimed that 6,400 Persians died at the battle of Marathon and only 192 Athenians, to which Shepherd responds: "It is hard not to accept the 192 because the fallen were all named and presumably meticulously counted.... It is a surprisingly small number, even for a winning side with superior defensive equipment." When Herodotus sets the number of Persian infantry at 1,700,000, Shepherd quotes the Oxford historian Reginald Walter Macan, from his 1908 commentary on the *Histories*, to the effect that "the historian or critic who maintains the literal credibility of this Herodotean absurdity is past praying for!" In *Persian Fire* (2005) the popular historian Tom Holland writes of Herodotus' numbers that "[s]uch figures, so colossal as to be vir-

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The Mueller Investigation and issues emanating from that investigation are at the heart of this book, providing a contextual setting for learning and reviewing materials across the law school curriculum. The book includes cases, essays, and other materials that allow it to be used as a capstone course for classroom discussion in areas of administrative law, civil procedure, counterintelligence and congressional investigative activity, constitutional law, criminal law and procedure, election law, evidence, and professional responsibility.

Keep Law Alive

James Boyd White, University of Michigan Law School

2019, 184 pp, ISBN 978-1-5310-1507-7, \$29.00

How should we respond to the fact that law and democracy are under real threat in our world? In *Keep Law Alive*, James Boyd White warns us that if we are to keep law alive we must understand what law is, and how it works at its best—while at the same time recognizing that it may indeed be lost.

The following quote, taken from the Foreword, describes the author's approach:

"My idea in this book is to express my sense of what law is like at its best—how it works, what it offers us, and what it requires of us, both as lawyers and as citizens, and what it would mean to lose it. I want to do this at this time in history because, as I say immediately below, I think the law as we know it is subject to serious threats today, threats I elaborate both explicitly and implicitly in the body of the book. In it I speak from a world that is now in peril in our country. This world was built upon the imperfect but real assumption that our polity is a constitutional democracy, based upon a fundamentally reliable electoral process, and that, with all its defects—some of them serious indeed—law is an institution that should be treated with utmost respect as an essential and valuable part of our public world."

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tually meaningless, were almost certainly a grotesque exaggeration." Shepherd suggests: "Best estimates of the combatant strength of Xerxes' land force seem to point to a figure somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 and a proportion of this total was most likely strung out to the rear protecting lines of communication and supply, and policing recently surrendered territory."

Inflating the number of Persian troops of course added to the lustre of the Greek victory. But, then, Xerxes himself encouraged inflation in the number of his forces. On one occasion he showed three captured Greek spies his arrayed troops in the hope that, daunted by the display of his forces, they would report back about Persian invincibility and thereby cause the Greeks to surrender without further opposition.

As for the Persian army, the best picture of it we have, comparable to that which Herodotus offers, is Peter Green's:

There were tressed Persian and Median infantrymen, who had mustered at Xerxes' command, from every satrapy in the empire, with embroidered tunics and fish-scale armour, regulation dirks slapping their right thighs as they walked. There were turbaned Elamites, and bearded Assyrians who wore bronze helmets and carried wicked iron-studded cudgels, and Scythians with their murderous battle-axes, and Indians in cotton dhotis, who used cane bows and cane arrows tipped with iron. There were Caspian tribesmen with leather jackets and curved scimitars, and thighbooted Sarangians, and fierce Arabs, already wearing the long flowing burnos, then known as the *zeira*. There were black Ethiopians, who smeared themselves with white and vermilion war-paint before going into battle, and wore horses' scalps with ears and manes still attached. There were Thracians in fox-skin caps, and crimson-putteed Pisidians, and Moschians, who wore cumbersome wooden helmets. The whole camp was a Babel of outlandish tongues; everywhere one had to raise one's voice against endless shouted orders, the tramp of marching feet, hee-hawing mules and donkeys. The smell of camels and heavily spiced food hung in the air.

Now add the chariot devoted to the god Ahura-Mazda, drawn by eight white horses, with its charioteer on foot grasping the reins, followed by the chariot of Xerxes, standing

beside his charioteer, behind which marched Persian brigades and the king's special guards, 10,000 of the fittest of Persian soldiers resplendently dressed and known as the Immortals, and a wagon which the king used to rest during long marches.

Because Herodotus wrote decades after the event, much of what he knew about the war came by way of those he spoke with who had first-, second-, or third-hand knowledge of events. *The Histories* is in fact an extended oral history. Herodotus often tells us that he is merely reporting what Athenians or Lacedaemonians or Corinthians told him. "I may be obliged to tell what is said," he wrote, "but I am not at all obliged to believe it. And you may consider this statement to be valid for my entire work." He sometimes expresses dubiety about a story he nevertheless feels compelled to recount. For example, on Xerxes' return to Susa after the defeat of the Persians at Salamis, his ship, encountering a storm, is said to have been overloaded, so, on the advice of the helmsmen, Xerxes requested several

So lavish
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that most places where
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grateful that he
took only one
meal a day.

of his Persian troops to throw themselves overboard to save the ship and their king, which they duly did. After telling this story, Herodotus writes, "though I for my part find it completely incredible."

Lively Details

KNOwn AS THE FATHER OF HISTORY, Herodotus was also the father of ethnography. His interest in the customs and mores of foreign countries, his even-handed descriptions of the manners of the enemy Persians, the generally impartial tone of his *Histories* foreshadows modern social science. Distinctly unmodern is the credence Herodotus lends oracles and prophecies. "Now I cannot refute the truth of oracles," he writes, "since I cannot refute oracles that speak quite plainly." Thucydides, who owed much to Herodotus, became the first truly modern historian by disregarding the intervention of the gods in the affairs of men and nations.

Yet Herodotus' stories, oracles included, everywhere enliven his narrative. He had a literary instinct, a sure sense of what makes for an interesting story, and a feel for the small detail that puts his reader into the scene. Whatever his flaws as an historian, Herodotus was a great writer. When a violent storm broke up the bridges of ships he had ordered built so that his troops could cross the Hellespont, Xerxes, Herodotus reports, "ordered that the Hellespont was to receive 300 lashes under the whip, and that a pair of shackles was to be dropped into the sea. And I have also heard that he sent others to brand the Hellespont." He reports that Masistius, leader of the Persian cavalry, whose grand Nesaian horse wore a golden bridal, was slain on the battlefield at Plataea by a Greek spear through the eyehole of his helmet, after which in mourning the Persian cavalry shaved their heads and the manes of their horses and pack animals. Among the exotic portents he recounts is one in which horses give birth to hares, and another in which a mule gave birth to another mule "with two kinds of genitals, both male and female, with the male genitals above the female."

The bits of information he provides about the Persians are always of interest. Their penchant for burying people alive is illustrated by Xerxes' wife, Amastris, who, "when she reached old age, caused fourteen children of prominent men to be buried alive." So lavish was Xerxes' dining, so costly setting table for him, Herodotus tells us, that most places where he stopped were grateful that he took only one meal a day. Then there is the brutality: the Persians, on a rampage of destruction, fire, and, plundering, "chased down some of the Phocians, catching them near the mountains, and they raped some of the women, who died from the sheer number of the men assaulting them." When a Lydian, thinking himself at favor in court, asked for permissions to have his oldest of five sons excused from military service, Xerxes had the young man cut in two, and placed each half of his body on opposite sides of the road on exhibit for the troops marching past to view.

Herodotus often pauses to register curiosities. He notes that around the Axios River, near the city of Therme, lions attacked the Persian camels, ignoring other beasts and men. "Whatever reason it was that compelled the lions to attack the camels but to stay away from the rest is a wonder to me," he writes, "as the camel was a creature they had neither seen nor experienced in any way before this." Following Xerxes' troops to Macedon, Herodotus stops not merely to smell the roses, but, at the gardens named after Midas the son of Gordias, to



count their petals: “each with sixty petals and a fragrance superior to all other roses,” he writes.

In Herodotus’ pages is found the best vengeance story I know, that perpetrated by Hermotimos, Xerxes’ most trusted eunuch, on the man who castrated him. This was Panionios of Chios, who made his living by castrating handsome boys and selling them into slavery. While in the service of Xerxes, Hermotimos encountered Panionios, whom he invited to bring his family to his (Hermotimos’) dwelling. Once there Hermotimos scorned Panionios for his “ungodly practice,” and forced him to castrate his four sons, after which he had the sons castrate their father. Among the ancients vengeance was a dish best served not cold but bloody.

We owe to Herodotus our best account of the Spartans at Thermopylae, where Greek forces were vastly outnumbered by the Persians. The account comes alive because of Herodotus’ carefully dabbed-in details: the 300 Spartans combing their hair before battle; the response of a Spartan soldier named Dienekes, who, when told that the Persian force was so large that their archers’ arrows blocked out the sun, replied that this was not necessarily a bad thing, for it would allow the Spartans to fight in the shade; the treatment of the Spartan king Leonidas’ corpse by Xerxes after his victory (his head was cut off and impaled); the story of Aristodemus, the one Spartan to survive the slaughter at Thermopylae, afterwards condemned as Aristodemus the Trembler, who later distinguished himself with a suicidal fury of bravery at the battle of Plataea that ended in his death.

The Men Who Saved the West

THERMOPYLAE WAS THE SECOND OF the five important battles of the Greco-Persian War. The first, occurring in 490 B.C., ten years before the others, was Marathon, in which the Greeks routed the Persians, giving them confidence that they could hold their own against the invading barbarians, whatever their superiority in numbers. The defeat at Thermopylae, from its inception a defensive maneuver intended to hold the Persians off as long as possible from advancing into central Greece, occurred nearly simultaneously with the sea battle at Artemesium, which

was indecisive—“a bruising draw,” William Shepherd calls it—but also built up the Greeks’ confidence in their own naval prowess. The two crucial battles, Salamis at sea and Plataea on land, both resulted in crushing Greek victories, with a final defeat of the fleeing Persians at Mycale putting an end to the war and to further Persian dreams of endless empire.

One cannot award so grand a victory to any single city-state or heroic figure, yet without the Athenians and Themistocles Greece would doubtless have fallen to Xerxes. Thermopylae apart, during the Persian war the Spartans, in Peter Green’s words, showed “over-cautious conservatism, slowness to move in a crisis.” In the war itself no city-state paid a higher price than the Athenians, having their city occupied and destroyed and all of surrounding Attica devastated by Persian troops. The Persian invasion goaded Athens, abetted through the suasion of Themistocles, to convert from a standard hoplite infantry to a naval power. When the Athenian silver mines at Laurium struck a rich vein, Themistocles convinced the assembly at Athens that the profits from the mines, rather than be divided among the populace, be used to build the Athenian fleet up from 70 to 200 triremes. He had also convinced them to build up the fortifications round the harbor at Piraeus, which would house these ships.

A tougher sale came later when Themistocles persuaded the Athenians to desert their city before the onslaught of the Persians and board their new fleet, with older men and women and children and their valuables sent off to safety at Aegina, Salamis, and Troezen. The winning strategy at Salamis, that of drawing the Persian ships into the narrow straits where the Greek triremes awaited, was also devised by Themistocles, and the Greek victory at Salamis is surely among the most significant battles in all history. Perhaps most impressive of all, Themistocles was able to convince the various Greek city-states to set aside their rivalries and join together, if only temporarily, to fight the barbarian foe. As Plutarch writes, Themistocles “put an end to all the civil wars of Greece, composed their differences, and persuaded them to lay aside all enmity during the war with the Persians.”

What makes Themistocles of special interest is that he wasn’t, like Pericles or Marcus Aurelius, a man of sterling character. He was closer to a Chicago politician, an operator, a main chancer, not above accepting bribes nor bribing others. No one was more adroit than he at manipulating the new Athenian democracy, perhaps because no one more embodied it in his person than he. “Themistocles,” wrote the classicist Maurice Bowra, “was the personification of the vigorous Athenian spirit.” In the language of the current day, Tom Holland notes that “he could infight, he could network, he could spin.” Herodotus does not pass up an opportunity to emphasize Themistocles’ wiliness. But Themistocles was ultimately wily for the public good. “I cannot tune a harp,” Themistocles said, “but I know how to take a modest city in hand and raise it to greatness.” Which is precisely what he did.

Themistocles, writes Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, “could look into the unknown and clearly foresee the good or evil that might come out of it. In sum, through the power of his intellect and the speed with which he applied it, this man was superbly equipped to decide on the spot what needed to be done.” Shepherd strongly seconds the motion, writing: “Themistocles did more than any other individual Hellene to secure the future of Hellas and with it the 5th-century flowering of Hellene culture and its enduring glittering legacy.”

At several points in his *Greco-Persian War*, Green compares Themistocles to Winston Churchill. Churchill, it will be recalled, failed to win re-election after saving England—and one could argue the Western world—through leading it to victory over the Nazis. So, less than a decade after the end of the Persian War, Themistocles was ostracized by the people of Athens, whose freedom he had helped preserve. He spent his last years on the move, and finally shored up in Persia itself, as a counselor to Artaxerxes, the son of Xerxes. Themistocles’ end—by suicide? from illness?—is murky, but the lesson of his life is that no man should expect gratitude from his own country, even after having saved it.

Joseph Epstein is an essayist, short story writer, and the author, most recently, of Charm: The Elusive Enchantment (Lyons Press).

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