

Athenian Democracy: Lessons for America*

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One of the things that retired politicians have the opportunity to do after long years of public service is to read. Not that busy governors and presidential candidates don't do a lot of reading. We do. But what you do is read a lot of memos, a lot of reports, and a lot of criticism. You don't read many books.

Now if you are Greek and you love history, you really miss it. So one of the things I've been doing since I left public office is reading history, and I'm thoroughly enjoying it. In fact, it would do us all a lot of good in this country to get back to our history books, particularly in this age of electronic communication and instant analysis. History is a great teacher, particularly in the television age when our friends in the media must have or manufacture a crisis a night with which to lead the six o'clock news. It's getting so that we can't even remember what the crisis was three weeks ago, let alone what history teaches us about our times and the challenges that face us.

In fact, Neil Postman, the chair of the Department of Culture and Communications at New York University said recently at the Kennedy School that our problem these days was not a lack of information. We've got too much information, he said, and we don't know what to do with it. That's what history does. It gives us a context within which to take information and make it work for important societal goals.

Lately, I've been doing a lot of reading about Athenian democracy. As all of you know, I am very proud of my heritage and of Greece's place in history as the birthplace of democracy. I have to confess, however that I'm learning a lot I never knew about the politics of ancient Greece and the extraordinary achievement that ultimately became Athenian democracy.

*The Annual Constantinos Paparrigopoulos Lecture Delivered at Queens College - May 19, 1995.

Those of you who know that history better than I do are, I am sure, very much aware of the fact that the early Greek city states were little more than fortified towns that gradually began reaching out to the territory around them – for reasons that still aren't entirely clear. And it took hundreds of years for Athenian democracy to emerge from what was essentially a feudal and oligarchic society. Over the centuries several powerful aristocrats had ruled Athens first for life and subsequently for a term of ten years – perhaps the first imposition of the concept of term limits in human history!

Ordinary Athenians had no guarantee that their rights as individuals would be respected. Society was highly stratified. The vast majority of people worked as what today we would call sharecroppers who had to give a substantial portion of their crops to the noble who controlled their land. By about 600 BC, the situation had become intolerable. Peasants were heavily in debt to their landlords, and some of them quite literally were selling themselves into slavery to pay their debts.

Finally, the great Solon was appointed as archon to serve as both a mediator and lawgiver. He canceled most of the peasants' debts and freed those Athenians who had been enslaved on account of them, but he didn't do much to redistribute wealth or curb the political power of the aristocracy.

His new constitution divided people into four classes, based on the amount of property or wealth they had – an approach not unlike that adopted by this nation's founding fathers who in our own Constitution left the decision on voter qualifications to the states, knowing full well that virtually all of the original states imposed property qualifications on both the right to vote and the right to hold political office.

Members of the lowest class under Solon's constitution – the *thetes* or common laborers – could not hold office, but they could sit and vote in the popular assembly, and they could sit as jurors in the law courts. It was Solon's constitution that first developed the notion that political participation in some form was the duty of every citizen – assuming that citizen was male and not a slave. And here, too, the similarities to the US. Constitution are striking. Most people forget that our Constitution, despite its brilliance and the sweep of its language, effectively barred both women and slaves from voting or participating in the political life of the nation.

Of course, Solon's leadership, while extraordinary in many ways, was hardly a revolution. And he learned, sometimes painfully, the first lesson of political leadership: You can't please everybody. In fact, Greek politics in those days was apparently just as tough as it is today. "I stood," he said, "at guard on every side, a wolf at bay among a pack of hounds." As a matter of fact, the political pressure to water down or change his reforms was so great that he finally went into voluntary exile to avoid being forced to amend them.

Unfortunately, Solon's reforms did not end fractional strife in Athenian politics. The most powerful Athenian families continued to battle for power, and in 546 BC, the tyrant Peisistratos seized power and ruled for nearly twenty years. Actually, he was a fairly benevolent dictator who loaned money to the poor, built large public works projects, and provided the city with an extensive system of aqueducts and fountain houses that ensured a clean and reliable supply of water.

His sons, however, were not like their father. While they helped to turn Athens into a great cultural center, they had other problems. Even then, the personal life of a politician could get him into trouble, and Hipparchos, one of the sons, was murdered in a lovers' quarrel.

Furthermore, by that time the people of Athens were demanding a greater voice in their government. They called on the Spartans for help, threw out the tyrants, and then turned on the Spartans and threw them out of Athens. They then turned to Kleisthenes, an aristocrat with democratic instincts and a large political following, and it was he who helped to set the stage for Athenian democracy. He reorganized the Athenian city state into ten tribes along geographic lines, made the tribes the basis for a representative democracy, and provided for three major governmental institutions to guide Athenian democracy.

The first was the *ekklesia*, the popular assembly. All male citizens had a right to attend and vote. It met every ten days. Its actual capacity was about thirteen thousand, a huge amount for a legislative body but considerably less than the total male citizen population. Years later, apparently in an effort to bolster attendance, citizens who attended the *ekklesia* were paid.

The *boule*, or Senate, consisted of five hundred members, fifty chosen by lot from each tribe. They met every day except on festival days. They were responsible for the general day to day affairs of the city-state, including the performance of magistrates, ensuring a

sufficient supply of food, conducting elections, managing the government's finances, making recommendations to the *ekklesia*, and defending the country. The *boule* had an executive committee – the *prytaneia* – which was rotated from tribe to tribe every thirty five days – but the Athenian city state had no elected chief executive.

The courts, or *dikasteria*, were the third major branch of government. Athenians loved to sue each other and the courts were scattered all over the city. What made the Athenian courts so unusual was their jury system. Each jury had a minimum of 201 jurors, and many were a lot bigger. Jurors were picked by lot and were paid. No trial could last more than a day, a reform we might well consider in the light of the O.J. Simpson trial!

In short, the Athenians created a remarkable political system, many of whose features reappeared in the American Constitution. Nor should we be surprised at that. Many of the framers of the Constitution were college graduates, an unusual thing in colonial times, and virtually all were students of ancient history and admirers of ancient Greece. Even though they ultimately opted for a republican government along Roman lines, the separation of powers, the combination of a popular assembly and an upper house or Senate, and the inclusion of juries as part of the justice system were adopted or adapted from the Athenian democratic system.

On the other hand, Athenian democracy, like our own, was not without its weaknesses.

There was, for example, no recognition of the importance of the separation of church and state in ancient Athens.

Athenian society not only tolerated but depended on slavery as a critical element of its economic system.

While the Athenian Constitution was inscribed in stone for all to read both inside and in front of the Stoa in the agora, many Athenians were illiterate and could not read and understand their own constitution.

Athenians not only believed in the death penalty, they were prepared to impose it for "crimes" like the ones that Socrates was accused of that would be rejected by even the most ardent death penalty supporters today.

And women in Athenian society were completely disenfranchised. Of course, as in mid-nineteenth century New England some women

did, in fact, play important political roles even without the right to vote and participate in the political institutions of their time. Aspasia was one of those women, and while her relationship with Pericles obviously put her in a position of prominence, she is said to have had excellent political instincts and judgment of her own, and she didn't hesitate to use them.

Yet, despite these faults, the framers of the American Constitution borrowed much and wisely from the democracy of Athens.

Perhaps the most important was the rule of law. We tend to forget these days that for the bulk of human history, the rules of the game in most societies were largely the result of decisions made by an all-powerful ruler and the elite group around him. Offend him or his advocates, and you were in trouble.

It was the Greeks who first introduced the notion of a body of laws that would govern the conduct of all, including those who held political power, and that required the force of public opinion to support and sustain them.

"And what is the strength of the laws," Demosthenes asked. "If one of you is wronged and cries out," he said, "will they (i.e. the laws) run up and be at his side to help him? No. Letters are only written things, and they would not be able to do this. So what is their power? If you support them and make them ever powerful to help one who needs them. So the laws are strong through you, and you through the laws."

Furthermore, it was, as we have seen, the Greeks who developed the idea of a jury of one's peers sitting in judgment on one accused of violating the law.

Those two ideas were fully embraced by our Founding Fathers to the end that ours would be a government of laws and not of men. They had experienced one-man rule, and they didn't like it. They developed their own forms of representative democracy at the state level during the colonial period, and the first written constitutions in this country were state constitutions that sought to enshrine the rule of law and the jury system as critically important elements in the emerging post-Revolution democracy.

The framers of the US. Constitution also developed the concept of the separation of powers largely from their study of the Athenian city state. There was, to be sure, no single chief executive in Athens, and, in fact, the executive power, such as it was, was exercised by the

prytaneia, the executive committee of the *boule* in much the same way that the US. originally attempted to govern the country under the Articles of Confederation through an executive committee of the states when the first Congresses were not in session.

But there was a clear separation between the legislative and judicial bodies in the Athenian system, and this nation's founding fathers believed deeply that it was that separation of powers and the check that each branch of government had on the other that was the best guarantee of freedom under the new constitution. Furthermore, having read much ancient Greek history, they were acutely aware of the dangers of factions taking over the government. Their answer, as Madison and Hamilton wrote so persuasively in the *Federalist Papers*, was to attempt to check the worst aspects of factionalism through a system of what they called "checks and balances." They borrowed liberally from the Greek experience to do so.

Moreover, the Greeks insisted on term limits for their elected or chosen officials. Interestingly enough, the framers of the US. Constitution rejected that idea. There was ample precedent for term limits in the experience of the states prior to the Constitution's ratification in 1789. Most states had short terms and limits. Many states limited their governors to a single term. The Virginia plan that was presented to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787 and was supported by the larger states recommended that the president be elected by Congress for a single, seven year term. Ultimately, that proposal was rejected by the convention, largely because of the reverence in which George Washington was held and the almost certain knowledge that he would be the first President.

On the other hand, the framers of the US. Constitution also accepted the Athenian notion that neither women or slaves could exercise the franchise. In fact, it took more than a century for women to win the right to vote and to participate in the political life of this country, and it was another half century before many of the descendants of slaves could do the same.

But the central principle of Athenian democracy – that all citizens, or at least those who were free and male, had a profound obligation to be informed and involved in the life of their democracy – was also the central principle of the new American democracy. And it is that fundamental principle that we are in danger of ignoring in this country if we continue down the path that we seem to be traveling.

Ancient Athenians were very clear about this. Pericles said, "Each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but also in the affairs of the state. Even those who are mostly occupied with their own businesses are extremely well informed on general politics, for unlike any other nation we do not say that a man who has no interest in politics is non-ambitious; we say that he is useless." (*Idiotēs*)

So, too, were those who worked so hard in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787 to shape a constitution for a new democracy.

And at least during the early decades of the new Republic citizens seemed to take their responsibility seriously. deTocqueville said, "These Americans are the most peculiar people in the world...in a local community in their country a citizen may conceive of some need which is not being met. What does he do? He goes across the street and discusses it with his neighbor."

But consider what has been happening to citizen participation in this the greatest and longest-lived democracy in world history.

Voter participation in the United States has been steadily declining over the past forty years. In the 1988 Presidential election George Bush and I were able to convince barely half of the eligible voters in this country that they should show up at the polls and vote for the most important position of political leadership in the world.

Four years later after candidates, opinion leaders, editorial writers and even MTV had put together a full-scale PR campaign urging people to vote, only fifty-five percent of the eligible voters bothered to make it to the polling place to vote for the Presidency. And even that increase in voter participation didn't last very long. Last November less than forty percent of the eligible voters in the US. took time to vote in the second most important election we have.

Of the thirty-nine percent that voted, fifty-one percent voted Republican, and forty-nine percent voted Democratic. In other words, twenty percent of the eligible voters in America put Newt Gingrich in the Speaker's chair, and of those twenty percent fully one-third were affiliated with the Christian Coalition.

Democrats didn't win any blue ribbons for performance either. We could only get nineteen percent of the eligible voters to show up for our side!

Not only is voter participation declining. The shape and nature of the public dialogue is declining as well. Of course the people of ancient Athens were not unfamiliar with this phenomenon.

Demagogues are demagogues, whether in ancient Athens or in America. And Athens had its share. "Demagogy," wrote Aristophanes, "is not the trait of an educated and good mannered man, but of an ignorant and uncouth man."

Fortunately, in the direct democracy of ancient Athens it was possible to confront the demagogue directly. In a nation of two hundred and sixty million people in which the principal means of communicating political thought and ideas is the electronic media, becoming the kind of informed citizen that Pericles described is not easy. For in some ways we have too much information these days. And what we do have is being filtered through the lens of a national press corps that increasingly seems to be buying into the supermarket tabloid business.

In the old days that stuff stayed on the supermarket rack, and if we read it at all, it was usually while waiting for the checkout line to move. But not now. Christopher Lydon, a former New York Times political correspondent and for many years the news anchor on Boston's public television station, put it this way when the Jennifer Flowers story broke:

"See the pattern? The upscale media baited the trap with hints about womanizing, their downmarket cousins bagged the trophy, and the quality commentators returned, bright clothespins on their noses, to dissect the evidence and tell us what it meant. To audiences it did not look like real warfare in the media but rather like a face-saving division of labor."

Tom Oliphant, the nationally syndicated columnist for the Boston Globe, put it even more succinctly:

"We are," he said of the press, "becoming the serial killers of democracy."

I don't mean to absolve politicians of their responsibility to debate the issues responsibly and well. But seventy-five percent of the American people get most of their information about the political process and their government from their television set. And the crying need, as Paul Taylor, the Washington Post's very able national political correspondent in the 1988 campaign, wrote recently is "to reach the inattentive audience, the ninety-one million adult Americans who didn't bother to vote for president in 1988, the tens of millions of others who think politics is baloney."

Taylor proposes that the national networks and all licensed TV stations in America be required to give the presidential finalists five minutes of free air time on alternating nights to discuss the issues on camera and in person during the last two months of the campaign right in the middle of prime time. There have been other proposals as well to try to elevate the debate, minimize the impact of 30-second attack commercials, and genuinely inform potential voters.

But one thing is clear. Most Athenians did not think politics was ballooned. They took it seriously, they were engaged and informed, and they took great pride in their democratic system.

Thucydides put it best in *The Oration on the Peloponnesian War*:

"Our form of government does not imitate the laws of others; we are the example of others rather than their imitators. Our government is called democracy, for the power is not exercised by the few, but by the many. All citizens are equal before the law in their private affairs. For public office we choose those who are capable and worthy, and not those who belong to a privileged class. If someone happens not to have social status or to be poor, he is not prevented from serving the city if he has something good to offer." (Pericles' *Funeral Oration on the Peloponnesian War*)

We seem to be having a difficult time building and sustaining that same kind of pride for our democratic system that until recently has been the hallmark of American democracy. The government bashers are hard at work. And our media mavens consciously or unconsciously are getting sucked in as well.

"Sometimes," Bill Clinton told the press during the 1992 campaign. "I think you folks are in the business of (finding) the darkest moment of the darkest week of the darkest year in anyone's life."

And the facts back him up. Coverage by the national media of both George Bush and me was two-to-one negative in the 1988 campaign.

Professor Thomas Patterson of Syracuse University reported that not too long ago that national network coverage of the Federal government in the ten years from 1982 to 1992 was ninety-three percent negative. No wonder many Americans have lost their confidence in their government and in their democracy.

Sadly, it may well be one of the worst tragedies in American history that has begun to change the public mood.

The bombing of the Federal building in Oklahoma City was a terrible thing. But what people saw during the days and weeks after the explosion were hundreds of dedicated public servants descending on the city from all over America to dig into that rubble at great peril to themselves to find and save as many lives as possible. Those government employees demonstrated great courage. They also demonstrated extraordinary professionalism; and I'd like to think that the standing ovation they received from thousands of people at the Sunday memorial service was their – and our – way of saying that “Yes, we understand and value public service and the political system that not only produced these extraordinary men and women but had them on the scene within minutes of the disaster.”

For our government after all is not some foreign body in the sky. It is us. It is the most open political system in the world, so open that two Greek-Americans, both sons of immigrants, were able not only to represent the citizens of their states as governor and United States Senator but to run for the presidency of the United States as well.

Sophocles said, “There is no way to know of any man his spirit and wisdom and will, until he stands proved ruler and lawgiver.”

That was what the ancient Greeks believed. It is about time we Americans began believing it again.

Modernization and Its Discontents

CONSTANTINE TSOUKALAS

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Greece in the 90's: an ailing country in need of immediate and drastic treatment, a preferential field of scientific or para-scientific queries, a living inspiration for essentialist quests and ironical side statements. At least so it would seem: for even if nothing can ever be really “wrong” with a collective entity which seems to exist and to survive in ways that are hardly less ambivalent than the ways of most other countries embedded in the disillusionments of our times, it is a fact that recent discursive attitudes towards Hellas have reached a stage of paroxysm. More than ever, spirits are disillusioned. More than ever, prospective healers, if always ubiquitous and vociferous, remain cautious. More than ever, politicians are hesitant to promise immediate and spectacular recoveries. And although there is no unanimity in terms of diagnosis, the shock therapy that seems to be admonished from all quarters can be summed up in a single word – modernization – now, in all urgency and at all costs.

Hardly an original recipe, to be sure. All countries, rich or poor, have been led to adopt modernization schemes and resolutions; and, to this effect, modernizing structural reforms and adjustments are by now integral components of the universal political and economic landscape. Greece could obviously be no exception in adopting a language which is becoming an imposed discursive banality. Indeed, at least since the end of the 60s, no well thinking country could afford to dispense with this new socio-cultural externality: modernization is universally seen as the only possible way out of all real and conceivable social and economic bottlenecks. Universal progress seems to be invested in a new concrete language, all the more convincing that it remains austere and incontrovertible. Literally a verbal panacea that