

THE BATTLE OF MARATHON AND THE SPIRIT OF THE WEST

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What is meant by “The West”? Images come to mind — the men of the setting sun, an old struggle against seemingly hopeless odds. Victory unlooked for and often due to the deeds of a few individuals. But never final victory. A feeling of a civilisation based on old values and, whatever its achievements, forever facing the old enemies, who change their appearance but never their essential nature.

I have in mind such stories as those in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*.¹ I think of the Battle of Britain, when those ‘few’ British fighter pilots held back the forces of one despotism, Nazi Germany, only for Britain to confront another, the Soviet Union, more powerful than ever, immediately after World War II. I’m thinking of such famous last stands for the West as the victory at Rorke’s Drift. I think of the Alamo, which bought time for the Texans to organise themselves against the army of the dictator Santa Anna, even though the defenders all died. Or of stands where brave men die over a point of honour, such as the English battle of Maldon,² where those faithful to their personal loyalty to one man (their lord Beorhtnoth) all died, and but where those who ran away from the Vikings were despised but not otherwise punished.

The Greek battle of Thermopylae is another famous last stand. But for me it was a different battle fought by the Greeks two and a half thousand years ago which symbolises all the concepts — military and political — that I associate with the West. I write of Marathon.

THE PERSIAN THREAT

First some background. The Persian Empire under Cyrus the Great had been expanding since 550 BC. It overwhelmed Lydia, in Asia Minor in 546 BC.

The Kingdom of Lydia, in what is now western Turkey, will be strangely familiar to those readers who are roleplayers. Lydia was the original Kingdom “between the mountains and the sea”, a Kingdom of great merchants and traders, of a great city (Sardis), of a great King (Croesus, who was indeed very rich), of a glorious cavalry (the Lydians saw no contradiction between being merchants and warriors), and where women played an active part in society rather than being locked away. In short, Lydia was a fairy tale Kingdom, except that it was real.

According to Herodotus, many aspects of Greek life were imported from Lydia. The idea of retail shops,

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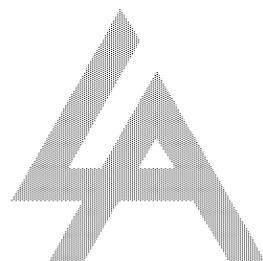
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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



the idea of coinage instead of iron bars,³ and virtually all of Greece's games and athletic sports had their origins in Lydia. The shock to Greece of Lydia's sudden fall was therefore great.

Ironically, if Lydia had survived, classical civilisation might have been strangled in its infancy, for Croesus was showing signs of wishing to absorb the independent Greek city states. Already he had won over many priests by giving lavish presents to their temples.

But the Persians were now the threat. They were not just non-Greek. They were totally alien. 'Barbarians'. The Persians were Zoroastrians, which with its two hostile powers — Ormusd and Ahriman (light and darkness) — was alien compared to the glorified human beings of the Greek Pantheon. Worse, the Persians seemed to worship their Kings as divine beings, a practice regarded by the Greeks as at best absurd and at worst as a vile blasphemy. When the Persians gobbled up the Ionian Greek cities in Asia Minor the Greeks were shocked. When these cities rebelled the Greeks, notably Athens, sent aid. But the Ionians were soundly beaten.

The whole near east (the whole east as far as the Greeks were concerned) had fallen. Nothing seemed able to stop the Persian Empire. Wealth and coinage? Where had these got the Lydians? An ancient tradition? These were not to save Egypt. Magic? The Magi had not saved the Medes at the very beginning of the Persian advance. Philosophy? The Ionians were philosophically in advance of the Greeks, but this had not saved them.

MARATHON

Other than divine intervention there seemed little to hope for when in 490 B.C. the Persian 'Great King' Darius sent forth an army on the pretext of punishing Athens for aiding the Ionians. The Athenians appealed for aid, but most of their potential friends were, it transpired, busy. The Spartans, for instance, were having a religious festival and so could not come just now.

The odds seemed hopeless, and the Athenian Generals were extremely reluctant to fight a battle where it had to be fought, at Marathon. But then it was the turn of Miltiades to command the Greek army. He launched a frontal infantry assault, fast and in close order, partly to achieve a successful impact through momentum, and partly to reduce casualties caused by long range weapons such as arrows.

The fighting was fierce, but as the day wore on the greater numbers of the easterners began to tell. All seemed lost until Miltiades threw in his cavalry in flank attacks. Cavalry is not for attacking an *organised* foe. But neither is it useless. What cavalry is

for is attacking a *disorganised* or *weakened* foe, particularly in the flank and rear. The Persians were routed, and driven back to their ships or into the sea.

This was not the end of the Persian wars. Indeed, it was only the beginning of the main phase. But the myth of Imperial invincibility — of the inevitable and irreversible spread of the Persian Empire — was broken.

Had Marathon gone the other way the Athenians would most likely have been smashed, and the Greeks might well in due course have fallen under the Persian yoke, the world today knowing as little of them as it now knows of the Lydians or the Lycians.

PERICLES AGAINST THE MEN OF MARATHON

It is a mistake to think of the Greeks as a monolithic cultural bloc, united on the side of what we now regard as virtue. There was, to some extent, a common religion and language. Hellenes recognized each other as Hellenes. But there was great diversity of political, social and economic institutions. On the one hand there were the highly cultivated Ionians. On the other, there were the Spartans, with their deliberate ignorance of coinage, their contempt for art (their former artistic aristocracy being in headlong decline by the time of the classical period), and their dislike of trade. The Athenians came to regard women as mere articles of property, while the proud horse lords of Thessaly regarded women as the equals of men.

However, the very diversity of Greece was its strength. That different ideas evolved in different circumstances, all within close proximity to each other, prevented the Greeks from thinking that any way of doing things was necessarily the only way.

The battle of Marathon itself became associated with a particular Athenian faction, the 'Men of Marathon'. Because this faction ended up on the losing side we now know it as the selfish, rich and idle oligarchs, and we regard the leader of the opposing faction, Pericles, as one of the greatest statesmen of all time and of all places.

Pericles was certainly a good speaker. (For that matter, so was Cyrus the great, as Herodotus relates.) Like the cleverest of his kind, Pericles did not merely confine himself to promising to give to his audience the wealth of others. He talked also of liberty. In this he resembled Franklin Roosevelt, and a great many other people who have called themselves Liberal, particularly in the twentieth century but also in the nineteenth.

Whether these men are sincere in talking in rapt tones of liberty while pushing for ever more power for the state (and incidentally for themselves) is not of the first importance. What matters is that they are contra-

dicting themselves, not whether or not they know that they are.

For example, as Thucydides son of Melesias (not to be confused with Thucydides the historian) pointed out, far from honouring Athena the Goddess of wisdom by building the Parthenon, Pericles had committed a sacrilege by using money stolen from the allies of Athens in the Delian league. The Athenians had sworn by the Gods to uphold the league as an alliance against the Persian Empire, but by this and other acts of plunder instigated by Pericles, Athens had turned her allies against her, hardly an action the goddess of wisdom would approve of. Thucydides' denunciations were to of no avail, and in the end he was exiled.

Pericles' pandering to the mob was highly successful. One of Pericles' schemes was to prevent those who were wholly or partly of non-Athenian descent from in future gaining Athenian citizenship. This served to discredit some of Pericles' 'impure' rivals, such as Cimon, the Delian league commander, son of Miltiades of Marathon and — it is said — brother-in-law of Pericles' great foe Thucydides son of Melesias. It also helped to spread the belief that other Greeks were inferior to the Athenians, and fit only to pay tribute to them. And Pericles needed such tribute, to pay for the votes of citizens on jury or assembly duties. He realised that if he obtained all the money he needed for his various schemes only from rich Athenians or by debasing the coinage, he would destroy the Athenian economy.

By contrast the 'Men of Marathon' believed in self reliance — in freedom coupled with cooperation. They believed in a man being a merchant or a farmer, but also devoting a large part of his money to his weapons and armour, and a large part of his spare time to learning how to use them in formation with his fellows.

This is what separated the Athenian army from the slave armies of eastern despots on the one hand, and from the wild chaos of savage northern tribes on the other. These two apparent opposites are fundamentally akin. The savage recognises no one else's property rights in person or possessions, and a despotism is a degenerated civilisation where this right is no longer respected.⁴

'Rich' Athenians were those who could afford to be heavily armed 'hoplites' or (more rarely) cavalymen. Rather naturally, citizenship meant a great deal more to such people than merely turning up at a public assembly and voting to award themselves privileges and payments at the expense of others.

SLAVERY

But the 'Men of Marathon' were guilty of proclaiming another contradiction. They believed in slavery.

How can one believe in individual self responsibility, and in slavery? How can a stable polity be maintained if free labour is being undermined in town and country by slave labour? Athenians would make speeches defending individual rights against majority vote, and then go home and give their slaves a good beating. It stinks of hypocrisy.

Slavery also does economic harm. If labour is virtually costless, there is no economic incentive to devise innovative labour-saving machines, which is perhaps why the ancient world, in spite of such technological geniuses as Archimedes, seems to have been so technologically stagnant.⁵

We do know, from the tortuous defences of slavery offered by Aristotle and by others, that slavery was not unchallenged in the ancient world. Dionysius, Tyrant of Syracuse, freed some slaves, so that he could have them as political allies in his struggles against their former masters. This decision to free slaves was one of the reasons why Syracuse became, for a while, the largest and most important Greek city in the world.

Such arguments were to recur later in Western history. All these things are relevant in future history. The reputations of anti-federalists like Patrick Henry, who rightly warned of the potential threat to liberty from the federal government, have suffered because of anti-federalists also having been the owners of slaves. Later, Calhoun attacked federal power, yet all that is now remember of him is his defence of Southern slavery.

In Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* there are no slave owning goodies. How could there be? Service is by personal oath of honour, not accident of birth. Honour, religious or otherwise, is what voluntary cooperation in situations of life and death — free association when it is not convenient and when there is a cost — is based on.

THE FREE CITIZEN IN ARMS

This leads me to the military and political significance of the battle of Marathon. Marathon exemplifies one of the fundamental Western ideas, that of the free citizen in arms.

The idea of a high proportion of a population not only owning weapons but spending a large part of its time learning how to use them may sound strange to a libertarian, who is more likely to think in terms of professional 'protection agencies' dominating defence 'production' in the manner of professional farmers dominating food production. But violence is special.

To have a group of people with an overwhelming advantage in firepower and training over their neighbours is dangerous. It leads to the temptation to plunder those neighbours.

Government does not always arise from foreign conquest. Sometimes a successful defence against invasion results in the leaders of that defence becoming permanent rulers. The crucial question is whether or not a permanent standing army is created. Even in modern Europe, a people unused to organisation in its own defence is prey to professional bands hired by various powerful people. France, during the wars of religion, or Germany during the Thirty Years War, are examples. The rise of absolute monarchs may be welcomed as a way of keeping the peace. But what if such monarchs abuse their power?

Tyrants like Louis XIV or Nicholas I are not overthrown. Only weak or hesitant men like Louis XVI, Nicholas II, or our own Charles I are overthrown — men who failed to destroy their enemies when they had the chance.

Contrary to David Hume's contention, it is not public opinion as such that matters; it is the correlation of forces. An unarmed or untrained public is helpless against a strong, united minority. Such tyrannies are overthrown only by external intervention.

It is certainly possible to guard against professional troops taking over a state. The Carthaginians had elaborate policies to protect themselves from successful generals and their mercenaries. But this put them at a fatal disadvantage against the Romans, who at the time of the Punic wars relied on soldier citizens and therefore could mobilise their full strength without fear of revolution. It is true that professionals tend to beat a rabble, but the Hoplites of Marathon were not a rabble, nor were the Romans of the early to mid Republican period, nor the English yeomen who smashed the flower of French Chivalry at Crecy and Agincourt.

Think of the contrast between 1914 and 1939-40. In 1914, when the professionals were committed, there were hundreds of thousands of men accustomed to the use of weapons from a great network of gun clubs in the National Rifle Association to draw on. In 1939, thanks to gun control, the Home Guard were drilling with broom handles. Had Hitler invaded in 1940 this 'leave it to the professionals' attitude would have meant the collapse of Britain.

Professionals make a vital contribution, but to rely on them completely, as if violence was just another specialist industry like farming or banking, is an error. Violence is the opposite of civil society. It is not about life and production; it is about death and destruction. War is organised incivility; not one activity

among many. While it lasts, it is the overwhelming activity to which all else is subjugated.

In contrast to the political philosophers, there are some science fiction writers who have understood this. A population which trusts a group — or even competing groups — for protection risks conquest by a population organised for war, or from the very groups or group they trust.

As Robert Heinlein and L. Neil Smith have both pointed out, the only way for an individual in a population to be secure is for large numbers of the population to arm and train cooperatively to assist in their own defence.

SOLDIER CITIZENS AT ALL LEVELS

Has not science perhaps made war too sophisticated for the ordinary man?

But if we lived in a truly free society, most men would be wealthy enough to buy modern weapons and means of defences, and to learn how to use them.

The role of the professional would be to teach, to look after routine threats in quiet times, and to help lead general forces and form special forces in times of crisis. But the mass of ordinary citizens must always have the capacity in both weapons and cooperative training to beat the professionals — not one for one but in total — if it were ever to come to that. 'Part timers', 'Amateurs', 'Soldier Citizens' — call them what you will — must be at all levels. Men with private incomes or peacetime jobs must be at command computers and in control centres and at the other extreme, they must, as a matter of civic routine, be heavily represented among the militia who deal with civil disorders.

Does this sound like a fantasy? If so, this shows how far from the real spirit of the West we have now strayed. It shows just what a mess we are in.

NOTES

1. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, George Allen and Unwin, London, Fifteenth impression 1975.
2. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhtelm's Son*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1975.
3. As the Greeks used iron for weapons, those Greek cities that used iron bars as money could be described as being on an ammunition standard. We may see this in our own time.
4. To some extent this is the distinction between savages and barbarians which R. G. Collingwood makes in his *The New Leviathan*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1942.
5. The Romans seem less advanced than their predecessors, the Etruscans.