

Good Democratic Leadership During Crisis; An Analysis of Thucydides, Homer, and the Covid-19 Crisis



By Mike Papaleo

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Introduction

- Watching and experiencing President Trump's management of the Covid-19 pandemic made me think more about leaders and their navigation of crisis throughout history.
- I first pondered how two democratic societies, the United States and New Zealand, could have such drastically different responses in their leadership regarding the Coronavirus crisis. I then thought back to Ancient Greece, as authors like Thucydides and Homer detail the experiences of ancient leaders who also fought crisis, and thus this thesis was born.
- What can we learn from our ancient sources about leadership during crisis so we can stop repeating mistakes of the past? Is there a type of leadership that succeeds during crisis periods and one that fails? What qualities should we demand our leaders to possess to ensure the best possible outcome while navigating a crisis? These are some of the questions I kept in mind while proceeding with my thesis.

Chapter 1: Pericles Through the Eyes of Thucydides

- Using Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, I began my quest to analyze leadership. The Athenian general Pericles was faced with two crises: war and plague.
- Thucydides presents Pericles as the ideal democratic leader, as he acts with virtues like prudence and moderation when both leading and making decisions. Pericles places an emphasis on dedicating himself to the people he serves and is successful because of traits like these.
- However, Pericles too has his flaws. Mary Nichols argues by his example that the flexibility and willingness to revise that are characteristic of democracy need occasionally to be overwritten by the prudent judgement that “staying the course” is best in certain circumstances. This can be pushed back against when we realize that “staying the course” actually allowed for the plague to prove more harmful. From this, it can be noted that good leadership during crisis requires flexibility and a willingness to adapt, not the opposite.

Chapter 2: Agamemnon's Failure

- In Homer's *Iliad*, we see how the leadership of Agamemnon is chronicled and ridiculed. Agamemnon's leadership is poor, as Homer describes him as selfish, arrogant, and ineffective. Although he was a great soldier on the battlefield, this does not mean we can call him a great leader. He frequently disparages his own men, and often puts his army in weak positions because of his selfishness and greed.
- Agamemnon does experience a small amount of character growth, which shows to us that leadership constantly refined and developed. However, we should be cautious in accepting Agamemnon's mistakes and relieving him from criticism because he is able to become better, and the sympathy with which some authors treat Agamemnon is not totally warranted.
- Unlike Pericles, who remains composed and wishes to have grievances against him aired out in a public setting, Agamemnon punishes those who question him and is unable to respond to any adversity. Homer desires for his reader to recognize these traits that Agamemnon possesses as the traits of subpar leadership, especially in the face of crisis.

Chapter 3: The Covid-19 Crisis: A Modern Test of Leadership

- Seeking to understand the vastly different leadership approaches taken by the New Zealand and American governments, and using Homer's and Thucydides' accounts of leadership during crisis to analyze Trump and Ardern in light of this findings
- Trump's messaging included denial and stressing Americans not to worry, and we see a lack of preparation, lack of transparency, arrogance, and ineptness in his leadership style.
- Ardern desired to educate citizens about the situation they faced. She speaks with honesty and focus, and relies on the scientific experts to guide the decisions she makes. While narcissism and ideological rigidity and evident in how Trump responds to crisis, Ardern turns to preparation, compassion, relatability and focuses on an all-inclusive response, which works to mobilize her country to act in safer ways. The result is Covid-19 ravaging America, while New Zealand was left mostly unaffected.

Conclusion: A New Path Forward From Ardern's Leadership?

- Although Covid certainly is not over, and we will continue to live a different and new world, we can still make conclusions about the leadership styles that allowed for a managing of the crisis. In some ways, Ardern is our modern Pericles, while Trump displays much of what Agamemnon does.
- Ardern's leadership also shows us something new, as through compassion she is able to unite a nation as one team with one common goal. When leaders of the past have attempted to do this (as Trump also attempted to during Covid), they usually use military tones and a "call to war" style of messaging. Ardern ditches this philosophy, as she refuses to call the Coronavirus "the enemy" but instead she uses metaphors that would inspire selflessness and focus on the mental health of her citizens. Through honesty and an ability to connect with her people, Ardern was able to stir up feelings of confidence throughout the community, and mobilized an all-inclusive effort through rhetoric that abandoned the traditional militaristic attitudes.
- From this, we can gather that yes, good leadership is something that includes all of our findings from Thucydides and Homer about the important and necessary qualities for a leader to possess, but that also in the 21st century good leadership must also be one that shows genuine concern along with an inherent level of kindness. Good leadership during crisis is a team effort, requires preparation, and can be achieved through the use of compassion.