THE POWER OF TRUTH:  
POLITICAL FORESIGHT IN THUCYDIDES'  
ACCOUNT OF THE SICILIAN EXPEDITION (6.32-42) 

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I. Introduction 

In this essay I shall be concerned with the power of truth to persuade in the political sphere. That pure unadulterated truth, stripped of all rhetorical flourishes, may be less than persuasive in a political arena is not an unusual notion. Socrates’ defense of his way of life in Plato’s Apology is an obvious case in point. In this essay I shall be concerned with another Athenian, equally brilliant, the historian, Thucydides. I shall focus on a relatively brief section of his History, his account of three speeches delivered in 415 in Syracuse. Given the actual historical events going on simultaneously with the delivery of the speeches, the speeches themselves take on more than merely historical interest. As I shall show, the whole section illumines the problem of the persuasive power of truth.

The section with which I shall be concerned, book 6 chapters 32-42, comprises the speeches of three individuals: (1) Hermocrates, (2) Athenagoras, and (3) an unnamed Syracusan general. The passage itself is virtually self-contained, surrounded dramatically by a ring which commences with the departure of the Athenian fleet for Corcyra (6.32.2), the first leg of its voyage to Sicily, and which concludes with its arrival to that island (6.42.1). The action, then, of this section, namely the three speeches, takes place within the time in which the Athenian fleet leaves the Piraeus to the time when it arrives at Corcyra. This fact must be borne in mind throughout — the Athenians are, indeed, on their way to Sicily.

II. Hermocrates’ Speech 

At Syracuse news is brought in from many quarters concerning the Athenian expedition against Sicily, but for a long time it is disbelieved. Finally, in an assembly a number of speeches were made, some in belief of the impending invasion, others in disbelief of the Athenian attack. Hermocrates, a member of the first group, steps forward to speak ‘in the belief that he had clear knowledge [εἴδεναι] about the situation’ (6.32.3).’ ‘Knowledge’ is a very strong word; after all, knowledge can only be of what

1. All translations are my own, and depend upon the Oxford Classical Text of Thucydides’ History.
is in fact true. A person, thus, who claims to know, or, even more strongly in Hermocrates’ case, to know clearly \(\sigma\alpha\phi\omicron\omega\varsigma\) is one who claims to possess the truth concerning a particular state of affairs. Whether he is vindicated, of course, only time will tell. In Thucydides’ \textit{History} time is contained in the narrative, and it is finally to that part of the work that we must refer if we are to discover the truth of an individual’s speech, plan, or goals. Yet, as we shall see, certain hints are provided by Thucydides even in the course of the speech. Furthermore, given the persuasive power (or lack of power) of the speech, we can understand Thucydides himself to be putting forth his own view as to the persuasive power of the truth in the political sphere.

So Hermocrates steps forth. ‘Unbelievable things \(\alpha\pi\iota\sigma\tau\alpha\). . . will I seem to say to you concerning the truth — \(\tau\eta\varsigma\ \alpha\lambda\eta\theta\epsilon\iota\varsigma\varsigma\) of the expedition; and I know [!] that those who either say or report things not worthy of belief not only do not convince, but also seem to be out of their mind. Nevertheless, I will not, out of fear, desist when the city is in danger, since I am convinced that I know how to speak rather more cogently \(\sigma\alpha\rho\epsilon\sigma\tau\epsilon\rho\omicron\ \tau\iota\) than the next man’ (6.33.1). Hermocrates, at the beginning of his speech, in fact with his very first word, ‘\(\alpha\pi\iota\sigma\tau\alpha\’\) (‘unbelievable things’), sets forth his dilemma. He envisions himself a Cassandra-like figure, a creature of tragedy. His knowledge of the truth is matched only by his inability to persuade his audience of it. Hermocrates is a man who both claims and, as we the readers of the historical narrative know, possesses the truth; yet he is a man whom no one will believe. The truth, viz. the reality of the Athenian expedition, is something which falls on deaf ears. Just as in the prologue to Hermocrates’ speech (6.32.3), where we are told that the reported news of the impending invasion was long disbelieved, so now the truth, the reality of the invasion as expressed by Hermocrates is disbelieved by the assembly. What does this say about truth? At the very least, it says that truth is not a sufficient condition for belief or trust. Its persuasive power is not assured. And this, of course, makes for the tragic dilemma which I mentioned above.

But though Hermocrates’ audience does not believe him, Thucydides himself gives some hints in the course of the speech itself as to the soundness (or truth) of Hermocrates’ claim and his plan for action. Indeed, Hermocrates’ claim about the impending Athenian invasion will only be \textit{fully} vindicated (in the eyes of the Syracusans) in the course of events; yet some hints as to its veracity are already present in the speech. At 6.33.2 Hermocrates asserts that ‘the Athenians have set out against us. . . with a great force. . . allegedly \(\pi\rho\omicron\omicron\alpha\sigma\omicron\nu\) because of alliance with the Egestaeans \textit{and for} restoration of the Leontini, \textit{but} in truth \(\tau\omicron\delta\epsilon\ \alpha\lambda\eta\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma\) for desire of Sicily . . .’ Now it is important to stress that this is not just another remark on the part of Hermocrates, for it is almost identical with what
Thucydides himself tells us about the true and the specious Athenian motives for the journey to Sicily (cf. 6.6.1: ‘... [the Athenians] set out in reality [τὴ ἀληθεστατὴ προφάσει] to conquer all [of Sicily], while at the same they wished to give the impression [εὐπρεπῶς] of coming to the aid of their kinsmen and allies’). Thucydides, writing ten years after the event, knew to his own satisfaction the true motivation for the Athenian journey to Sicily. Thus, his remarks, made in propria persona (in 6.6.1), are of the utmost importance. If an individual, in this case Hermocrates, says virtually the same things as the author himself, then we may assume that the speaker’s claim is to that extent ‘verified’. Again, in rather broader terms, we may say that Thucydides points out that in this case he (Thucydides) ‘sides with’ or ‘thinks highly of’ or ‘supports’ the speaker. And so, presumably, should we.

Hermocrates continues with his speech and urges the disbelievers not to turn a deaf ear to the news from abroad. To the believers, on the other hand, he offers encouragement, mentioning that ‘few great armies... which have marched far from their homeland have been successful’ (6.33.5). Here again I believe is a hint which, when taken in conjunction with remarks made elsewhere, points to the ‘worthiness’ of Hermocrates’ speech, a worthiness which Thucydides very much wants us to see, a worthiness which Hermocrates’ audience does not see, ‘tragically’. I want to draw attention to 6.23.2, a section in which Nicias, the Athenian general, is the speaker. In this passage Nicias is attempting to dissuade the Athenians from embarking on what he believes to be an ill-conceived mission. Amongst other considerations he points out the necessity that the Athenians consider that (1) they are going to found a city among foreigners and enemies, and that (2) if they go, they must immediately conquer the land, lest they have everybody as their enemy.2 The two points which Nicias here makes bear comparison with Hermocrates’ remarks in 6.33.5, which we noted above. Nicias, in effect, anticipates Hermocrates’ claim of the difficulty of conquering foreign lands, far away lands, and a fortiori of the danger involved in so trying, viz. of being trapped without adequate sources of reinforcement. Hermocrates, in his speech, uses the argument to encourage those who believe that they will have to fight the Athenians; Nicias, in his speech, uses the argument in an attempt to dissuade the Athenians from embarking on (what he takes to be) a dangerous course. Thus we have much the same argument used by two ‘reputable’3 speakers.

2. Comparison should be made between Nicias’ points here before the Athenians set sail and his remarks on the eve of the Athenians’ first battle against the Syracusans: ‘Consider this: you are far from home and in no friendly sort of place... For the enemy the struggle will be about his homeland, but we are not in our homeland; and because of this we must be victorious or not easily retreat’ (6.68.3).

3. Nicias’ opponent in the Athenian assembly is the notorious Alcibiades (6.15-18).
(that is, ‘reputable’ in Thucydides’ eyes, the only eyes through which we may read the History) in two opposing situations. And, of course, they are both ‘right’. The Syracusans should take heart (and prepare themselves as well); the Athenians should give up their folly. As for the latter, Nicias’ protestations are nugatory; the Athenian fleet is on its way while Hermocrates is speaking. Furthermore, Hermocrates’ encouragement is all the stronger in the reader’s eyes, if unfortunately not in his audience’s ears, if we recall Nicias’ earlier remarks.4

With this exhortation Hermocrates begins his plans for preparation against the Athenian attack. What is important for us is not so much Hermocrates’ specific proposals as the fact that hardly any were received with enthusiasm. Envoys were not sent abroad or through Sicily (contra Hermocrates’ suggestions at 6.34.1, 34.3) until much later (6.73.2, 75.3); Carthage was apparently never contacted (contra 6.34.2). The man who knows, who possesses the truth about the impending Athenian invasion, is the least persuasive of men. Because of their habitual quietude (διὰ τὸ σύνηθες ἡσυχον — 6.34.4) the Syracusans will pass up what Hermocrates believes to be the most opportune (ἐπίκαιρον) plan of action, viz. to meet the Athenians at Tarentum with their entire navy. More important than the practicability or impracticability of the plan is the fact that the plan is a plan, a call to action. The Syracusans must act, according to Hermocrates, in the face of a calamity, a state of affairs which they at the moment do not acknowledge. But, alas, the truth goes unheeded.

Hermocrates continues with the benefits of his plan. If the Syracusans set out in force to meet the Athenians at Tarentum, there would be a good chance that the Athenians would never leave Corcyra. They might even give up the expedition altogether, because ‘the most experienced of the generals, as I hear, commands unwillingly and would be pleased to lay hold of the first pretext [sc. to break up the expedition], if anything worthwhile should be seen from our side’ (6.34.6 fin). We are here given a good opportunity to test once again the ‘worthiness’ of Hermocrates and the ‘soundness’ of his plan of attack. He claims to have heard (άκούω) that the most experienced general (Nicias, of course) is commanding unwillingly. Well, is Hermocrates’ claim true? Surely it is, for we need only refer to 6.8.4 where Thucydides, in propria persona, tells us exactly that, viz. that Nicias was chosen to command against his will (άκουσίως). Hermocrates' plan is vindicated. And, as in 6.33.2, Thucydides is telling us that Hermocrates is a person to whose advice attention should be paid. Again, the tragedy is all

4. For that matter, Nicias’ exhortation in 6.68.3 (for which see note 2 supra) is all the more poignant when read in the light of his own earlier remarks (at 6.23.2) as well as Hermocrates’ encouraging remarks at 6.33.5.
the more pointed. The man who knows the truth, in fact the truth itself, is unheeded.

And so Hermocrates concludes his speech, much as he began it. In the beginning he claimed that he would seem to his audience ‘to say unbelievable things concerning the reality of the expedition’; now, at the end, he unsuccessfully attempts to persuade his fellow citizens to show the necessary courage in carrying out his plan. In such a way the speech takes us back to our initial concern as to the persuasive power of truth. ‘I know well [εύ οίδα — 6.34.9 fin] that the Athenians are coming to attack us and that they are already upon the voyage and all but here.’ Hermocrates here makes, as at the beginning (6.33.2), a true claim about the Athenian invasion; and we the readers know that he is correct. The Athenians are on their way to Sicily. But is truth enough? Does it entail assent? The answer is clearly no. And Thucydides, in his own way, tells us what this negative implies. It implies (1) the weakness or impotence of truth to persuade in the political arena,3 (2) the tragic condition of the man who really does know, and (3) the (equally) tragic condition of those who do not trust or believe the man who knows.

III. Athenagoras’ Speech

Upon the conclusion of Hermocrates’ speech Athenagoras steps forth. No patronymic is given, but we might supply ὁ Δήμου (‘of the People’). Athenagoras is the ‘leader of the people and among the masses the most persuasive [πιθανώτατος]’ (6.35.2). Even before he has begun to speak Thucydides has given us, by the use of the single word ‘πιθανώτατος’, a powerful hint as to how we should listen to Athenagoras. Hermocrates has been seen as a man who not only claims to know, but in fact really does know the truth. Yet, for all that, he is the least persuasive of speakers. He is even ridiculed. With Athenagoras, however, a man who, as we shall see, will make similar claims to the truth, though quite the opposite to those of Hermocrates, we have a speaker described as ‘πιθανώτατος.’ What greater contrast could there be? — least persuasive vs. most persuasive. But where we have this one contrast might we not expect another? As Hermocrates was least persuasive but also most veracious, might not Athenagoras, explicitly described as ‘most persuasive,’ be least veracious as well? In short, before we even begin this second speech we should be alive to the following analogy: least persuasive: most persuasive:: most veracious: least veracious.

5. So weak in fact is the power of truth that (at 6.35.1) some men not only disbelieved Hermocrates but ‘turned the affair [Hermocrates’ speech] into laughter.’ In sum, ‘belief in Hermocrates was slight and so was fear for the future.’
So the most persuasive speaker steps forth. He does *not* believe that the Athenians are on their way to Sicily. This is, of course, in direct contrast to Hermocrates, who does believe that they are. Now *either* what Hermocrates claims is true *or* what Athenagoras claims is true. But we know that Hermocrates’ claim is true; therefore, Athenagoras’ claim that the Athenians are not on their way is false (Q.E.D.). Our above analogy has so far been sustained. Athenagoras’ powers as a demagogue are not besmirched; but his powers as a reliable guide for the future are called into question.

How does Athenagoras state his claim regarding the non-possibility of the Athenian expedition? ‘If you advise yourselves well, you will not calculate the probabilities [τά εϊκότα] from a consideration of those things which these people [Hermocrates and his group] report, but from a consideration of those things which clever and much-experienced [έμπειροι] people, as I believe the Athenians are, would do. For it is not probable [εικός] that the Athenians, leaving the Peloponnesians behind and not having yet firmly concluded the war there, willingly come to another war just as big. . .’ (6.36.3-4). There is much interest for us in this brief section. Athenagoras’ yardstick for the truth in this situation is *not* the reports which have been coming in from abroad (cf. 6.32.3), and which have been interpreted, correctly as we know, by Hermocrates; rather Athenagoras urges his audience to compute τά εϊκότα from a consideration of the (previous) actions of ‘much-experienced men’ such as the Athenians. But what do the Athenians do? Do they indeed act like ‘much-experienced men?’ At the beginning of book 6 Thucydides, *in propria persona*, states that the Athenians undertook the Sicilian expedition being ‘inexperienced [άπειροι] as regards the size of the island and the number of its inhabitants. . . and as regards the fact that they were undertaking a war not much inferior to that against the Peloponnesians’ (6.6.1). The two passages are so similar that Thucydides surely assumes that we remember the earlier passage when we read the latter. Anybody, then, who bases his view of what may well happen (τά εϊκότα) on the ‘fact’ that the Athenians are a paradigm of experience and intelligence could not be more wrongheaded. In fact, so wrongheaded is Athenagoras that the fact he adduces for the Athenians’ not going (because of their *experience*) on the expedition, namely that the war in Sicily is no less than that in the Peloponnes (at 6.36.4), is the *very* fact of which Thucydides himself says the Athenians were *inexperienced* (at 6.6.1). How much more clearly could Thucydides say what he thinks about Athenagoras, and indeed the Athenian decision to set out for Sicily.

Though Athenagoras does not believe for a moment that the Athenians are on their way to Sicily, at 6.37ff, he entertains the possibility. ‘If indeed. . . [the Athenians] should come, I believe that Sicily is more capable
of carrying through the war than the Peloponnese since it is in every way so much better prepared; moreover our city by itself is much stronger than the present force which, as they [Hermocrates et al.] say, is coming against us—even if its were twice the size. I know [ἐπισταμαι] that neither will horses accompany the Athenians, nor will any be procured here with the exception of a few from the Egestaeans’ (6.37.1). The supposition that the Athenians might come leads to a series of hypothetical predictions on the part of Athenagoras. We have seen previously (at 6.36.3-4) how utterly wrongheaded Athenagoras’ predictions are. Now he tentatively assumes the opposite of what he there predicted; in other words, the assumption that the Athenians are coming against Sicily, previously treated as absurd, is now hypothetically treated as true; and we the readers know that it is true.

It is noteworthy that Athenagoras’ predictions immediately change from bad to good when they are based on the (actual) facts. Though he entertains the arrival of the Athenians as the slimiest of possibilities, he knows [ἐπισταμαι] that if they arrive they will neither have any horses nor obtain any save a few from the Egestaeans.6 Thucydides himself in the subsequent narrative confirms these two facts for the most part.7 All told, Athenagoras’ predictive powers in this case are quite good. But how ironic (tragic?) that they are based on a counterfactual! Athenagoras, a man who really knows what will happen to the Athenians if they should come against Sicily, does not himself believe that they are coming. In a similar vein, and similarly based on the counterfactual supposition, Athenagoras states that the Athenians, should they arrive, will undoubtedly be destroyed ‘especially since the Athenians will be in a Sicily completely antagonistic to them (for Sicily will band together). . . and not far will they [the Athenians] venture because of our cavalry. In sum, I believe that the Athenians would not even conquer the land’ (6.37.2). These sentiments had earlier been expressed by Nicias (in 6.21.1),8 in his second speech before the Athenian assembly. His fears, just as Athenagoras’ misplaced predictions, are borne out in the subsequent narrative.9 Athenagoras’ predictions are thus shown to be true,

6. Cf. Nicias’ remarks at 6.21.1 fin: ‘if the [Sicilian] cities should become frightened and thus band together. . . we would be left without friends (except the Egestaeans) to furnish us with horses for our defence’. Whatever positive things I say about Athenagoras’ hypothetical predictions goes double for Nicias’ actual predictions.

7. Firstly, at 6.64.1, we are told quite simply that for the Athenians no cavalry, i.e., no horse, is present. Secondly, at 6.71.2, Thucydides tells us that the Athenians must send for cavalry both to Athens and to their Sicilian allies. And finally at 6.98.1, as Athenagoras (and Nicias before him (at 6.21.1 fin — see note 6 supra) ) predicted, only 300 cavalry plus horses arrive from the Egestaeans.

8. See note 6 supra.

9. Firstly, concerning Sicilian unity, comparison should be made with 7.33.2 (cf. 6.33.5 for Hermocrates’ prediction concerning Sicilian unity). Secondly, the problems the Athenians
but, nevertheless, they are nugatory because they are based on a premise not believed to be true. In the case of Hermocrates we perceived a tragic element. In the case of Athenagoras we must perceive, I think, a rather ironic element. The least persuasive of men, Hermocrates, has, tragically, the greatest claim to truth; the most persuasive of men, Athenagoras, has the least claim to truth, and, ironically, for the sole reason that his major premise is wrong.

Athenagoras concludes his speech in the mask of a teacher (6.40.1). The power of political rhetoric is such that the man who does not know becomes the man who knows. Athenagoras addresses Hermocrates and his group as ‘οἱ πάντων ἀξυνετῶτατοί: ‘if still even now, oh most ignorant of all men, you do not learn . . . ’ Given Athenagoras’ actual grasp (or rather non-grasp) of the true situation, his address to Hermocrates et al. is more of an address to himself; or it should be. The men who know are declared to be the most ignorant of all; and those who do not know are their teachers. The reversal of values, the confusion between appearance and reality is total. Plato was not the first to call attention to the vagaries inherent in the political realm.

IV. The Speech of the Anonymous General

Has the analogy which we drew at the beginning of Section III been sustained? The analogy was this: least persuasive: most persuasive:: most veracious: least veracious. For it to be sustained the subsequent passages should show that Athenagoras’ plan, or rather lack of one, won the day. After all, he was πιθανώτατος (most persuasive).

In chapter 41 an anonymous general steps forth.10 He immediately calls a halt to the calumnies of Athenagoras and states that ‘. . . we should look to the reports that are coming in from the outside [τὰ ἑσαγγελλόμενα], in order that each man and the city as a whole prepare themselves for repelling the invaders. Even if there is no need, there is no harm in the state being furnished with horses and arms. . . ’ (6.41.2–3). Whatever Athenagoras’ persuasive powers are, they did not convince the one person whom they should have convinced. This general, who was in fact in charge of the Syracusan assembly,11 believed that preparedness against a foreign enemy are to have with the Sicilian cavalry are manifest as soon as the two armies come face to face (6.64.2, 67.2, 68.3, 70.3). (For the final pre-eminence of the Syracusan cavalry see 7.78.3, 78.6).

10. It is perhaps of importance to note that Athenagoras, described at 6.35.2 as a ‘politician’ (προστάτης τοῦ δήμου), is compositionally ringed by the speeches of two generals, Hermocrates and the anonymous general. Does this give us an added clue as to the ‘soundness’ of the various personages and their speeches (professional soldiers vs. dilettantes)?

11. Cf. 6.41.1.
was necessary in any event. If the reports were in fact true (contra Athenagoras' beliefs), action was obviously needed; and if the reports were not true, then nevertheless no harm would be done by preparing (contra Athenagoras who believed that since the reports were not true no preparation need to commenced against an imaginary enemy, but rather action must be taken against the purveyors of those false reports, lest the constitution be subverted, etc. (6.38.2-5, 40.2)).

Athenagoras has ultimately proven to be unpersuasive, and his slurs upon Hermocrates slanderous. Hermocrates, to the extent that his advice to prepare for war has been accepted by the unnamed general, has proven to be rather more persuasive. Our analogy has not been sustained. The least knowledgeable man (Athenagoras) has not proven to be the most persuasive. And in such being the case, Thucydides is telling us something about the Syracusans, or at least that one Syracusan upon whose shoulders the ultimate decision for preparedness rested. And Thucydides is saying some very positive things: the general is not taken in by the calumnies cast by Athenagoras, he is not moved by political rhetoric, he is above party politics, he is a good empiricist looking to τά ἐσαγγελόμενα (the outside reports). This little speech of the anonymous general is no mere aside, for all these implications may be drawn from it. And it is no mere aside for another reason as well; for it is ultimately from this speech alone that any action is undertaken by the Syracusans in preparation for a war which would mean freedom or servitude.

V. Conclusion

If we remember Thucydides' remark at 6.32.3, immediately preceding the three speeches with which this essay has been concerned, viz. his remark that '. . . news about the [Athenian] expedition was reported at Syracuse from many sides; yet for a long time nothing was believed,' then I think that a remark of his, found in the narrative section succeeding the speeches, provides a fitting conclusion to this essay. At 6.45 Thucydides tells us that 'At Syracuse. . . σαφή [clear (i.e., true)] reports were coming in from many sides and from their own scouts that the Athenian fleet was at Rhegium; and in the face of this they prepared themselves with all their spirit, and no longer did they disbelieve.' So, in the end, disbelief has turned into belief. At first the reports about the Athenian expedition were not believed; now they are. At first Hermocrates was not believed; now he most certainly is. In fine, Hermocrates, nay, the truth is vindicated. Cassandra has been heeded for once. But it was almost too late.