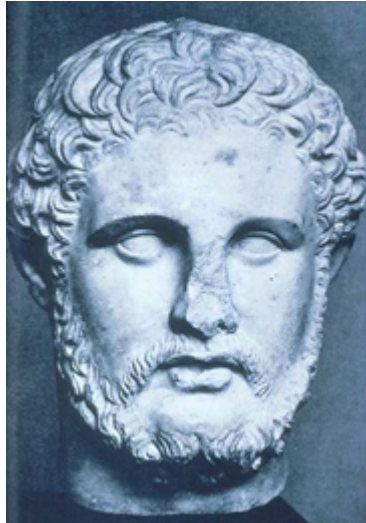


Current Cleon



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Pick up any journal of mass political psychosis, cultural collapse or resurgent authoritarianism in once-vibrant Western democracies and you're likely to encounter an ancient Athenian by the name of Cleon. A villain of the late-fifth century B.C., this public irritant otherwise lost to history is getting a belated workout for one reason: He's a lot like Trump.

He's also a good baseline for a discussion of American demagogues, which is the subject of the freshman writing class that I teach at George Washington University.

Cleon Son of Cleanetus was a boor of the period immediately following the death of the literally pointy headed Pericles, the Obama of the era. He vaulted to power despite having had no government or military experience, which had been the typical route to leadership. Instead, he ran the family business, a successful leather tanning outfit.

He was rash, scornful, self-proud and slanderous. Aristotle viewed him as a bully who "corrupted the Athenians more than anyone else." Cleon, he said, "was the first to shout

during a speech in the Assembly, use abusive language while addressing the people, and hitch up his skirts.”

Just like Trump!

He also had a violent streak. In a famous passage in Thucydides’s history of the Peloponnesian War, Cleon demands that the Athenian Assembly slaughter all the men of Mytilene, an erstwhile ally that, like a rat, had switched sides in the middle of the war to side with Sparta. The women and children, he insisted, should be sold into slavery.

Nice guy.

Persuasive, too. The Assembly sided with Cleon over his more dispassionate interlocutor, Diodotus, and dispatched a galley to Mytilene to execute the orders. More than a thousand men were quickly put to the sword.

That’s the abridged version. It’s a dramatic tale with an unexpected twist. And it has a few pungent parallels to our own woe, which is why Cleon, like Trump, has been getting lots of press lately in some major outlets: *The Scotsman*, *The American Scholar*, *UWire*, even *The Herald-Tribune* of Randolph County, Ill., although the reference there was to a Cleon Kempfer Sr. of Willisville, arrested for burglary of a farm shed along with a Cleon Kempfer Jr.

Senior and Junior caught up in alleged crime, eh? Ring any bells?

In my class, we use ancient Cleon as a model for America’s own Big Four demagogues: Huey Long, Joseph McCarthy, George Wallace and, of course, Trump.

We learn that Cleon, like The Big Four, was loathed by the elites and beloved by the rabble, whom he flattered and purchased with such emoluments as three extra obols for jury duty. When you’re humping cisterns of olive oil all day long, some extra obolage can go a long way.

We also learn that Aristophanes mocked Cleon mercilessly in his comedies, provoking much litigation. It didn’t work for Cleon, either.

It's *de rigueur* to observe that Trump, like Cleon, has flouted all the "norms" of democratic politics. It's also true. But Trump is not only normal; he's an archetype of democracy as old as the polis.

He's also squarely in the American tradition. When my students read Margaret Chase Smith's take-down of McCarthy, they know who's Cleon and who's Diodotus. Ditto debates over treatment of mothers with babies pleading for asylum.

In fact, as malignant as Trump is, he's just the latest aspiring American tyrant. Even the way he sells out his country is typical. Nixon secretly derailed Vietnam War peace talks for advantage in the 1968 campaign. Reagan meddled in the Iran hostage negotiations in 1980. And of course, Trump is in bed with Russians oligarchs.

So much for the exceptional quality of our democracy.

Maybe that's a good enough lesson to take from history since exceptionalism can excuse lots of unexceptional behavior. Like getting in bed with Russian oligarchs. And neo-Nazis. And porn stars. And Wayne Lapierre. Ew.

As for what to do about Current Cleon, what counsel does history offer? Hm. Cleon died in battle, but Trump survived his combat: beating off STDs lurking among his sexual conquests.

Long was shot, obviously not an option here. Wallace, too, was shot and used the experience to redeem himself, a profoundly unlikely model for Trump. McCarthy drank himself to death, but Trump's a tea *teetotaler*. SAD!

Maybe we're already self-correcting given the midterms and the inexorable muddle to impeachment. If so, we would be repeating another bit of Athenian history: In a twist, the day after it voted to butcher the Mytileneans, the Assembly changed its mind and sent a second galley to overtake the first.

That's lovely, but the Athenian correction was only temporary since Cleon's rise helped bring on Athens's fall. By 404, spent from plague, war and bad government, the great democracy had surrendered to Sparta. It never fully recovered.

People love to quote Santayana on the peril of forgetting the past, but he was only repeating what Thucydides had said 2,400 years earlier:

“It will be enough for me ... if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future.”

That’s both a hope and a warning.

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