

Thucydides VI
The Sicilian Campaign (Nicias vs. Alcibiades)

The Athenians vote to send an expedition to Sicily, in order to help their allies the Egestaeans in their war with the Selinuntines. They choose Nicias (and two others) to command the expedition, but Nicias is against the voyage and he says so in an address to the Assembly.

Nicias argues that Athens has not even gotten control of its Peloponnesian empire, so it is a mistake to tackle such a large and faraway project like Sicily: "you leave many enemies behind you here to go yonder and bring more back with you.... [T]he Egestaeans, our allies, have been wronged, and we run to help them, while the rebels who have so long wronged us still wait for punishment." [10] Moreover, though the Egestaeans are allies, what have they ever done for Athens?

Nicias tells the Athenians that they have become overconfident, "puffed up" by a recent unexpected success over the Lacedaemonians. He implores them to take a second vote on the matter, and to ignore young rich kids who support the campaign (i.e. Alcibiades).

Thucydides points out that Nicias' ad hominem attack is directed at Alcibiades, a political opponent who most Athenians think is plotting to be a tyrant.

Alcibiades then addresses the assembly, vehemently defending his fame, fortune, youth, and the Sicilian campaign. He argues that the Sicilian "motley rabbles" can be easily defeated, and that they overstate their strength. Moreover, Athens has always overestimated the strength of rebel states in Peloponnesia, so the condition of the empire is more secure than Nicias would have us believe. Alcibiades defends the alliance with the Egestaeans, and agrees that though they have never helped Athens directly, they have helped indirectly by engaging potential enemies in Sicily who might have sent armies to Athens in the last war. [note the inconsistency - above he argues that the Sicilians are weak, but here he highlights them as a potential threat to Athens during their previous conflict!]

Alcibiades essentially argues for the preemptive strike: "Men do not rest content with parrying the attacks of a superior, but often strike the first blow to prevent the attack being made.... [W]e must not be content with retaining [the empire] but must scheme to extend it, for if we cease to rule others, we are in danger of being ruled ourselves." [18]

On seeing that the Athenians are leaning toward Alcibiades' view, Nicias argues that the campaign will require a very large force if it is to be successful. He hopes this will change their minds, but it does not-it makes them even more enthusiastic. The majority in favor of the expedition becomes so large that those opposed remained quiet.

In the following days a huge force is assembled and readied for the campaign.