The Andrew W. Marshall Papers

"The Incalculable Element"
Ancient Innovations for Modern Security Problems

EMILY A. DAVIS
WINNER OF THE ANDREW W. MARSHALL PAPER PRIZE ON CREATIVE BURSTS AND INTELLECTUAL OUTLIERS

About the Author

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Emily is a PhD candidate in Political Theory at the University of Texas at Austin. Her dissertation examines the ambiguous concept of charismatic leadership through works by thinkers such as Weber, Xenophon, and Plutarch. After graduation, she hopes to continue exploring questions of justice, leadership, and political ambition as seen in both ancient and modern texts—and to continue considering how the teachings of these texts illuminate the political problems we face today.

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Foreword

Within an individual's career or an organization's lifetime, there may be a period when they are especially creative or part of a "flaring of intellectual outliers," defined by Augier, March, and Marshall[1] as "small groups of thinkers who briefly, but decisively, influence the development of ideas, technologies, policies, or worldviews." Occasionally, individual and organizational factors interact to help encourage or cultivate creativity with constructive and innovative results.

The Andrew W. Marshall Paper Prize on Creative Bursts and Intellectual Outliers asked people to examine how creativity among peer groups or within an organization comes about, is fostered, and is maintained. "'The Incalculable Element': Ancient Innovations for Modern Security Problems," by Emily A. Davis, takes the reader on a journey with the Syracusan general Hermocrates, demonstrating his brilliance as an intellectual outlier who inspired several creative bursts. She also offers the reader a meditation on limitations, intellectual flexibility, and partnership.

In presenting Emily's paper we hope that the reader will understand the importance of understanding history as one grapples with the strategic questions facing the United States.

The Andrew W. Marshall Foundation
May 2023

Acknowledgments

Many unanticipated dangers—military, political, technological, foreign, and domestic—shadow the U.S. national security landscape, creating a need for adaptive and inventive leadership. But what exactly does this leadership look like? This paper explores insights from what might seem an unusual source: Thucydides' discussion of how the Sicilians, inspired by the unconventional guidance of the general Hermocrates, facilitate Sparta's defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War. As Thucydides shows, Hermocrates spurs his listeners to reflect on their limitations and biases at a time when imminent peril would seem to call for nothing but confidence. Yet this reflection, by allowing the Sicilians to reconsider their moral and cultural norms, reform their military structures, and join with unlikely allies to resist Athens' imperialist threat, fosters an innovative outlook that makes that resistance succeed. This ancient case study remains salient for modern audiences because it exemplifies a nontraditional leadership suited to today's unforeseen security problems.

Introduction

In the eighth year of the Peloponnesian War as described by Thucydides, Hermocrates, a previously undiscussed general from Syracuse, exhorts his fellow Sicilians to unite against the mounting Athenian threat. Sicily has been marked by ethnic conflicts of various kinds,[2] conflicts that have caused some groups to side with the Athenians and others to side against them. Hermocrates urges his listeners to overcome these tensions in order to defeat an enemy whose growing imperialism endangers them all. His speech is convincing. Although their peace agreement does not last forever, the Sicilians are persuaded to make one at this crucial time. When they relay their decision to the Athenians, they withdraw from Sicily, if only temporarily.

On the surface, this story seems like many others that have been told throughout political and military history: A leader makes a speech, his audience believes him, and some change occurs, at least for the moment. However, a deeper examination of Hermocrates' words (both here and elsewhere in Thucydides' work) reveals truths that, despite their ancient setting, remain remarkably relevant to issues of contemporary U.S. national security. At a time of massive instability—a time when seemingly infallible laws and systems suddenly appear fragile and established security strategies appear weak in the face of unexpected threats—Hermocrates fosters an ingenuity among the Sicilians that helps them play a key role in eventually defeating Athens. Surprisingly, he does so by highlighting human limitations, the changeability of political and strategic affairs, and the power of chance much more than almost any other Thucydidean leader.[3]

This decision to emphasize the Sicilians' limits is both daring and innovative. One would think that in their perilous situation, the Sicilians, who are weaker than the Athenians, would need exhortations to power rather than reminders of their human frailty. Yet such reminders are, paradoxically, exactly what the Sicilians need. By placing their own limitations and biases at the forefront of their minds, Hermocrates leads them not only to reflect realistically on their fallibilities but also to question which of these fallibilities are genuine and which are imposed on them by convention and prejudice. These considerations encourage an open-mindedness—a greater ideological receptivity, acceptance of organizational change, and willingness to form untraditional partnerships—that prove vital to the Sicilians' success.

Although this success is now centuries old, the Sicilian situation is not so different from that of the United States today. Like in Thucydides' work, this is a time of major political and social upheaval, characterized by institutional instability, intense polarization, and bitter moral and cultural tensions. All of these problems, scholars argue, hinder the creation of effective foreign policy and leave the United States ever more vulnerable to external threats.[4] Moreover, analysts have been claiming since the turn of the century that a kind of strategic upheaval is occurring as well—that the increased connectivity and technological advancement of the past few decades, as well as the impact of massive political and military changes such as the shift to an all-volunteer force, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the events of September 11, 2001, necessitate a revised approach to military leadership.[5] In January 2011, the Defense Science Board published a study devoted exclusively to enhancing the adaptability of American military forces. Its goal was to help the Department of Defense "better face the rapidly changing security environment of the 21st century."[6] And as recent research shows, adaptability (or flexibility) has become a highly prized quality among those hoping to maximize mission effectiveness in the modern world.

This quality is essential, military scientists claim, both on and off the battlefield. It has become more and more common for military operations to be "geographically distributed"[7] and to include people of many different cultures and backgrounds. These changes have made communication between leaders and their troops, as well as between leaders and the local populations whose support they often need, a morass of "volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity."[8] The ability to gain cultural knowledge quickly, to "shift interpersonal relationships and leadership styles as the situation demands,"[9] and to cooperate with groups of all types (both military and civilian), is now crucial for success.[10] Moreover, as military missions have come to include tasks (such as peacekeeping, providing humanitarian aid, and "establishing or reinforcing political institutions") that differ from pure combat,[11] and as technological progress has extended and blurred the definition of "pure combat," the demand for creativity and adaptability has vastly increased.[12]

In recent years, the United States, confronted with these challenges, has sorely needed leaders who can model these qualities. But since these challenges have created great uncertainty and instability, the impulse has often been to respond to them as quickly and confidently as possible by relying on traditional methods and on decades of uncontested power. As military scholar James H. Lebovic maintains, the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, despite their many differences, had one significant similarity: In all three cases, the United States failed "to understand the potential pitfalls ahead, to consider fallback options, to plan operations with a realistic sense of what [could] (and [could] not) be achieved, and to mobilize the military, economic, and political resources that [were] needed to ensure mission success."[13] Today, as the possibility of a major conflict with China or Russia looms large—one that would involve a dangerously unpredictable mix of "conventional, nuclear, *and* irregular warfare"[14]—many experts, worried that the United States will repeat past mistakes, warn that U.S. hegemony is not guaranteed.[15] In the words of Graham Allison, the United States needs "a serious pause for reflection.... If the United States just keeps doing what it has been doing, future historians will compare American 'strategy' to illusions that British, German, and Russian leaders held as they sleepwalked into 1914."[16]

We are not suggesting, of course, that the United States stop trying to present a powerful and united front in the face of threats. At this point, the need for such a front is perhaps greater than ever. Recent history shows, however, that the United States cannot develop the power and unity necessary in today's environment without adaptability, and it cannot adapt effectively to any kind of conflict without a clear-eyed understanding of its abilities and means. Gaining this kind of understanding requires sustained consideration of difficult questions: Regarding defense and combat, what are America's limits as a country? Which of these limits can be overcome, and what are the best ways to overcome them? How do the answers to these questions differ according to circumstance and perspective?

It is easy to say, of course, that the United States needs adaptable leaders, leaders who can engage effectively with these questions and embrace change and uncertainty in a way that leads to more productive action. It is much harder to envision what such leaders look like in practice. Examining the situation through a Thucydidean lens, therefore, could be useful. True, many researchers have already turned to Thucydides for help illuminating the political and strategic complexities of the modern world.[17] The case of Hermocrates, however, remains understudied, perhaps because he cuts a much less eye-catching figure than, say, Pericles or Alcibiades. Yet this case deserves closer attention, for it provides an example of a leader who, in asking his followers to reflect on their limitations, succeeds in generating the kind of strategic flexibility that is so crucial today.

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Hermocrates' Speech at Gela

The first reference to Hermocrates in Thucydides' history—and, indeed, in history overall—appears in Book 4 of *The Peloponnesian War*, when he first speaks to his fellow Sicilians about the Athenian threat. Thucydides devotes only a few words to his introduction. Stating that ambassadors from all over Sicily have convened in the city of Gela, he calls the general "Hermocrates, the son of Hermon, a Syracusan, and the very man who was persuading them most."[18] After touching on his lineage and background, Thucydides highlights just one quality about Hermocrates: his superior ability to influence others through speech. Given that Hermocrates is "the only statesman whom Thucydides shows bringing about peace on the basis of persuasion,"[19] this brief description is especially compelling.

Why does Hermocrates need to address the Sicilians in the first place? As Thucydides describes, and as contemporary historians have discussed,[20] the Athenians have been considering conquering Sicily—which is an attractive prize because of its size, location, fertility, and accessibility[21]—for some time. In 427 BCE, the fifth year of the Peloponnesian War, they send a fleet of twenty ships to Sicily in response to a conflict between two of its cities, Syracuse and Leontini. Thucydides does not state the cause of this fight, but he makes clear that it is representative of a larger ethnic conflict between the two major Sicilian groups: the Dorians (to which the Syracusans belong) and the Ionians (to which the Leontines belong). Because the Athenians are also Ionian, the allies of the Leontines appeal to them for help. As Thucydides states, the Athenians provide that help seemingly because of their Ionian connection, but really because they want to stop the flow of Sicilian grain to the Peloponnese and to see how feasible a Sicilian conquest might be.[22] At this point, however, a second outbreak of the plague[23] prevents the Athenians from realizing either of these goals.[24]

Still, Sicilian infighting continues for over two years. Many cities eventually take part, with the Dorian ones (such as Gela and Locri) joining Syracuse and the Ionian ones (such as Naxos and Catane) joining Leontini. As Finley points out, some cities are also racked by "serious internal factionalism and class war."[25] This problem is exacerbated by yet another division within Sicily: the one between the Greeks and the original Sicilian settlers, whom the Greeks have subjected.[26] Moreover, tensions exist even among the Dorians, not only due to "the usual border disputes that were endemic among the Greek Sicilian cities,"[27] but also because "all Sicilian cities fear Dorian Syracuse, the most powerful among them. Hence the allure of an Athenian connection, of an outside protector against a homegrown menace."[28] Once the plague passes, this outside protector continues to involve itself in the Sicilian conflicts, so much so that when the warring cities of Gela and Camarina broker a peace in 425, Hermocrates seizes his opportunity to urge the Sicilians to unify. This context sets the stage for his speech at Gela.

Hermocrates begins in a somewhat surprising way, given what is known about the fear and resentment that many Sicilians feel toward Syracuse: he emphasizes that his city is "not the smallest" in Sicily and that it is "not suffering most in the war." With this statement, he reminds his listeners of the sobering, if not chilling, fact of Syracuse's growing strength. In an immediate demonstration of rhetorical skill, however, Hermocrates quickly turns this reminder to his advantage. Because Syracuse remains relatively comfortable, he implies, he does not need to advance its interests; instead, he can discuss what he thinks is the best course of action "for all Sicily."[29] By briefly spotlighting the individual interests of Syracuse, Hermocrates ends up casting himself as a defender of the common good.[30]

Hermocrates goes on to make the general statement that "war is an evil," claiming that everyone understands this fact so well that explaining it is unnecessary. In his next remarks, however, he complicates this claim. Those who are convinced that they have something to gain from war, he says, do not allow either "ignorance" or "fear" to prevent them from engaging in it—but sometimes they "happen" to choose the wrong time to do so. At these moments,

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Hermocrates asserts, "exhortations of reconciliation are useful."[31] With these statements, he suggests that war is not an unqualified evil, for those who believe they will benefit from it may be right. Yet the losses of war could end up outweighing the gains, especially if people miscalculate the timing of the conflict. And the Sicilians, Hermocrates argues, have done just that, which makes his exhortations especially needful. He approaches the peace question pragmatically, proposing that the Sicilians should reconcile not because war is morally reprehensible and peace is morally correct,[32] but because this particular war will not serve the Sicilians as they initially imagined.

This pragmatism becomes more explicit as Hermocrates' speech continues. He asserts no one would contradict the statements that the Sicilians started the war with a view to their "private interests"; that these same interests will dictate the terms of their potential peace agreement; and that, if they cannot reach a settlement, the war will go on.[33] He then introduces the looming threat of Athens, appealing repeatedly to the "sense" (or "moderation") of his listeners.[34] If they were sensible, Hermocrates insists, they would see that they cannot afford to think only of their private interests, for these interests, to a great extent, depend on the safety and stability of Sicily as a whole.[35] He paints a powerful picture of the Athenian menace, claiming that the Athenians are hiding sinister intentions beneath a friendly mask. Although they are acting under "the lawful name of alliance" now, they are simply playing on the "hostility" that exists among the Sicilians "by nature," waiting for them to wear themselves out, and plotting their eventual subjection.[36]

By referring to the natural hostility among the Sicilians, Hermocrates acknowledges the intensity of the Dorian–Ionian conflict, but he also urges the ambassadors to broaden their perspectives. No one should fool themselves, he claims, into thinking their shared ethnicity will always protect the Sicilian Ionians from the Athenians, for it is not hatred for the Dorians nor affinity for the Ionians that drives the Athenians' imperialism. Instead, they are "longing for the good things in Sicily, which we have acquired in common."[37] Hermocrates then makes the surprising statement that he does not blame the Athenians for harboring this longing, for human beings naturally desire to rule—but he would blame the Sicilians for ignoring the Athenian threat and submitting to the "common danger" too easily.[38] The real enemy, Hermocrates stresses, is the Athenians, at least for now. This enemy imperils all the Sicilians, no matter their ethnicity or background. The way to "try in common to save all Sicily," therefore, is to make peace as quickly as possible.[39]

Hermocrates recognizes, then, that the Ionians have a certain natural bond with one another and a certain natural animosity toward the Dorians. Yet this is only one part of the story, for he also suggests there is something that runs deeper in human beings than ethnic ties: the natural longing to rule. This most fundamental desire, Hermocrates argues, could spur the Athenians to reject their "lawful" alliance with the Ionians and even to resist their natural bond with them. And because the Athenians would simply be obeying their deepest impulses, Hermocrates claims, their actions would be "very excusable."[40] In the same way that an eagle could not be blamed for trying to capture a hare, the Athenians could not be blamed for trying to capture Sicily. With these statements, Hermocrates offers his listeners a new viewpoint not only on their relations with other cities—suggesting that human nature (or human ambition) allows for many more combinations of alliances than they have imagined[41]—but also on what is "excusable." Once again, Hermocrates' speech is remarkably free of moralism. The Athenians, he indicates, did not choose to

feel their irrepressible desire to rule, which means they should not be condemned or punished for it.[42] While giving a certain credence to what the Sicilians already believe, then, Hermocrates also gives them the opportunity to recognize the prejudices within these beliefs—to realize that ethnic differences do not necessitate enmity and to temper their retributive instincts, even against the group that really does constitute an immediate threat.

This theme reappears in the next section of the speech. After reiterating that peace is far better than war because it brings so many fewer dangers, Hermocrates warns against the confidence that either "justice or strength" will guarantee victory in battle. He reminds his listeners that many people, in trying to punish someone they think is unjust, have ended up merely harming themselves, while many who have counted on their seemingly superior strength have miscalculated disastrously. "Vengeance," Hermocrates says, "does not turn out justly because injustice is done, nor is strength sure because it is hopeful...the incalculable element of the future" wields too much power for that. Although this element is "the most perilous," it is also "the most useful," for it strikes the same fear into everyone's heart and makes people think twice before engaging in war.[43] Hermocrates encourages his listeners to let "the obscure fear of this uncertain future," combined with the danger of the Athenians' immediacy, provoke them to unite and eject the enemy from Sicily. Though he hints that he knows this unity cannot last forever,[44] he urges the ambassadors to make it last for "as great a time as possible." Internal peace, Hermocrates argues, will leave the Sicilians free to run their state as they please, while internal war would make them reliant on the Athenians and unable to fight for themselves.[45]

Finally, Hermocrates acknowledges more openly than before that he, as a Syracusan, harbors some of the same imperial ambitions as the Athenians. Yet he tempers this statement with another reference to the incalculability of the future, modeling the consideration of limits that he is urging the Sicilians to practice. He claims that a "love of victory" has not fooled him into thinking he is "equally master of my affairs and of fortune, which I do not rule," and he says he will "yield as much as is reasonable."[46] At the end of his speech, he refers again to the Dorian–Ionian conflict, but exhorts his listeners to remember that they are all called "Sicilians." He reemphasizes that if one Sicilian city is endangered, so are the rest. For these reasons, Hermocrates concludes, the ambassadors should choose peace, thereby choosing "freedom" for Sicily.

In this latter part of his speech, Hermocrates closely links the desire to blame and punish—to take vengeance for perceived injustices—with the inability to recognize that human beings cannot control fortune.[47] He suggests that the conviction that one is morally right and the confidence that one is stronger than others can cause the misguided hope that justice or strength gives one full command over the future. Armed with this heady faith, people then feel free to strike down those they feel have wronged them or those they see as weak. In doing so, they forget that such moves, no matter how boldly they make them, do not always work out the way they plan. Despite these best efforts, "the incalculable element" makes people stumble all the harder because self-assurance prevents them from accepting it. Though Hermocrates admits that the tensions within Sicily run deep and will probably never disappear, he advises his listeners to try not to entrench themselves on their respective sides, for such stubbornness could easily blind them to the realities of their situation.

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As we have shown, however, Hermocrates does not present these realities too harshly. Despite his pragmatic statements and his many hints that a true common good will elude the Sicilians, he does not simply dismiss their long-held beliefs,[48] and he appeals to a common identity and purpose, fragile though they may be.[49] Moreover, his very lack of moralism—his very emphasis on "sense" (or "moderation") and on humility rather than rigid conviction—allows him to present his listeners with a more humane and openminded outlook on warfare. As Young-Bruehl notes, "Hermocrates' success was, pointedly, not a product of moral argument; rather, he gave his potential allies new interpretations of commonly held opinions about human nature and the unpredictability of the future. That is, he helped them to intellectual reconsideration and consensus."[50] Connor, too, claims, "The effect of Hermocrates' words is...to introduce new issues and a fresh view of events and even of power itself."[51] This is the initial creative burst that Hermocrates, a clear intellectual outlier, encourages within the Sicilians: the mental shift from firm self-assurance to careful self-reflection in a situation that, given its pressing dangers, would seem to require the former. It is the latter, however, that spurs the Sicilians to look beyond their traditional alliances and enmities, at least for a while. As Thucydides relates, the Sicilians do come to a peace agreement, at which point they bribe the Athenians to depart.[52]

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The Athenian Contrast

Hermocrates' singularity becomes even more evident upon consideration of the broader context of his speech. Monoson and Loriaux point out that the speech "follows immediately and antithetically on the Athenian triumph at Pylos, an unexpected victory and the highwater mark of the city's fortunes." This "first introduction to Sicily and Syracuse, the principal instruments of Athens's defeat" signals the beginning of the end for Athens.[53]

Thucydides strengthens this implication by bookending the speech with another Athenian anecdote. He explains that when the Athenian soldiers get home, two of their leaders (Pythodorus and Sophocles) are banished for taking the Sicilians' bribes instead of trying to conquer the island, while another (Eurymedon) is fined. Right after describing these punishments, Thucydides makes a more general statement: he says that because the Athenians have done so well in the war thus far, they have become convinced that they are stronger than anyone who might oppose them—that, in fact, they "[have] a right" (ἠξίουν) not to be opposed.[54] They think they can "achieve the possible things and the impracticable things equally," no matter their number of resources. This great success, Thucydides claims, is "confusing their strength with their hope."[55]

This discussion echoes a crucial part of Hermocrates' exhortation. Hermocrates warns the Sicilians that "Vengeance does not turn out justly because injustice is done, nor is strength sure because it is hopeful," and he urges them not to let this hope enchant them into thinking they can control the future.[56] Thucydides now suggests that the Athenians have fallen into this very trap. First, he implies that they feel a sense of justice—that they believe they deserve victory—by saying they think they "[have] a right" to conquer and by mentioning the banishing and fining of Pythodorus, Sophocles, and Eurymedon. As Strassler notes in his commentary on this passage, "It was not all that unusual for Athenians to punish statesmen or generals with whom they were angry or disappointed."[57] The Athenians, intoxicated by their perceived right to subdue Sicily (and most likely outraged by the matter of the bribes) immediately act on these forceful feelings, taking vengeance for what they see as an injustice.

Second, Thucydides indicates that the Athenians' success has made their hopes soar to a dangerous height. Their earlier triumphs have convinced them that future triumphs are certain, even in impossible situations, even though strength is not "sure because it is hopeful."[58] Through this passage, Thucydides clearly suggests, just as Hermocrates does in his speech, that this feeling of boundless strength is closely connected to one of moral superiority and that the two together create the dangerous illusion of infallibility.

As many scholars have discussed,[59] Thucydides shows this illusion confounding the Athenians at several significant points. Before laying siege to the island of Melos in 416, they tell the disadvantaged Melians that considering questions of justice is unnecessary, for "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."[60] As they claim

earlier in the war[61] and imply here, they understand that their own good consists of obeying their imperial ambitions and that nature compels them to view the pursuit of this good as more important than anything else. The Athenians argue, then, that they are free from the desire to act justly or nobly—that is, to look to the good of anyone other than themselves—which means that they, as the stronger power, will not hesitate to crush the Melians for their own gain.

Thucydides demonstrates, however, that the Athenians are not quite so liberated from the concern for justice as they purport to be. As Bruell notes,[62] their initial remarks about focusing solely on their own ambitions[63] are immediately followed by the claim that they still act more justly than their strength requires.[64] In the Melian dialogue, the Athenians, despite their hard-nosed assertions, condemn the Spartans for "believing that the pleasant things are noble and the advantageous things are just."[65] And in his famous Funeral Oration, in which he waxes rhapsodic about the Athenians' character and virtues, the great statesman Pericles praises his people for displaying an unsurpassed generosity that transcends all selfishness.[66] Thucydides indicates, therefore, that the Athenians believe they are (perhaps divinely) protected not only by their superior strength but also by their superior regard for justice—both of which, they feel, entitle them to commensurate rewards like securing Sicily for their empire.

It is in their approach to the infamous Sicilian expedition (launched in 415, ten years after Hermocrates convinces his audience to spurn the Athenians) that this conviction is most evident. Although many factors make this undertaking ill-advised—the unstable conditions that the war and the recent bout of plague have created within Athens, the dangers of attacking powerful Sicily and the huge number of resources needed to do so, and the difficulty of maintaining a hold over the faraway island even if it were subdued[67]—the Athenians, buoyed by hope, feel sure the expedition will succeed.[68] Even at the moment of the soldiers' departure, when the perils of the project are most palpable, the lavish beauty and splendor of their force bolster the Athenians' faith and keep them unswerving in their certainty.[69] Yet this certainty, of course, is unfounded. The Sicilian expedition ends in a calamitous defeat that completely destroys the Athenian forces.[70]

It is striking, therefore, that the Athenians' initial argument—that nature compels them to obey their deep desire to rule, which implies they cannot be blamed for pursuing their ambitions—matches Hermocrates' statements about the excusability of their actions.[71] The problem with this argument, however, is that it rests on the Athenians' manifestly false insistence that they are free from the concern for justice. Their obvious trust in their moral superiority—of which the hopes they place in their strength; their groundless conviction that they will necessarily get what they think they deserve; and their anger at those who stand between them and what, in their minds, is rightfully theirs are all signs—shows they do not really believe their own thesis.[72] During the debates about the feasibility of the Sicilian expedition, this trust predisposes the Athenians to heed Alcibiades, the young, ambitious hothead who conjures grand visions of an ever-expanding empire, rather than Nicias, the older general who, correctly anticipating that this venture will force the Athenians to exceed their military limits, urges restraint.[73] And as Thucydides implies, even Nicias, the most prudent of his peers, occasionally allows the belief that he must be rewarded for his virtue (by his fellow Athenians and by the gods) to cloud his strategic judgment during the war.[74] With these examples, Thucydides demonstrates the pervasive appeal of the Athenian outlook.

As we have shown, this outlook contrasts sharply with that of Hermocrates. In his speech at Gela, he admits that neither he nor his people lack imperial ambition, pointing to an ominous similarity between the Syracusans and the Athenians. Yet he also shows that the Syracusans (and the Sicilians as a whole) have something the rising Athenians do not: a leader who is trying to moderate their moral and strategic hopes before their power grows too great. A major reason for Hermocrates' success, however, is that he (unlike the Athenians) does not try to deny the existence of these hopes. The Athenians, by persisting in this denial, allow themselves to charge ahead without confronting their own limitations and assumptions, which eventually leads to their downfall. Hermocrates, by contrast, neither ignores nor rejects his listeners' moral framework. Instead, he acknowledges it and asks them to view it from

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a different perspective, thereby helping them temper its most extreme part: the prejudice that has kept them from opening their minds to new diplomatic possibilities. Unlike the Athenians, whose pretensions to cynicism only intensify their moralism—and, for that matter, unlike the Spartans, who, as Burns convincingly argues, also assume they must ultimately be rewarded for their righteousness[75]—Hermocrates really is able to resist succumbing to moralism. He therefore avoids ascribing certainty to an uncertain future and desiring revenge against those who oppose his plans. His is a humanity that seeks to persuade rather than to punish, even when his own life and livelihood are under threat.

It has been said that the Athenians and the Spartans are opposites with regard to national character: the Athenians are innovative, bold, and swift, while the Spartans are traditional, cautious, and slow to act.[76] Thucydides suggests, however, that the true ideological innovators—the ones who do not merely claim to depart from the arrogance and vengefulness of conventional moralism but really do so, at least for a while—are the Sicilians under Hermocrates.[77] Through reflection on their own weaknesses and biases at a time that would seem to require the opposite, the Sicilians actually succeed in strengthening their forces. Considering their limitations helps them see the realities of their situation more clearly and realize that one of those limitations, the strife among the different Sicilian groups, is not as insurmountable as custom would have them believe. And as Thucydides shows, their successes do not end here.

The Sicilian Victory

Hermocrates' second speech is presented immediately upon the Athenians' decision to launch the Sicilian expedition. Thucydides writes that reports of this expedition quickly reach Syracuse, but no one believes them for some time. Eventually, however, the Syracusans hold an assembly at which some speakers try to convince the audience that the Athenians' advance is real, while others hold that it is not. Hermocrates, correctly believing that the Athenians are indeed approaching, warns the Syracusans of this fact in no uncertain terms.

He begins by saying that he does not really expect to win his listeners over, thereby acknowledging the limits of even his considerable persuasive powers. Yet he also says the thought of being doubted and ridiculed will not silence him when he is convinced that Sicily is in trouble. The Athenians, Hermocrates asserts, will soon attack Syracuse, pretending once again that they are protecting their Leontinian allies against the Syracusan threat,[78] but actually intending to subdue the state and then conquer all of Sicily. He urges the Syracusans, therefore, to confirm current alliances and form new ones. They should reach out, Hermocrates says, not only to the native Sicilians and inhabitants of other Sicilian and Italian cities, but also to the Carthaginians, the Spartans, and the Corinthians, all of whom are either actively fighting Athens or live in fear of an Athenian attack. Finally, Hermocrates argues that although the Syracusans are not accustomed to making preemptive strikes, they should ready their navy and try to cut the Athenians off before they reach Sicily. This move, he claims, will surprise the Athenians enough that they might be deterred, even though their numbers and resources outstrip those of the Syracusans. Hermocrates ends his speech by exhorting his listeners to let their fear of Athens provoke them into at least preparing for the attack, even if they do not mount an offensive.[79]

Here, Hermocrates' suggestion that fear can have benefits—in particular, that it reminds people of their weaknesses, thereby helping them do what they can to counteract these weaknesses, better than pure confidence does—reappears,[80] as does his related argument for Sicilian unity (which has once again dissolved, as he predicts it will in his first speech). Now, however, he greatly expands his proposed web of alliances, including many more connections outside Sicily that his audience has not yet explored. Even further, Hermocrates encourages the Syracusans to look beyond their conventional military strategies. He urges them to counteract tradition and make the first move, the simple unexpectedness of which could shock their more powerful enemy into submission.

At first, the Syracusans do not welcome these possibilities. The majority wants to believe that the Athenians are not coming or that, even if they are, they will not do serious or lasting damage. Moreover, Hermocrates does not have the luxury, as he does at Gela, of speaking unopposed. His second speech is countered by that of the popular leader Athenagoras, who boasts of the strength of Syracuse and casts Hermocrates as an alarmist plotting to steal power from the people.[81] The Syracusans, therefore, initially reject Hermocrates' advice. Although they decide it is prudent to make some preparations for a potential attack, they base this decision on the counsel of a third, unnamed general, not on that of Hermocrates.[82]

Thucydides relates, however, that the Syracusans about-face, sending envoys to the other Sicilians and readying their horses and weapons, when it becomes clear that the Athenian fleet is indeed approaching.[83] After a period of inactivity, the Athenians make their first move by surprising the Syracusans in the city of Catana. Although the Syracusans are not expecting an attack at this moment, Thucydides says, they "were not lacking in eagerness or daring." They are, however, quite inexperienced in war (especially compared to the Athenians), and Thucydides goes on to admit that their resolve holds only as long as their fragile military skills do.[84] When a sudden thunderstorm erupts, the Syracusans, who have not had much practice fighting in such weather, take fright and soon begin to flee.[85]

"Hermocrates encourages the Syracusans to look beyond their conventional military strategies. He urges them to counteract tradition and make the first move, the simple unexpectedness of which could shock their more powerful enemy into submission."

After this defeat, the Syracusans hold an assembly at which Hermocrates speaks again, this time without an opponent. Thucydides does not quote his words directly here, but he does praise Hermocrates, calling him "a man lacking nothing in sagacity and everything else" and "sufficient in experience of war and brilliant in courage."[86] As Thucydides narrates, Hermocrates tells the Syracusans not to let this setback affect them too much, for their problem is not their will but their lack of discipline. He says, in fact, that they have done quite well, given their unfamiliarity with battle in contrast with the Athenians' plentiful experience.[87] Hermocrates then proposes what he think will help the Syracusans improve: a structural reform of the army.

Hermocrates argues that the Syracusan soldiers are disorganized primarily because of issues with their leadership. The army is top heavy: it has fifteen generals, which makes for an unnecessary number of orders and an unnecessary amount of confusion during both training and battle. Hermocrates claims, therefore, that the number of generals should be significantly reduced and that the new leaders should spend the next winter ensuring that every soldier gets enough weapons (some of them have none) and enough practice for the next fight. After this reform, he says, the Syracusans will possess not only courage but also discipline; this latter quality will bolster the former by giving them greater reliance on their abilities.[88]

Hermocrates also suggests that the new generals should "have full powers" and that the army should swear an oath to permit them to do whatever they see fit.[89] Given that the Syracusans decide to follow all of his advice and proceed to elect him (along with two other men, Heraclides and Sicanus) general, it would be hard not to see an element of self-interest in Hermocrates' arguments. As previously stated, however, Hermocrates has never hidden his own ambitions. He says in his speech at Gela that he also feels the natural desire to rule, but refuses to let that desire breed imperial hopes within him that are so grand as to be foolish. And as Thucydides shows, Hermocrates, rather than abusing his power, uses it to great effect, sparking further innovation within the Syracusan army.

At first, the soldiers continue to struggle with preparedness and organization, suffering another defeat at the plateau of Epipolae in 414—although, "led...above all by Hermocrates,"[90] they do manage to fell an important Athenian general (Lamachus) and to construct two walls that temporarily slow the Athenians.[91] Disheartened by this failure, the Syracusans blame their generals and replace them, retracting Hermocrates' full powers almost as soon as he has received them.[92] At this point, however, the tide begins to turn in the Sicilians' direction. After a few more setbacks, the Syracusans are convinced by Hermocrates and a Spartan general, Gylippus, to try an unexpected tactic: to outfit as many ships as possible and challenge the Athenians on their own turf, the sea.

In another paraphrased speech, Hermocrates tells the Syracusans that the Athenians are not seamen by nature and will not remain a naval power forever, for they only developed their maritime skills because they were forced to do so in their previous war with the Persians. The Athenians, he says, will be surprised and terrified by the Syracusans' readiness to use their own tactics against them.[93] Moreover, Hermocrates blames his listeners neither for their own shortcomings nor for stripping him of his powers. Instead, as in his speech at Gela, he simply presents them with the possibility that something they assumed was natural and permanent—the Athenians' naval hegemony—may not be as changeless as they thought.[94] By doing so, he allows the Syracusans to see their adversaries and themselves in a

different light, which inspires them to try an uncustomary strategy. And as Thucydides shows, this gambit works. The Syracusans capture the Athenian forts at the promontory of Plemmyrium, which Thucydides calls the "greatest and foremost" cause of the Athenians' destruction.[95]

From there, the Athenians begin to grow distressed and exhausted, especially because, energized by the Syracusans' successes, every other Sicilian city (except Agrigentum, which has remained neutral) have now joined the Syracusans in the fight against Athens, effectively fulfilling Hermocrates' initial wish.[96] As the Sicilians' bravery increases, so do the Athenians' disorder and fear.[97] Finally, after a series of Sicilian triumphs and Athenian losses, the Athenians suffer their infamous, completely crushing defeat.[98] A combination of courage, perseverance, and innovation has enabled the Sicilians—the undisputed underdogs—to prevail.

Through this sequence of events, Thucydides continues to show that when Hermocrates prompts his followers to reflect on their own limits and biases, they gain a better understanding not only of what cannot be achieved but also of what *can* be achieved. As Hermocrates demonstrates, some of the Sicilians' key disadvantages—their internal divisions, their military disorganization, their comparative naval weakness—are not as insurmountable as they have imagined. Recognizing this fact allows the Sicilians to adopt new systems and strategies that are innovative and realistic. Yet this recognition would not have been possible without the initial mental shift that Hermocrates inspires: the initial decision to think critically before forging ahead under old and questionable assumptions. This decision helps the Sicilians gain greater open-mindedness and, thus, greater creativity and eventual success.

Conclusions

Even though traditional leadership theories emphasize consistent confidence, today's grand challenges require a less conventional kind of leadership, one that allows for humility, reflection, and acceptance of uncertainty in the face of competing demands.[99] As Thucydides demonstrates, this outlook does not preclude confident action: Hermocrates encourages proactive military measures at every turn. Yet unlike the Athenian generals, he is able to show his people the benefits of confronting their own limitations and assumptions—moral, political, and military—before moving forward. The confidence Hermocrates instills in the Sicilians, therefore, stems not from a groundless belief in their own righteousness but from a realistic and honest assessment of their resources and abilities. Prioritizing deliberate reflection leads to the open-mindedness that true flexibility requires, which, in turn, allows clear-eyed determination to replace vague hope.

It is evident, then, how this case applies to current issues of U.S. national security. For military and political leaders who are trying to cultivate the adaptability that is becoming ever more necessary, the teachings of Thucydides are indispensable. There is much to learn, not only from the speeches of Hermocrates but also from the contrast between the Sicilians' actions and those of the Athenians. As Brands puts it, "Precisely because the United States is able to do so much in the world, there is a near-constant temptation for it to do more." But instead of quickly succumbing to this temptation, as the Athenians do, "leaders need to foster an atmosphere in which reassessment and self-scrutiny can occur," one in which strategists keep "asking the fundamental questions about a country's role in the world."[100] Through his discussion of Hermocrates and the Sicilians' success, Thucydides provides a concrete example of a leader who fosters just such an atmosphere. If the United States is serious about adjusting its grand strategy to the changing times, it would do well to consider this example and its implications.

This conclusion, however, comes with its own limitations, each of which presents opportunities for future research. First, this paper considered Hermocrates' rhetoric only as it applies to his circumstances, time period, and culture. Although it made a case for its relevance to the current American situation, the question of its overall generalizability needs further examination. Second, this paper analyzed only a few short portions of Thucydides' rich history, focusing almost exclusively on the speeches of Hermocrates. Its references include some scholarship in which Hermocrates is contrasted with important figures such as Pericles and Brasidas,[101] but these references are far from exhaustive. What further insights into innovative leadership, strategy, and rhetoric could be drawn from, say, comprehensive comparisons of Hermocrates to other crucial Thucydidean leaders like Alcibiades or Nicias? Moreover, how would this argument map onto the only other Thucydidean passage in which rhetoric similar to that of Hermocrates is employed, the speech of Diodotus concerning the Mytilenean revolt?[102] Finally, what other examples of Hermocratean leadership could be found in the ancient world and in cases from disciplines not showcased here? Discussing Thucydides' work, of course, already entails combining skills and observations from several disciplines—history, classics, political science, military science, and leadership studies, to name just five—but valuable contributions to this research could undoubtedly be made by scholars in fields like sociology, anthropology, business, and the arts. Given the wide reach and scope of Thucydides' text, many of its avenues still await exploration.

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2. M. I. Finley, *Ancient Sicily* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1979); Robert W. Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Clifford Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Richard Evans, *Ancient Syracuse: From Foundation to Fourth Century Collapse* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

3. As many scholars have indicated (Orwin, *Humanity of Thucydides;* Thomas L. Pangle and Peter J. Ahrensdorf, *Justice Among Nations: On the Moral Basis of Power and Peace* (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 1999); Steven Forde, "Thucydides on Ripeness and Conflict Resolution," *International Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2004): 177–96; Timothy Burns, "The Virtue of Thucydides' Brasidas," *The Journal of Politics 73,* no. 2 (2011): 508–23; Alek Chance, "Realpolitik, Punishment, and Control: Thucydides on the Moralization of Conflict," *Journal of Military Ethics 12,* no. 3 (2013): 263–77), the only speech that compares to Hermocrates' on these fronts is that of Diodotus, the otherwise unknown Athenian who convinces his peers not to punish the Mytileneans too harshly after they revolt from Athens (Thuc., *Historiae,* ed. Henry Stuart Jones and John Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942), 3.41–49). Translations from the Greek are my own, although I have been influenced by Richard Crawley's translation as presented in Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to* The Peloponnesian War (New York: Free Press, 1996).

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16. Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 214.

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18. Thuc. 4.58.

19. Forde, "Thucydides on Ripeness," 191.

20. Finley, *Ancient Sicily;* Evans, *Ancient Syracuse;* Jeremy Dummett, *Syracuse, City of Legends: A Glory of Sicily* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010).

21. Finley, *Ancient Sicily*, 3.

22. Thuc. 3.86.

23. Cf. Thuc. 2.47–54.

24. Evans, *Ancient Syracuse,* 94.

25. Finley, *Ancient Sicily,* 67.

26. Thuc. 6.2–5; cf. Orwin, *Humanity of Thucydides,* 163.

27. Evans, Ancient Syracuse, 101.

28. Orwin, *Humanity of Thucydides,* 163; cf. Evans, *Ancient Syracuse,* 96–7.

29. Thuc. 4.59.1.

30. Connor, *Thucydides,* 121.

31. Thuc. 4.59.2–3.

32. Orwin, Humanity of Thucydides; Forde, "Thucydides on Ripeness;" Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, "What Thucydides Saw," *History and Theory* 25, no. 1 (1986): 1–16.

33. Thuc. 4.59.3.

34. Thuc. 4.60.1, 4.61.1.

35. Cf. Connor, *Thucydides,* 121.

36. Thuc. 4.60.1–2.

37. Thuc. 4.61.2–3.

38. Thuc. 4.61.5–7.

39. Thuc. 4.61.2, 4.61.7.

40. Thuc. 4.61.5.

41. Cf. Thuc. 4.63.2. Thucydides himself confirms this argument later in the book. Before listing the groups on both sides of a fight between the Sicilians and the Athenians, he states that these groups are bound by "advantage" or "necessity" more than "right" or "kinship" (7.57.1) and goes on to show that the ethnic makeup of each side is complex (7.57–8).

42. Young-Bruehl, "What Thucydides Saw;" Orwin, *Humanity of Thucydides;* Forde, "Thucydides on Ripeness;" Burns, *Virtue of Thucydides' Brasidas;* Sara S. Monoson and Michael Loriaux, "The Illusion of Power and the Disruption of Moral Norms: Thucydides' Critique of Periclean Policy," *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 2 (1998): 285–97.

43. Thuc. 4.62.

44. Cf. Thuc. 4.64.3.

45. Thuc. 4.63.

46. Thuc. 4.64.1.

47. Chance, "Realpolitik, Punishment, and Control."

48. As Pangle and Ahrensdorf put it, Hermocrates "shrewdly pursues his city's interests without offending his fellow citizens' religious and moral concerns" (*Justice Among Nations*, p. 31).

49. Connor, *Thucydides.*

50. Young-Bruehl, "What Thucydides Saw," 14.

51. Connor, *Thucydides,* 121.

52. Thuc. 4.65.1–2.

53. Monoson and Loriaux, "The Illusion of Power," 295.

54. In general, ἀξιόω means "to think worthy," often in the context of rewards or punishments (e.g., "I think she is worthy of a reward"). This meaning already implies a sense of justice or desert. In this particular sentence, however, Thucydides pairs ἀξιόω with only an infinitive, giving it the even stronger meaning of "to think one has a right."

55. Thuc. 4.65.4.

56. Thuc. 4.62–3.

57. Strassler, *Landmark Thucydides,* 258.

58. Thuc. 4.65.4, 4.62.4.

59. Young-Bruehl, "What Thucydides Saw;" Orwin, *Humanity of Thucydides;* Monoson and Loriaux, "The Illusion of Power;" Pangle and Ahrensdorf, *Justice Among Nations;* Christopher Bruell, "Thucydides' View of Athenian Imperialism," *American Political Science Review* 68, no. 1 (1974): 11–17; Christopher Bruell, "Thucydides and Perikles," The St. John's Review 32, no. 3 (1981): 24–30; David Bolotin, "Thucydides," in *History of Political Philosophy,* 3rd ed., ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987); Richard Ned Lebow, "Thucydides the Constructivist," American Political Science Review 95, no. 3 (2001): 547–60.

60. Thuc. 5.89.

61. Thuc. 1.75.3.

62. Bruell, "Thucydides and Perikles."

63. Thuc. 1.75.3, 1.76.2.

64. Thuc. 1.76.3.

65. Thuc. 5.105.4.

66. Thuc. 2.40.4–5, 42.3, 43.1, 45.1.

67. Thuc. 6.9–12, 20–23.

68. Thuc. 6.24.

69. Thuc. 6.31.

70. Thuc. 7.87.

71. Thuc. 4.61.

72. Clifford Orwin, "Thucydides on Nature and Human Conduct," in *The Oxford Handbook of Thucydides,* ed. Ryan K. Balot, Sarah Forsdyke, and Edith Foster (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 355–73.

73. Thuc. 6.9–24.

74. Thuc. 7.48–50, 7.86.

75. Burns, "Virtue of Thucydides' Brasidas," 512; cf. Thuc. 1.84–86. See also Allison: "Both [Athens and Sparta] were fatally overconfident about their own capabilities" (Destined for War, p. 37).

76. Thuc. 1.70–71, 2.37–39.

77. See Young-Bruehl, "What Thucydides Saw;" Monoson and Loriaux, "The Illusion of Power;" Lebow, "Thucydides the Constructivist;" and Chance, "Realpolitik, Punishment, and Control" for discussions of how Hermocrates differs from Pericles, the greatest Athenian leader. As Lebow puts it, "On the eve of war Pericles sought to inspire confidence in his fellow citizens, but Hermocrates wants to intensify their fears… Hermocrates finds strength in the restraint and caution that come from recognition of the limits of knowledge and power and contemplation of the future (promethia) with an eye toward its unpredictability" (p. 557). Similarly, see Burns for a discussion of how Hermocrates differs from Brasidas, the greatest Spartan leader, when it comes to accepting that we must "be resigned to the world's inability to grant us our deepest desires" ("Virtue of Thucydides' Brasidas," 520).

78. Cf. Thuc. 5.4.

79. Thuc. 6.34.

80. Connor, Thucydides; Lebow, "Thucydides the Constructivist;" Chance, "Realpolitik, Punishment, and Control."

81. Thuc. 6.35–40. For further discussion of Athenagoras's rhetorical tactics and differences from Hermocrates, see Gottfried Mader, "Strong Points, Weak Argument: Athenagoras on the Sicilian Expedition (Thucydides 6.36–38)," *Hermes* 121, no. 4 (1993): 433–40; E. F. Bloedow, "Hermocrates' Strategy Against the Athenians in 415 B.C.," Ancient History Bulletin 7 (1993): 115–24; Edmund F. Bloedow, "The Speeches of Hermocrates and Athenagoras at Syracuse in 415 B.C.: Difficulties in Syracuse and in Thucydides," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 45, no. 2 (1996): 141–58; and James A. Andrews, "Athenagoras, Stasis, and Factional Rhetoric (Thucydides 6.36–40)," *Classical Philology* 104, no. 1 (2009): 1–12.

82. Thuc. 6.41.

83. Thuc. 6.45.

84. Thuc. 6.69.1.

85. Thuc. 6.70.

86. Thuc. 6.72.2.

87. Thuc. 6.72.3.

88. Thuc. 6.72.4.

89. Thuc. 6.72.5.

90. Thuc. 6.99.2.

91. Thuc. 6.96–102.

92. Thuc. 6.103.

93. Thuc. 7.21.

94. Orwin, *Humanity of Thucydides*; Mark Fisher and Kinch Hoekstra, "Thucydides and the Politics of Necessity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Thucydides,* ed. Ryan K. Balot, Sara Forsdyke, and Edith Foster (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 373–91.

95. Thuc. 7.22–24.

96. Thuc. 7.33.2.

97. Thuc. 7.34–46.

98. Thuc. 7.87.

99. Jonathan Schad and Wendy K. Smith, "Addressing Grand Challenges' Paradoxes: Leadership Skills to Manage Inconsistencies," *Journal of Leadership Studies* 12, no. 4 (2019): 55–9; Fabrizio Ferraro, Dror Etzion, and Joel Gehman, "Tackling Grand Challenges Pragmatically: Robust Action Revisited," Organization Studies 36, no. 3 (2015): 363–90; Amy Y. Ou, David A. Waldman, and Suzanne J. Peterson, "Do Humble CEOs Matter? An Examination of CEO Humility and Firm Outcomes," *Journal of Management* 44, no. 3 (2018): 1147–73. See also L. David Marquet, Turn the Ship Around! A True Story of Turning Followers into Leaders (New York: Portfolio, 2013).

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101. Young-Bruehl, "What Thucydides Saw;" Monoson and Loriaux, "The Illusion of Power;" Lebow, "Thucydides the Constructivist," Chance, "Realpolitik, Punishment, and Control;" Burns, "Virtue of Thucydides' Brasidas."

102. Orwin, *Humanity of Thucydides;* Pangle and Ahrensdorf, *Justice Among Nations;* Forde, "Thucydides on Ripeness;" Burns, "Virtue of Thucydides' Brasidas;" Chance, "Realpolitik, Punishment, and Control."

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Designed by: Selena Robleto, Red Velvet Creative

Edited by: Thomas Mowle, Rampart Professional Solutions