In the eighth book of Thucydides’ history, the Athenian general Phrynichus argued that the Athenians should not fight the Spartan fleet at Miletus. He declared that a defeat would force Athens to capitulate, and rather than take that risk, he withdrew. Thucydides praises this decision in the following manner: (8.27.5)

“And he seemed, not on the present occasion more than afterwards, nor in this thing alone but also in whatever situation Phrynichus found himself, to be not unwise.”

Thucydides’ praise of this decision has been called “surprising in view of the losses to which his strategy condemned Athens in the next month.” In addition, Thucydides later relates other decisions of Phrynichus’s which could hardly be called “wise”. It is also apparent from Thucydides and other sources that the Athenians did not appreciate Phrynichus’ wisdom more and more, but instead bitterly reviled him long after they slew him. Why then does Thucydides praise him and why in these terms? This paper will evaluate Phrynichus’ actions, and then discuss Thucydides’ praise here in light of his earlier praise of Pericles. From this comparison, a better understanding of Thucydides’ judgments emerges.

The first step is evaluating the consequences of Phrynichus’ decision and the constraints under which he was placed. At the time of the withdrawal, the Athenians had 68 ships, while those of the approaching Syracusans and Peloponnesians were 55. In addition, 20 Chian and 5 Spartan ships were blockaded by the Athenians in Miletus harbor, and it is reasonable to assume that they were aware of the approaching Spartan fleet and would assist them if possible. Not only were the Athenians outnumbered by at least 12 ships, but several of their ships were troopcarriers and would be less effective in a battle at sea.

The Athenian navy often defeated forces of superior number, but, as Phrynichus pointed out, if they were to suffer defeat, Athens itself would be left almost defenseless. A decisive defeat would certainly end Athens’ eastern empire, including the vital Hellespont. The question here is not “Would a defeat at Miletus have been a serious blow for Athens?” because it no doubt would have been so, rather the question is “By withdrawing without a fight, did Phrynichus consign Athens to losses of such a magnitude that the risk of a decisive battle should have been taken?”

Because Phrynichus withdrew from Miletus, the Peloponnesian fleet was able to take Iasus by surprise and with it Amorges, the satrap revolting from the king. “So they made a sudden attack upon Iasus and took it, as the inhabitants had no thought but that the ships were Athenian.” (8.28.2) This was a setback for Athens, but Thucydides does not blame it on Phrynichus. When Peisander accused Phrynichus of abandoning Amorges and Iasus, Thucydides does not consider the charge valid, “Peisander alleged that Phrynichus had betrayed Iasus and Amorges and slandered him.” (8.54.3) As Thucydides knew from personal experience, a charge of “betrayal” in Athens often meant that one did not accomplish all that the Athenians believed possible. All Peisander need “allege” is that Phrynichus refused to fight. By calling the accusation false,
Thucydides in effect reaffirmed that, to his mind, Phrynichus’ decision was the best one for Athens. Nevertheless, the loss of Iasus is a consequence of Phrynichus’ decision.

The effect of the Athenian withdrawal upon relations with the allies is hard to measure. The Athenians had sent 25 ships to Lesbos to suppress a revolt and establish order (8.23) just prior to the decision at Miletus. Yet immediately after it, the Peloponnesians received some envoys from Lesbos (8.32.1) requesting aid for renewing their revolt from Athens. However, Clazomenae, subdued by the same Athenian ships, later beat back a Spartan attack, even though the city was unwalled (8.31.3). From these two examples it is hard to see a widespread reaction among the allies to Phrynichus’ refusal to fight.

The most important consequence is still more difficult to assess, and that is control of the sea. Until the Sicilian disaster, at least, Athens ruled the waves. Did Phrynichus’ decision concede control of the sea to Astyocharus, possessor of the largest Peloponnesian fleet ever to sail in the Eastern Aegean? There are indications that Athens retains control, especially after reinforcements: “[the Athenians] controlled the sea and made descents upon Miletus” (8.30.2), “and their fleet at Samos made a number of descents upon the Peloponnesian fleet at Miletus; but when the latter did not come out to meet them, they retired again to Samos” (8.38.5)

The Athenian position at sea seems no worse than before, but this is a false impression. Previously the Athenians had had complete superiority in naval experience and reputation, and this probably gave them more victories than numbers alone. After Miletus, the Peloponnesians had an established fleet in Ionia, and some freedom of action. After Miletus, the Athenians could not count on the opportunity for a decisive battle, because the Spartans did not need to fight one: in this war of attrition they could rely on further revolts of Athenian subject-allies. These considerations suggest that Phrynichus should have risked a direct confrontation, and this is supported by close examination of Pericles’ speeches.

Phrynichus’ cautionary advice has been called “Periclean”, and there are some parallels. Both Pericles and Phrynichus argued against fighting a decisive battle with the Peloponnesians.

But Phrynichus the Athenian general, when he received from Leros accurate information about the enemy fleet, though his colleagues wished to wait and fight a decisive battle refused either to do this himself or to permit them or anyone else to do it.” (8.27.1)

Pericles had similarly advised the Athenians earlier (1.143.5), when referring to battles on land:

We must not give way to resentment against the Peloponnesians and risk a decisive battle with them, far superior in numbers as they are. If we win we shall have to fight them again in undiminished number, and if we fail, our allies, the source of our strength, are lost to us as well.

A further point in common is their distinction between risks which are deemed necessary and “self-chosen dangers”. This phrase was used by Pericles at 1.144.1, when he tells the Athenians, “not to burden yourselves needlessly with dangers of your own choosing; for I am more afraid of our own mistakes than of the enemy’s plans.” Phrynichus uses this same phrase later in 8.27.3:

It was not disgraceful, he said, for Athenians to give way before a hostile navy upon occasion, but it would be more disgraceful if under any circumstances whatsoever they should be defeated and have to make terms. The state would incur, not only disgrace, but also the greatest danger; for, after their past misfortunes, it was scarcely permissible for it when securely prepared of free will, or through absolute
necessity, to take the offensive in any direction, much less was it permissible, when there was no pressure, to rush into self-chosen dangers.

Phrynichus does echo Pericles’ cautions against taking unnecessary risks, but Thucydides’ Pericles encourages the Athenians to accept risks, when they are calculated and believed to be advantageous to the city. He is vehemently opposed to withdrawal from a position of strength. He was essentially the original proponent of the domino theory, with his belief that with each small capitulation a larger one will follow (1.140.5). He accepted the loss of Athenian land because he had no way to prevent it, but he intended to surrender no part of the sea.

[absolute mastery of the sea], if we hold fast to it and preserve it, will easily restore these losses, but let men once submit to others and even what has been won in the past has a way of being lessened. (2.61.3)

Here then, is the crux of their differences, while Phrynichus believed that “it was not disgraceful for Athenians to give way before a hostile navy upon occasion”, Pericles shows why Spartans should be denied the sea:

the art of seamanship ... is an advantage they will not easily secure...How then could men do anything worth mention who are tillers of the soil and not seamen, especially since they will not be permitted to practice, because we will always be lying in wait for them with a large fleet? For if they had to cope with only a small fleet lying in wait, they might perhaps risk an engagement, in their ignorance getting courage from mere numbers; but if their way is blocked by a large fleet, they will remain inactive, their skill will deteriorate through lack of practice, and that in itself will make them more timid. (1.142.6-8)

It can be argued that, after the destruction of the Sicilian expedition, the situation had changed so much that it would be impossible to adhere to Pericles original policy. This has some merit, but the Sicilian defeat and the sea battles in Ionia were fought primarily with Syracusan and Ionian ships, not Peloponnesian. The Spartans were still subject to the Athenian blockade, as is seen when the Athenians bottled them up near Corinth:

They were so discouraged, because in this their first undertaking in the Ionian war they had failed, that they from this time on ceased planning to send out the ships that were in home waters, but on the contrary even thought of recalling some that had previously gone out to sea. (8.11.3)

This shows that the power of the Athenian navy was still feared by the Spartans. However, when some of the Athenian ships holding the blockade at Corinth were sent to quell the revolt at Chios and the two forces left were equal in number, the Peloponnesian fleet managed to break the blockade and captured four Athenian ships in the process (8.20.1).

Spartan fear of Athenian naval superiority endures despite the withdrawal from Miletus. Afterwards in Thucydides’ history the Spartan navy only offers battle on one occasion (8.63.1-2, and at that time the Athenians at Samos were divided into factions and did not come out to oppose them). Furthermore, Tissaphernes assumes that the Spartan navy would lose in a decisive battle: “they might be forced to fight the Athenians and suffer defeat” (8.57.1). However, this fear may be more imagined than real, and Phrynichus himself mentions in a later speech that the King would not be likely to support the Athenian cause “now that the Peloponnesians were at home on the sea quite as much as the Athenians” (8.48.4). This too can be seen as a legacy of Phrynichus’ decision.
The ships which were approaching Phrynichus were composed of 22 ships from Sicily, presumably with veteran crews, and 33 recently equipped ships from the Peloponnese, presumably with inexperienced crews. In the two years since the destruction of the Sicilian expedition, all of Athens, including Phrynichus, had heard of the technical innovations of the Syracusan engineers, and hopefully they could apply that knowledge. At Syracuse there was only crowded harbor fighting, and so the impending battle at Miletus would put them at a distinct disadvantage. The Athenians generally choose to fight in open water, where their superior nautical skill would rule the day. Phrynichus had a splendid opportunity to eliminate the enemy fleet before it became too capable. It is not immediately apparent that Phrynichus’ decision was, as Thucydides says, “not unwise”.

Despite this speculation, we are unable to give a final evaluation of the decision to retreat. We do not know the nature of the “accurate information” (8.27.1) concerning the Peloponnesian fleet possessed by the Athenian generals. We do not know how many Athenian vessels were troop-carriers, and hence less useful for a sea battle. The exact difficulties of facing the enemy fleet while blockading another force are unclear. Even assuming that all this and more were known, the decision would still be no more than a gamble, as the outcome of the battle is subject to “the unexpected turns that belong to human life” (8.24.5). Phrynichus refuses to take this gamble, and Thucydides approves. Though many of the factors considered in this gamble are lost to us, an attempt can be made to understand Thucydides’ motivation for siding with Phrynichus.

The problem is twofold, for not only must a plausible explanation be given for the judgment, but attention must be paid to the unusual manner in which he gives it. He asserts that Phrynichus was judged wise in this decision all the more as time passed by, which does not correlate well with other sources for this period. In addition, he claims that Phrynichus behaved wisely throughout his career, which is slightly surprising in light of the facts later reported in Thucydides.

It is apparent that the Athenian demos did not grow to appreciate more and more the wisdom of Phrynichus. From 8.54.3 we learn that the Athenians relieved him of his command on the request of Peisander, although he later becomes a leading figure in the oligarchy. Lysias 8.7 mentions rewards offered for the murder of Phrynichus, and this is supported by an inscription from about 409 BC (ML #85). The speaker of Lysias 20 not only disparages Phrynichus’ general esteem and capacities, but regards being related to Phrynichus as if it were a crime (11-12). Lykurgus 112 states that after Phrynichus’ murder “on investigation they found that Phrynichus had been trying to betray the city” and that his bones were cast out of Attica. This account is supported by Plutarch Alcibiades 25.10. This treason charge probably refers to his latter actions in the oligarchy, i.e. the embassy to Sparta and the fortifications at Eetionia. Still, it seems safe to say that among the Athenian jurors who heard these speeches, few would aver that Phrynichus acted intelligently in whatever situation he found himself. Thucydides seems to be speaking for himself, or at least for a minority, when he claims that consciousness of Phrynichus’ wisdom was not decayed by time.

The claim that wisdom was demonstrated “in whatever situation Phrynichus found himself” seems incongruous with other reports of his actions found in Thucydides, specifically the intrigue with Astyochus. According to book eight, motivated by fear of Alcibiades, Phrynichus writes to the Spartan general, telling him about Alcibiades double-dealing and proposing that he be put to death. Astyochus betrays this letter to Alcibiades, who notifies the other Athenians in turn. Then, under suspicion for being a traitor, he writes again to Astyochus, offering him the
opportunity to destroy the entire Athenian army at Samos. Apparently he would have gone through with the plan, had he not found out that Astyochus had again betrayed him to Alcibiades. By quickly preparing against the Spartan attack, he appears blameless when a letter from Alcibiades arrives, charging him with treachery.

As the story is told in Thucydides, Phrynichus does not seem in any way wise—he comes through this wringer not by demonstrating any intelligence, but by having the good fortune to land butter side up.

There are many flaws in the story as it is written, and accounts by both modern and ancient writers credit Phrynichus with a defter handling of the situation. Because it is crucial to the story that the letters are revealed to the general public, their contents as reported by Thucydides are very likely true. Virtually everyone but Thucydides assumes that Phrynichus did not intend to betray the Athenian fleet, but rather counted on a second betrayal by Astyochus, with the eventual result that his name would be cleared, as in fact it was. The reasons given in the letters for wishing to betray Athens are weak, and there is no reason why they cannot stand as clever mechanisms for the benefit of the city. The story as it reads in Thucydides, at any rate, does not jibe with his appraisal of Phrynichus at 8.27.5.

An explanation for Thucydides blanket approval of Phrynichus can be found in his second appearance. The way Phrynichus is lauded at 8.27.5 prepares the reader to listen for intelligent things from the mouth of Phrynichus. In this way Thucydides can use him as a mouthpiece, without any apparent form of judgment from Thucydides (8.48.4-7). Everything he says in this ‘proto-speech’ comes true by the end of the war, and yet there is no editorial comment. Later events show that Alcibiades truly did not care what constitution Athens had, that the Athenians chief concern should have been avoiding factions, that the King would not attach himself to Athens, and that the allied cities when under oligarchies would not support Athens any more than before (8.64.3-5). By extending his earlier praise of Phrynichus to his entire career, Thucydides puts emphasis upon the intelligence of this speech without seeming to make comment.

This to some extent may explain the unusual superlatives attached to the judgment of Phrynichus’ decision, but not Thucydides’ reason for praising the decision at all. In his praise of Phrynichus and Pericles, Thucydides appears to value the method by which a decision was reached as much as the actual decision. The two are not unrelated, as the value of the latter depends to a certain extent upon the value of the former, i.e. a plan formulated using careful reasoning will probably, but not necessarily, be superior to one conceived in haste or carelessly. Phrynichus and Pericles both mention of the necessity of reason: “He would never, he declared, yielding to the consideration of disgrace, hazard a decisive battle unreasonably” (8.27.2). And Pericles says at 2.62.5 it is intelligence that confirms courage—the intelligence that makes one able to look down upon one’s opponent, and which proceeds not by hoping for the best (a method only valuable in desperate situations), but by estimating what the facts are, and thus obtaining a clearer vision of what to expect.

Phrynichus and Pericles consider more aspects of the problems at hand than other speakers. They notice what others fail to notice, or very often even refuse to notice. They arrive at their judgments through independent reasoning, often setting themselves at variance with both the mob and the typical “gut reaction.” Pericles’ plan calls for the abandonment of all property outside the city walls, and this certainly goes against the grain:
Indeed, had I thought that I should persuade you, I should have urged you to go forth and lay them waste yourselves, and thus show the Peloponnesians that you will not, for the sake of such things, yield them obedience. (1.143.5)

Thucydides admires both Pericles and Phrynichus not just because of their intelligence, but because that quality governs their emotions—allowing them to pursue calculated plans while at the same time restraining the anger directed at an invading army, the shame of giving ground to a Spartan fleet, and the wrath of both colleagues and crowd. This bond between the two generals is shown by Thucydides noting that their actions seem better as the years go by: “After his [Pericles’] death his foresight as to the war was still more fully recognized” (2.65.6) The foresight that Thucydides praises in these two men is their ability to separate their strategic calculations from the emotions of the day. Only later, when the clouding emotions have faded, can the mob recognize the wisdom of their decisions.


**NOTES**

1 This translation is mostly based on C. F. Smith’s in the Loeb edition of Thucydides. All subsequent translations are taken directly from this edition or from other Loeb volumes when another author is cited.


3 According to 8.26, the recently arrived fleet learned of conditions in Miletus from Alcibiades, who had been in the city himself, and it was he who urged them to come to the aid of Miletus. Therefore some means of communication may have been possible.

4 This facet of Phrynichus’ decision is pointed out in Gomme, Andrewes, & Dover, pp. 67-68.

5 Ibid, p. 64.

6 Thucydides 2.40.3, 2.42.4, to name but a few.

7 This incident is covered in detail in H. D. Westlake, “Phrynichus and Astyochus”, *JHS* 76 (1956), p. 100. Most of the flaws in Thucydides account are reported in this source. Other writers who also credit Phrynichus with some sense are P. A. Brunt, “Thucydides and Alcibiades”, *REG*, 65 (1952), p. 76. and Plutarch *Alcibiades* 25:8. Plutarch seems to have a bit of both traditions, because 25.6-7 seem to indicate that he fully intended to betray the Athenian fleet, while 25:8 shows that he was playing a double game.

8 “and they did not finally succumb until they had in their private quarrels fallen upon one another and been brought to ruin” (2.65.13)

9 This is Rex Warner’s translation, because at this point Smith’s is hard to follow.