



by Rick Chersicla

From 431 BC to 404 BC, the two preeminent Greek city-states of the time engaged in what would be a generational struggle. This war (really a period of intermittent conflict with the occasional stretches of peace) commonly known as [The Peloponnesian War](#), was a struggle for hegemony between the land power of Sparta, and the rising master of the sea, Athens. The best account of the war is that written by [Thucydides](#), himself a veteran of the fighting. Thucydides' [sweeping work](#) (one he wrote with the intent that it be a “work for all time”) contains a [multitude of lessons](#) in diplomacy and international relations.

Beyond its obvious utility for historians, diplomats, and the strategists, the nearly 2,500-year-old work also holds relevant lessons for any boardroom or operations center given its timeless lessons on communications and leadership.

By 415 BC, Athens and Sparta were 17 years into the war, and the people of Athens were debating opening a new front with an invasion of Syracuse on modern-day Sicily. The people

of Egesta appealed to the Athenians for aid, invoking a military agreement made years earlier (as well as offering to pay handsomely for the assistance). The Egestaens also played to Athenian paranoia, implying that if Egesta did not receive support now, all of Sicily may one day fall to pro-Sparta rivals. These arguments fired the imagination for those who were already searching for an excuse to make war on Syracuse and transform the island of Sicily into an Athenian ally or vassal.

Three leading Athenians—Alcibiades, Nicias, and Lamachus—had tentatively been chosen to lead the [expedition to Syracuse](#) and the gathered people heard two opposing arguments regarding invasion. Alcibiades, an ambitious, influential, and persuasive speaker, argued for invasion. Making the case that the Sicilians were politically divided and could be easily conquered, Alcibiades urged the people to vote for invasion in order to expand the Athenian empire. [Nicias](#), however, an older and more experienced leader who had been chosen for the shared command against his will, was not keen on launching an invasion. Pointing first to the many domestic issues Athens had to attend to, Nicias then argued against the invasion by describing that even if they were to conquer Syracuse and then all of Sicily, it would be too difficult to administer. To borrow from modern military doctrine, the arguments of Alcibiades and Nicias came to symbolize the two *courses of action* crafted to answer the strategic challenge of what to do regarding Syracuse.

Military planners [define a Course of Action \(COA\)](#) as a “*potential way (solution, method) to accomplish the mission.*” A military COA must meet a specific set of criteria—it should be: suitable, feasible, acceptable, distinguishable (captured of course as an acronym, FAS-D), and complete prior to being presented for a decision. While this definition is enshrined in modern military doctrine, the concept transcends the profession of arms—for example, a business proposal regarding expanding into new markets should meet the FAS-D standard prior to being presented to executive leadership or a decision-making board. In the military, a COA presented by a planner who presumes the boss will not choose said proposed COA is derisively called a “[throwaway COA.](#)” While unadvisable, this is sometimes done in order to influence leaders and convince them to choose the COA preferred by the presenter—or, perhaps because he or she thinks they understand what the commander wants and that alternative plans are not worth developing. A throwaway COA can also simply be the result of time constraints that do not allow for much additional planning. Turning again to Nicias in Athens, we see that anyone presenting options to a commander, CEO, board, et cetera, owes it to themselves to present good COAs.

Nicias, as Thucydides writes, seeing that he could not deter the people with his original argument, thinks that “he might perhaps alter their resolution by the extravagance of his estimates.” So, somewhat ironically given that what he actually preferred was to [cancel the](#)

[expedition](#), Nicias offers a purposefully exaggerated course of action, thinking he could convince the people that an expedition would in fact be too costly. Nicias outlines the challenges posed by a Sicilian expedition, and argues that “it will not do to have merely a weak naval armament,” but also a large army must sail with the force—infantry, archers, slingers, all supported by a tremendous base of supply. Additionally, Nicias continues, “we must have an overwhelming superiority at sea” to move the supplies and personnel. Thus, Nicias sought to “put the Athenians off by the magnitude of the undertaking,” or at least make the expedition safer for himself if compelled to take part. However, rather than dampen enthusiasm for the expedition, Nicias’ *maximalist estimate had the opposite effect*, and the people [became even more enthusiastic](#) for an invasion.

In the end, Nicias not only found himself on the losing side of the initial debate, but ended up being chosen as one of the leaders for the expedition! As Thucydides writes, “everyone fell in love with the enterprise” based on the purposeful overestimate provided by Nicias:

*“...the Athenians, however, far from having their enthusiasms for the voyage destroyed by the burdensomeness of the preparations, became more eager for it than ever; and just the contrary took place of what Nicias had thought..... it was held that he had given good advice, and that the expedition would be the safest in the world.”*

It is not much of a stretch to say that this is analogous to a modern Admiral exaggerating and stating, “Well sir, if you’re going to send a carrier strike group, you may as well send the whole fleet!” Nicias gambled on a “throwaway COA,” and lost.

The fundamental lesson of Nicias is this: don’t present a course of action if you’re not willing to actually execute it.

Providing a supervisor or commander with what you deem as a “throwaway” (“*oh, the boss would never pick this one...*”) is at best a gamble, and at worst a recipe for disaster. Nicias accompanied the expedition (against his preferences), and Athens lost more material and people (to say nothing of prestige) than they would have with a more measured approach. Nicias, the reluctant co-commander, became one of the many Athenian casualties on Sicily, and while the result of presenting a “throwaway” option is not typically as permanent as his fate, it could easily be personal or professional ruin in a serious enough situation. Nicias learned the hard way—never present the “throwaway COA” in order to meet an arbitrary number of choices to a supervisor—it just may very well be the road taken in the end.

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