



P E R S P E C T I V E S

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How the Marathon Began

And Another Example of Courage for Modern Times

The first battle of the Greco-Persian wars occurred in 490 B.C. in the town of Marathon, Greece. With Persians attacking cities all along the Greek mainland, and as Athenians braced for their own attack, Athenian General Miltiades took command of a civilian army and marched to Marathon to meet the Persian army. Using superior battle tactics (Miltiades unexpectedly weakened his center and reinforced his flanks), the Greeks won a surprise victory. According to legend, a messenger named Pheidippides ran non-stop from Marathon to Athens to report the victory but dropped dead immediately after announcing the good news.

That 25-mile journey from Marathon to Athens inspired the organizers of the first modern Olympics in 1896 to create the 26.2-mile running race that we call “the marathon”. The Boston Marathon (the world’s oldest continuous marathon) first ran on April 19, 1897, was likewise inspired.

And so it is that the modern marathon race is really the story of one man’s run, a selfless act of heroism to alert his Athenian neighbors of the Persian defeat, lest a fast Persian ship beat him there and spread false news of an opposite result. He didn’t run for money or glory. He was a pure amateur in the best civilian tradition. Pheidippides’s story is one of sacrifice in the teeth of a violent war that Athens did not seek but could not avoid.

The tale of Marathon is book-ended by another story of Greek bravery of outlandish proportions that occurred a decade later — the Battle of Thermopylae.

As this column is being written, the City of Kyiv (Kiev in the West) has withstood five days of a massive Russian invasion by aerial bombardment, tanks, armored troop carriers, and tens of thousands of soldiers. No one ever thought the vastly out-numbered force of Ukrainians supported by domestic guerilla fighters fighting street by street, could hold the Russians back for even a day when they attacked from Belarus. Yet, they have.

At the Battle of Thermopylae, like the modern-day Ukrainians, a much smaller Greek army of 7,000 men under the Spartan King Leonidas stood their ground against a Persian army of 300,000. Like the Athenian general Miltiades before him, King Leonidas developed a superior strategy to save his native Sparta. He correctly concluded that a very small force could hold the Persians in a mountain pass that was only a couple of dozen yards wide. It turned out he was right for several days.

Unfortunately, a Greek traitor revealed a way to “end run” the Greek army, and the Persians set off to overwhelm the Greek force. Once Leonidas realized he’d been betrayed and was being outflanked, he sent the main army into retreat and held the Persians back with 300 of his personal bodyguards and some militarily unsophisticated slaves captured by the Spartans in earlier campaigns. This tiny force resolved to hold off the Persian hordes as long as possible, in their case facing almost certain death, to give the main Greek army time to retreat. For that reason, the Battle of Thermopylae is celebrated as “an example of heroic persistence against seemingly impossible odds.”

Which brings us back to modern day Ukraine, where Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, like the Greek generals Miltiades and Leonidas, has been facing overwhelming odds.

Ukraine's been under pressure since 2014 when Russian forces forcibly seized Crimea and invaded the Donbas region of Ukraine with the intention of destabilizing the government at that time. It didn't work. The civilian conflict in the Donbas has now waged for eight years without Ukraine retreating or submitting to Russian blackmail. It has strengthened the Ukrainians' resolve to fight to defend their country and has even been a source of intense motivation for Ukraine to build its own military over those eight years. Like the Greeks, Zelensky has prepared for street-by-street combat which is precisely what is happening as we go to press.

No one is more surprised than Vladimir Putin. He thought Kyiv would fall in a day. It didn't.

The Ukrainian army is better disciplined than Putin imagined, and the Ukrainian civilians are fighting in massive numbers shoulder to shoulder with their military. They are fighting for their homes, for their country, and for their future freedom. Putin is a thug and a killer. It must be hard for him to understand, as it was for the Persians so long ago, that free men and women can resist an overwhelming force with just a little bit of luck, great strategy, and a support network that the rest of the world is beginning to supply.

The West, particularly the US and leading European countries, should have done far more to provide Ukraine with the defensive weaponry it desperately needs. That help has only just begun arriving in significant quantities, to provide the anti-tank weapons (the Ukrainians have been using Molotov cocktails to stop tanks!), and other ground to air weaponry required to slow an invading army of 190,000 Russians, fighter jets, and support vehicles.

Putin could not possibly understand why Ukrainian civilians would be fighting so hard against what he believed to be overwhelming odds because, as a dictator, he cannot begin to fathom the power of deeply held democratic values. Hence his massive miscalculation. Hence, he finally agreed to the beginning of peace talks. Let's hope those talks are successful, and Putin finds a way to save face so he can retreat before he himself becomes a political casualty in his own country. Over 6,000 Russian demonstrators have taken to the streets to protest the war at great personal peril. Many more Russians are rooting for the Ukrainians to withstand Putin's autocratic whims. As are we.

So, we can thank President Zelensky for strategically holding off long enough to shame European leaders into supporting really crippling sanctions. Having major Russian banks, and the Russian central bank, cut off from all SWIFT foreign exchange transactions is a powerful message. That will cause Russia to collapse within a year—or provide just the incentive the Russian people need to “retire” Putin once and for all.

We can also thank Zelensky for reminding Americans, particularly the pro-Russian commentators like Hannity on Fox why we don't want an autocracy here in the US. Just maybe, the Republicans will gain the courage Ukrainians are displaying to finally resist the autocratic Cult of Trump.

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