

# Counseling the King - the art of smart decisions, 25 centuries ago

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Lessons from Herodotus “History of the Persian Wars”

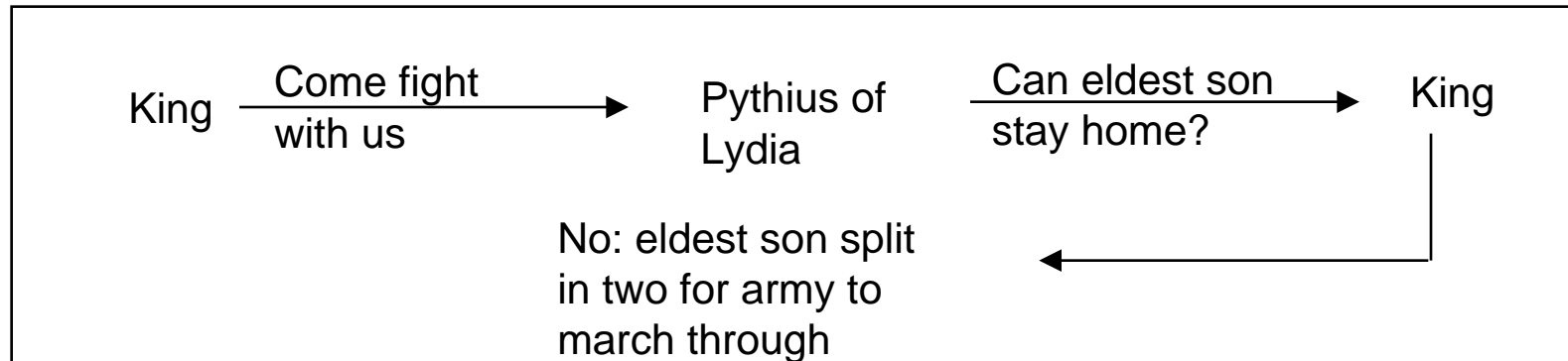
# It's 485BC; the king is ready for war...how do you advise?

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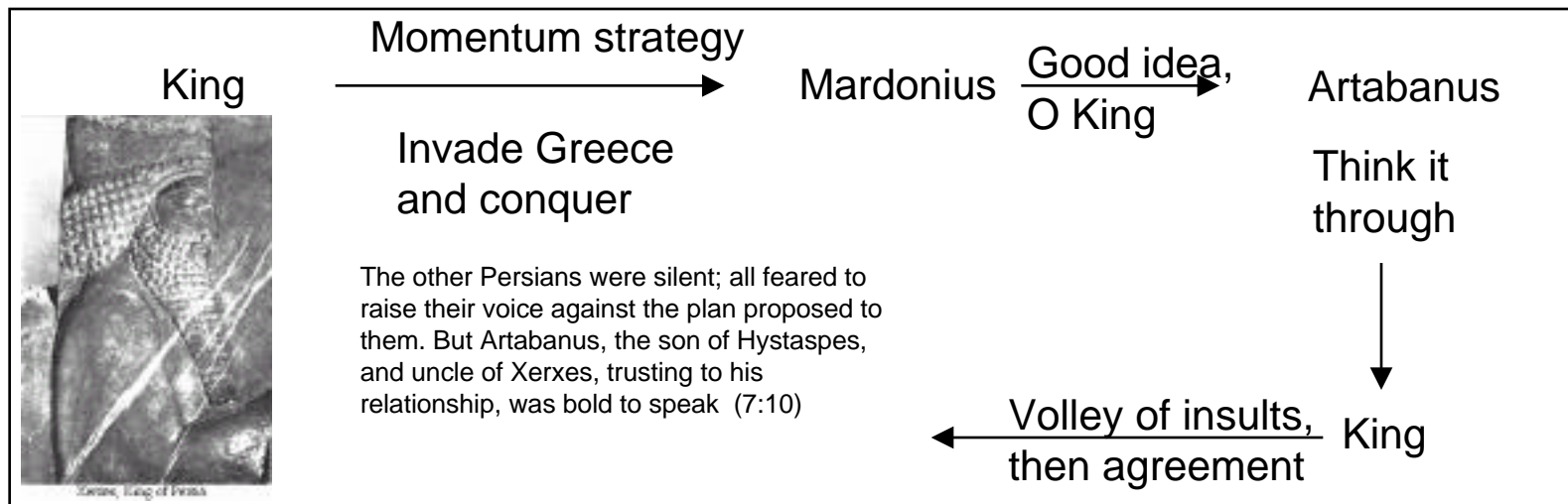


# Principle 1: have a well established relationship with the decision maker

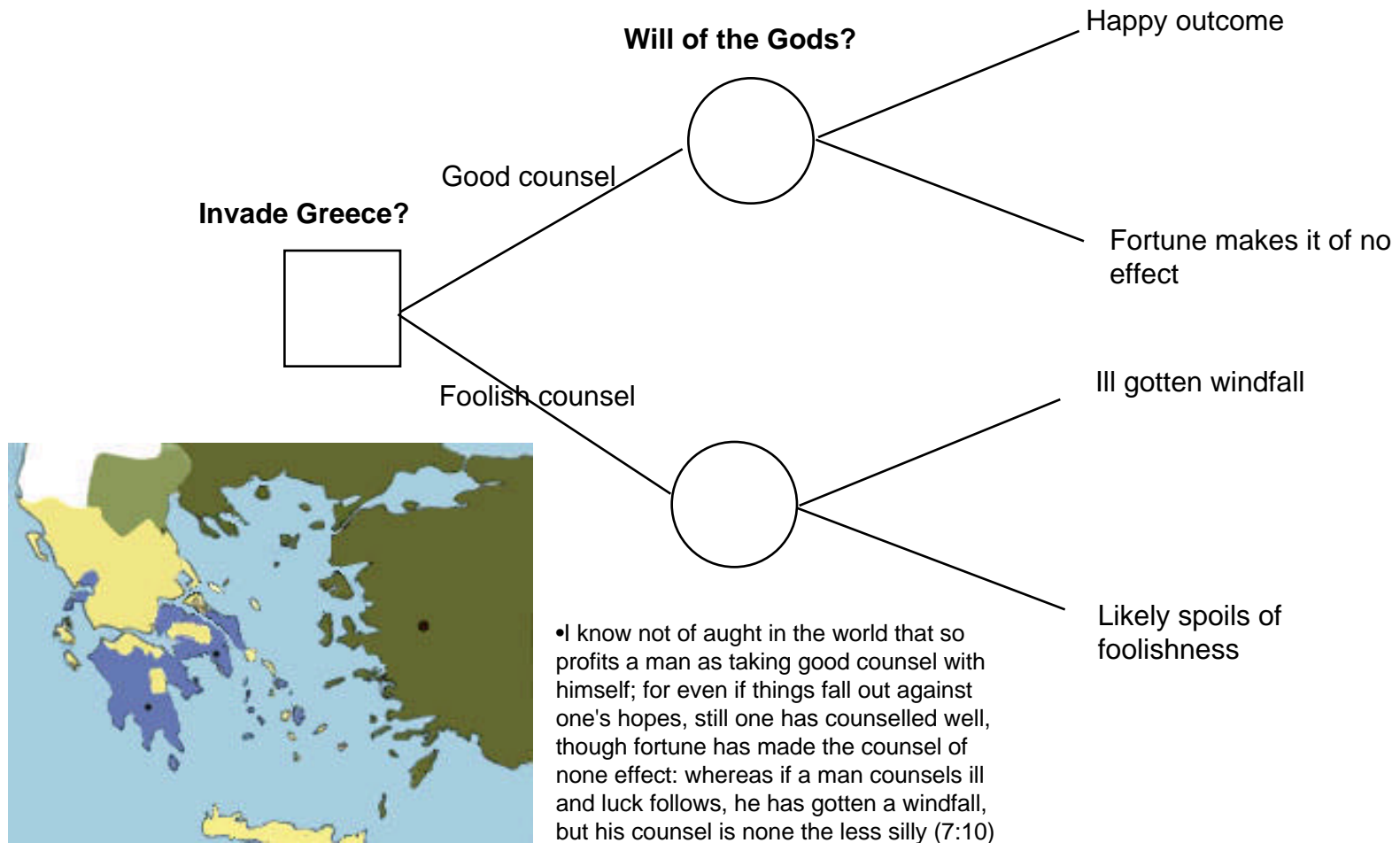
## Discussion A



## Discussion B



# Principle 2: take good counsel and be content, even if misfortune strikes



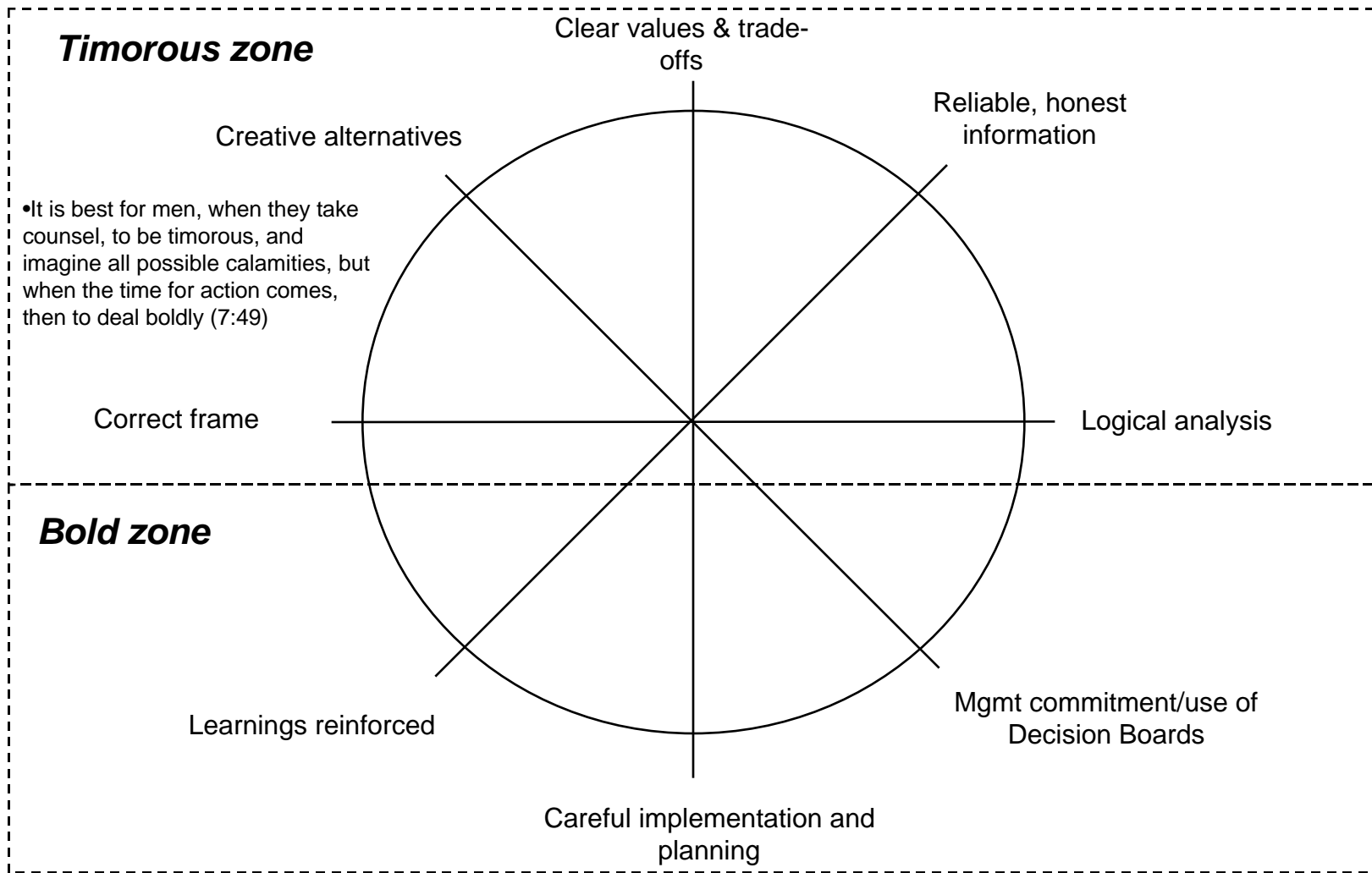
# Principle 3: if opposite speeches are delivered, then choice can be exercised

Strategy	Commander	Size of army	Size of navy	Role of Ionians
Invade Greece	None	None	None	None
Stay home	Xerxes	Large	Large	Part of Persian army
	Mardonius	Huge	Huge	
	Artabanus	Colossal	Colossal	

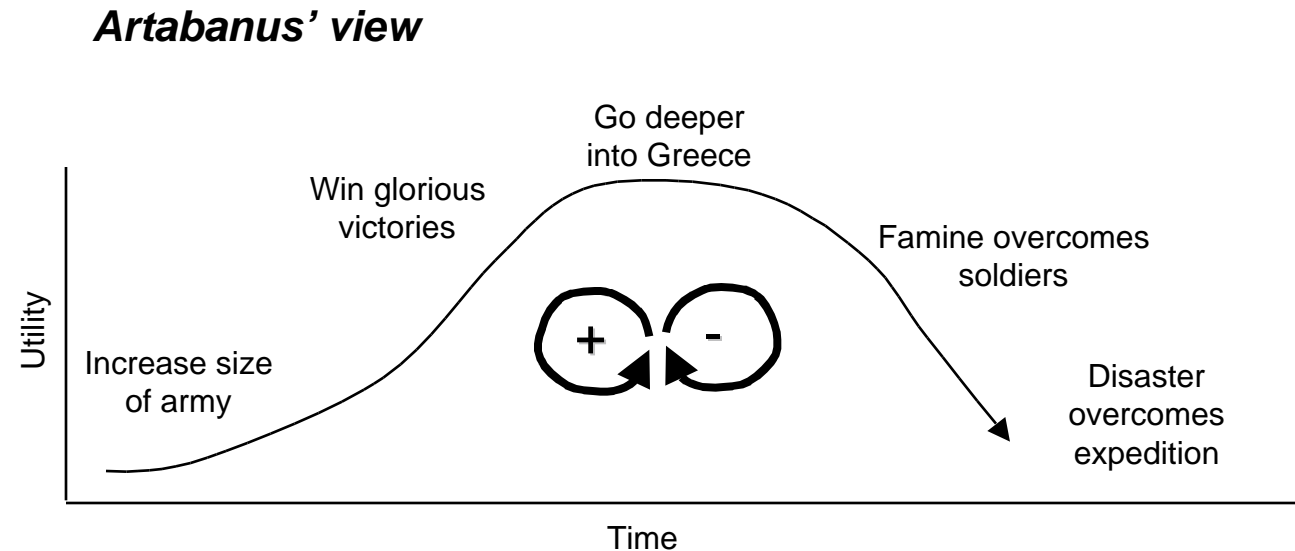
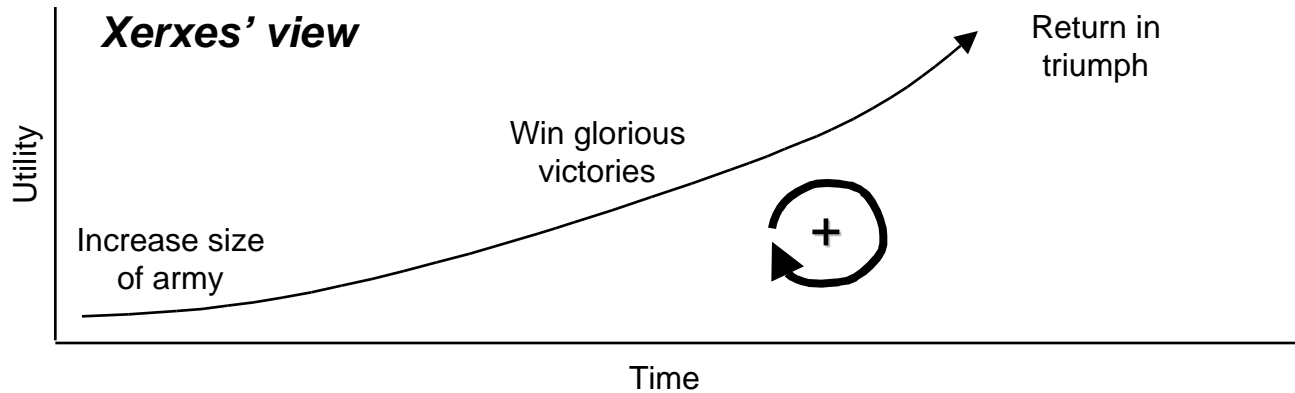


It is impossible, if no more than one opinion is uttered, to make choice of the best: a man is forced then to follow whatever advice may have been given him; but if opposite speeches are delivered, then choice can be exercised (7:10)

# Principle 4: be timorous in counsel, but bold in action



# Key insight: The things which are of most consequence are opposed to thee



•[T]he two things which are of most consequence are alike opposed to thee... [t]he more thou addest to [thy navies and armies], the more hostile will [the land and sea] become (7:48 and 7:49)



# The decision maker responds ...(a)

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"There is reason, O Artabanus! in everything which thou hast said; but I pray thee, fear not all things alike, nor count up every risk. For if in each matter that comes before us thou wilt look to all possible chances, never wilt thou achieve anything. Far better is it to have a stout heart always, and suffer one's share of evils, than to be ever fearing what may happen, and never incur a mischance.

- This is actually very good advice
- Which risks are most important?
- I don't think the Persians had tornados, hence there wasn't much chance for them to develop a tornado chart



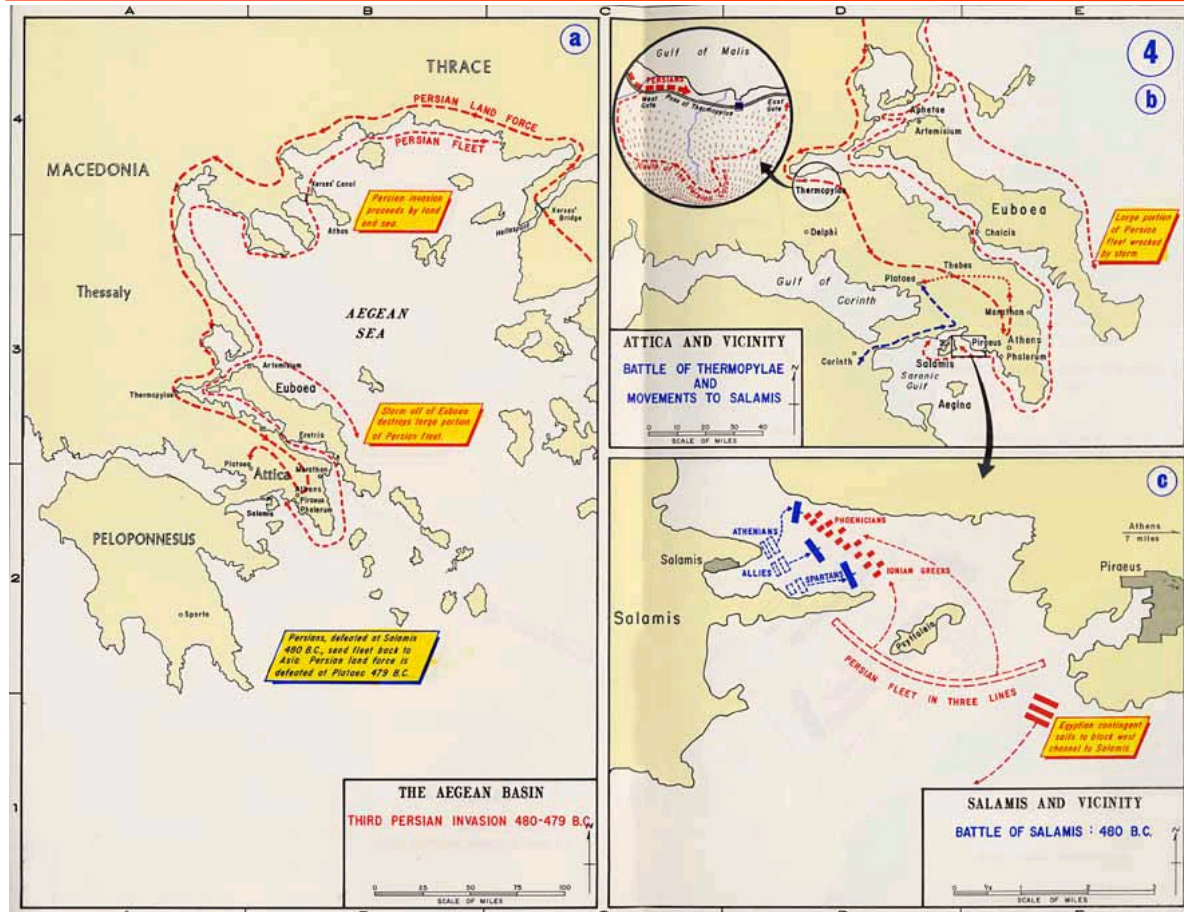
# ...and isn't buying the argument for rational calculation.

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"Moreover, if thou wilt oppose whatever is said by others, without thyself showing us the sure course which we ought to take, thou art as likely to lead us into failure as they who advise differently; for thou art but on a par with them. And as for that sure course, how canst thou show it us when thou art but a man? I do not believe thou canst. Success for the most part attends those who act boldly, not those who weigh everything, and are slack to venture...for great empires can only be conquered by great risks."

- How many times have we heard this?
- Probabilistic forecasts are no use - show me what's going to happen.
- Fortune favors the brave (what Keynes called Animal Spirits)

# The outcome was disappointing for Xerxes



Defeated and dishonored, Xerxes returned to Persia where he spent the remainder of his reign in seclusion. He was murdered by assassins in 465 BC and succeeded by his son Artaxerxes

# What does Herodotus have to teach DA professionals?

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- Remember his four principles...
  - Decision makers are swayed by people they trust
  - Take good counsel, but accept the will of the gods
  - Opposite speeches let choice be exercised
  - Be timorous in calculation, but bold in action
- ...his insight...
  - Consider supporting *and* opposing forces
- ...and this last thought
  - the beginning and end of the matter are not always seen at once

# Collected thoughts

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My source

<http://classics.mit.edu/Herodotus/history.html>

See also

<http://www.norvig.com/Gettysburg/index.htm>

- The other Persians were silent; all feared to raise their voice against the plan proposed to them. But Artabanus, the son of Hystaspes, and uncle of Xerxes, trusting to his relationship, was bold to speak (7:10)
- I know not of aught in the world that so profits a man as taking good counsel with himself; for even if things fall out against one's hopes, still one has counselled well, though fortune has made the counsel of none effect: whereas if a man counsels ill and luck follows, he has gotten a windfall, but his counsel is none the less silly (7:10)
- It is impossible, if no more than one opinion is uttered, to make choice of the best: a man is forced then to follow whatever advice may have been given him; but if opposite speeches are delivered, then choice can be exercised (7:10)
- It is best for men, when they take counsel, to be timorous, and imagine all possible calamities, but when the time for action comes, then to deal boldly (7:49)
- [T]he two things which are of most consequence are alike opposed to thee... [t]he more thou addest to [thy navies and armies], the more hostile will [the land and sea] become (7:48 and 7:49)
- The beginning and end of a matter are not always seen at once (7:51)