

ALCIBIADES: PATRIOT OR OPPORTUNIST?

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

ACTIVITY

Consider Alcibiades' role in the oligarchic coup of 411 BCE. Source 1 presents Thucydides' conclusion about Alcibiades' motives. Source 2 reflects the arguments made by Pisander, a supporter of Alcibiades, about why the oligarchic coup was a good idea.

THUCYDIDES ON ALCIBIADES

[Alcibiades] cared no more for an oligarchy than for a democracy, and only sought to change the institutions of his country in order to get himself recalled by his associates.

← SOURCE 1

Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War 8.48.4, trans. Richard Crawley.

PISANDER'S ARGUMENT FOR THE COUP

In the face of the fact that the Peloponnesians had as many ships as [Athens,] ... more cities in alliance with them, and the [Persian] king and [Persian governor] Tissaphernes to supply them with money, of which the Athenians had none left ... [was there] any hope of saving the state, unless some one could induce the king to come over to their side? ... This we cannot have unless we have a more moderate form of government, and put the offices into fewer hands, and so gain the king's confidence, and forthwith restore Alcibiades, who is the only man living that can bring this about. The safety of the state, not the form of its government, is for the moment the most pressing question, as we can always change afterwards whatever we do not like.

← SOURCE 2

Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War 8.53.2-3, trans. Richard Crawley.

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Using Sources 1-2 and your own knowledge, respond to the following:

1. Were there good reasons for the coup? Might it have changed the outcome of the war?

2. Considering Alcibiades' character and his past actions, do you agree with Thucydides' assessment? Or do you think that, in encouraging the coup, Alcibiades was motivated by a genuine desire to help Athens?
