

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

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Friday, August 30, 2002

EXCERPT FROM A PIECE PUBLISHED IN THE LATE 2ND CENTURY A.D. BY PLUTARCH ABOUT THE LIFE OF PYRRHUS, KING OF EPIRUS

When the following discussion took place, Pyrrhus was doing quite well. He was King of Epirus and world-renowned for his prowess in battle. Plutarch put it this way: "Fortune gave him a fair occasion of enjoying himself in quiet, and peaceably governing his own subjects."

But, as Plutarch noted, Pyrrhus "thought it a nauseous course of life not to be doing mischief to others." So, when the people of Tarentum, a Greek colony in southern Italy, asked him to help them fight the Romans, Pyrrhus was interested. Hence, the following narrative.

There was one Cineas, a Thessalian, considered to be a man of very good sense, a disciple of the great orator Demosthenes, who of all that were famous at that time for speaking well, most seemed, as in a picture, to revive in the minds of the audience the memory of his force and vigor of eloquence; and being always about Pyrrhus, and sent about in his service to several cities, verified the saying of Euripides, that: -- "the force of words can do what'er is done by conquering swords."

And Pyrrhus was used to say, that Cineas had taken more towns with his words, than he with his arms, and always did him the honor to employ him in his most important occasions. This person, seeing Pyrrhus eagerly preparing for Italy, led him one day when he was at leisure into the following reasonings:

"The Romans, sir, are reported to be great warriors and conquerors of many warlike nations; if God permit us to overcome them, how should we use our victory?"

"You ask," said Pyrrhus, "a thing evident of itself. The Romans once conquered, there is neither Greek nor barbarian city that will resist us, but we shall presently be masters of all Italy, the extent and resources and strength of which any one should rather profess to be ignorant of, than yourself."

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Cineas after a little pause, "And having subdued Italy, what shall we do next?"

Pyrrhus not yet discovering his intention, "Sicily," he replied, "next holds out her arms to receive us, a wealthy and populous island, and easy to be gained; for since Agathocles left it, only faction and anarchy, and the licentious violence of the demagogues prevail."

"You speak," said Cineas, "what is perfectly probable, but will the possession of Sicily put an end to the war?"

"God grant us," answered Pyrrhus, "victory and success in that, and we will use these as forerunners of greater things; who could forbear from Libya and Carthage then within reach, which Agathocles, even when forced to fly from Syracuse, and passing the sea only with a few ships had all but surprised? These conquests once perfected, will any assert that of the enemies who now pretend to despise us, any one will dare to make further resistance?"

"None," replied Cineas, "for then it is manifest we may with such mighty forces regain Macedon, and make an absolute conquest of Greece; and when all these are in our power what shall we do them?"

Said Pyrrhus, smiling, "We will live at our ease, my dear friend, and drink all day, and divert ourselves with pleasant conversation."

When Cineas had led Pyrrhus with his argument to this point: "And what hinders us now, sir, if we have a mind to be merry, and entertain one another, since we have at hand without trouble all those necessary things, to which through much blood and great labor, and infinite hazards and mischief done to ourselves and to others, we design at last to arrive?"

Such reasonings rather troubled Pyrrhus with the thought of the happiness he was quitting, than any way altered his purpose, being unable to abandon the hopes of what he so much desired.

Have a happy Labor Day!

Post Script: Oh, by the way. Pyrrhus went to Italy with a force of 25,000 men and 20 elephants and beat the Romans badly in two major battles. The problem was that his army was decimated in the process. Hence the expression, "Pyrrhic victory."

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