

Speaking of Delphi . . .

by Antony Papert

Editor's note: The declaration of bankruptcy by Delphi Corporation, and the sophisticated garbage coming out of the mouth of its CEO Steve Miller, inspired us to provide the following historical perspective on the role of the Delphic Oracle in destroying great civilizations.

The faithful Fifth Century, B.C., historian Herodotus records as follows how the oracle of Apollo at Delphi tricked King Croesus of Lydia into a doomed attack against the Persian Empire. After first deluding the king into believing anything that Delphi might tell him, it then answered his question as to what would happen if he crossed the Halys River to attack the Persians, by telling Croesus that if he did so, he would destroy a mighty empire. But once emboldened to cross the river, Croesus realized almost immediately—but too late—that the “mighty empire” of the prophesy was his own.

Like the three witches in *Macbeth*, Delphi brought many others to perdition similarly,—through lies, through lies mixed with truth, or even through so-called “truths” which immediately become lies in the ears of the hearer, as Chicago’s late Professor Leo Strauss has recommended the latter practice in our own time.

During the two great Fifth Century, B.C., wars to preserve the flame of freedom in Greece—alone in Europe—against the onslaught of the Persian Empire to snuff it out, Delphi

was shamefully pro-Persian. When Athens sent ambassadors ca. 480 B.C. to inquire how to respond to an imminent attack by the Persian fleet, Delphi advised the Athenians to flee for their lives. Its priests only agreed to modify this prophecy somewhat, when the Athenian ambassadors refused outright to take it back to their city.

Immediately thereafter, Athens led the naval forces of all patriotic Greek cities to defeat the Empire’s fleet at Salamis, ending its threat to Greece forever. Had they instead heeded Delphi’s original prophesy, European civilization would have ended then and there under the Persian yoke, about a decade before the birth of Socrates.

It is well-attested (for example, in Thucydides I, 121 and 143) that the same Temple of Delphi was a great center for money-lending at usury, probably the greatest in Greece. Lending to states for the purpose of waging war, was a notable included specialty.

Ancient writers described the temple procedure as follows. The priestess, a mature woman given the ritual name Pythia, heard the petitioner’s question from a throne raised above a cleft in the rocks, from which issued a gas, probably hydrogen sulfide, which sent her into a trance or ecstasy. A priest of Apollo seated nearby, a “spinmeister” of that day, translated her incoherent words and cries into verses, which were given out as the prophesy.

The oracle was said to have been begun by an enormous snake or dragon named Python (hence the name Pythia given the priestess), related to the earth-goddess Ge (Gaia) as either her consort, her daughter, or her son. Apollo was said to have killed the snake Python and taken over its oracular function. Aeschylus gives a more detailed review in *Eumenides*.

Throughout historical times, the Temple of Delphi fostered and encouraged the growth of sophistry in Greece. It



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Delphi, where the oracle brought many foolish believers in superstition to perdition.

was that sophistry which led to the Peloponnesian War and the unbroken chain of succeeding fratricidal wars, in which Classical Greece ended by completely destroying itself. As Lyndon LaRouche has written, the Peloponnesian War never actually ended; what happened instead was that all the combatants, i.e., every city in Greece, were ground down and destroyed until they could simply fight no longer.

Even afterwards, the Delphic tradition was continued into Roman times by, among others, the prolific Greek writer Plutarch, who was almost certainly a priest of Apollo. Plutarch's anti-historical and anti-voluntaristic writings survive to this day, to a great extent. Paradoxically, this Plutarch was a great source for Shakespeare's Roman and Greek histories, while yet the outlooks and attitudes of the two men could not have been more at odds.

The Roman historian Livy wrote that Rome itself was a project of the Delphic cult of Apollo.

But the whole point of this story will probably be lost on the unreflecting reader of today, who is smiling because he knows, or thinks he knows, that any belief whatever in divine intervention is

a childish superstition,—why single out Delphi? Intentions, whether divine or human, have no part in shaping nature or even society. Simple, mechanical-like causes, determine everything. Any further distinctions are lost.

Dismissing what he views (rightly, in part) as ancient superstition, he overlooks his own superstitious worship of what is called statistics, probability, randomness, and the supposed godlike power of stochastic processes. The dogma, for instance, that, although human ingenuity cannot create life, yet the power of randomness can. Or, that while purposive actions by government cannot promote national economic well-being, yet blind stochastic processes can never fail to promote it, indeed to promote it optimally.

While our deluded contemporaries pretend to believe that these rank superstitions constitute modern science, literate ancient Greeks or even Romans would immediately recognize the most degraded form of worship of the goddess Fortuna, or the Greek Tyche.

The Magician



No wonder that gambling (or is it drugs?) is our largest industry.

In fact, such gross superstitions as Adam Smith's "invisible hand," as "free trade," as "the objective, inevitable laws of history," are precisely nothing else but today's reincarnation of the blind idolatry of ancient Delphi. For you the reader, this may be harder to recognize, but not for those financier-oligarchical families who view themselves, correctly, as the historical continuation of the ancient Babylonian, Persian and Roman empires. Through all the differences of historical development, they see the continuity of the mental chains with which the brains of the great numbers of helots can be bound.

Think of this the next time you see Alan Greenspan at a hearing of the U.S. Senate, just at that moment when he has finished some utterance which will be mentioned by every one of the world's newspapers the next morning,—and just as the Senators are scrambling over each other in their haste to try to touch his garment or to kiss his foot.