

Athens, Sparta, America and Your Job Search

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

One of the greatest conflicts in the ancient world was between Athens and Sparta. In fact, the history of ancient Greece was dominated by the conflict between these two different cultures. Both cultures ended up leaving an important legacy to the world.

- On one hand, the culture of Athens left a legacy of art, drama, [architecture](#), philosophy, the enjoyment of wealth and opulence, the idea of a governmental democracy, and a strong navy.
- On the other hand, the government of Sparta left a legacy of asceticism, [military](#) supremacy on land, and oligarchy (rule by a few).

These two societies fought repeatedly between the years of 500 BC and 350 BC. Their clash was a fight between two civilizations in the fullest sense. Each believed their society and their way of doing things was the correct way. They fought in different ways and they ran their societies in different ways. Most of what we know about the Spartans comes from the writings of the Athenians, because the Athenians were the ones who spent their time writing and thinking. And since the Athenians didn't like the Spartans, the writing is somewhat biased. I believe, and have always believed, that being a successful job seeker requires you to be more of a Spartan than an Athenian. In fact, I would propose that a great deal of what is wrong with our current economy is due to many approaching our careers and our jobs like Athenians rather than Spartans.

I've witnessed what appears to be a decline in a solid work ethic, job finding skills, and the ability to do good work in the United States since I was a young child. It seems to me that this decline is just getting worse and worse. Most people use all their sick days each year, even if they aren't sick. Many people who aren't working spend years unemployed and refuse to take a job unless it pays as much as their last one. In the [automobile industry](#), unions have contributed to a slow death among American automobile companies by demanding more and more benefits and less and less work. Our government is bailing out companies and banks when they can't make a profit. Our leaders are intellectuals with no experience running armies or groups.

Worst of all, there is something developing in this country where we reward people for making mistakes. For example, between 2000 and 2005, hundreds of thousands of Americans made an incredible amount of money buying and selling houses. Now that the economy has started to slow down and they are no longer making money, we are stepping in to fix all of this. It's like a child running back to their parent for help. Our health care costs are incredibly high compared to other cultures. The people of our country are unhealthy and don't watch their diets. Our highest paid workers in the law and other disciplines form communities online where they spend more time complaining about what they make than appreciating what they have.

Our jobs in this country have migrated to places where people can do them cheaper and who are hungrier for work. With manufacturing, it happened already with jobs migrating to China. In the [information technology](#) sector, our jobs are going to places like India. Our country is getting fat, lazy, and developing a massive sense of entitlement. We are turning into intellectuals as opposed to soldiers. Our children spend time playing video games and not learning. Our national test scores are going down on an almost annual basis. We are innovators in many sectors, but something is changing. We have a sense of entitlement about what we deserve and yet we don't deliver. Much of the success we experienced in the recent past has been the result of financial chicanery and financial manipulation. The cultural icons of our youth are other kids who never worked. Some of our most popular shows at this point in time are about people who aren't even required to memorize lines. Instead, a camera follows around young adults on shows like *The Hills*, as they go on dates and socialize. Our country spends more than it saves. Our government has a deficit and most households do as well.

There is something going on in this country that is more "Athens" than it is "Sparta," and it's dragging us down. I know there isn't a lot you can do about what's going on--and I know you may not agree with me. However, what you can do personally is be more "Sparta" than "Athens," and being more "Sparta" than "Athens" is something that can help you reap incredible rewards in your career. As I will discuss below, being more "Sparta" than "Athens" will enable you to: (1) get a job more quickly, (2) be more effective in your existing job, and (3) survive in all economic conditions.

In ancient Greece, Sparta had the most feared military force there was. The Spartan soldier was, and still is, legendary. A Spartan soldier's training began at birth and the Spartan soldiers never lost a battle in the conflicts that waged between the small city-states of ancient Greece. When a baby was very young, it was tested for weakness and deformity. Babies were bathed in wine shortly after being born by their mother. The babies that survived the bathing were brought by their fathers before a governing body of Sparta (a council of elders known as the Geousia). Babies that seemed as if they would be unlikely to become strong soldiers, or who were considered "puny," were thrown in a gorge to die. If a baby made it past this stage and died in another manner later on, they were not even allowed a headstone. The only Spartans who were allowed headstones were those of soldiers who died in battle where Sparta was victorious, and women who died in childbirth or a divine office.

For those who were allowed to live, the training of the Spartan soldier was nonstop and savage. Spartan boys began formal military training at the age of seven in what was called the Agoge system. The boys lived communally and were given grueling physical training and learned to work with weapons at a young age. Men couldn't live with their families until they left active military service at the age of thirty. Spartan men remained in the reserves until the age of sixty. Plutarch, a Greek historian and essayist, wrote that for many Spartan soldiers, going to battle was a welcome relief from the grueling training: "For the Spartans, actual war was a holiday compared to their tough training."

What is so significant to me about this early aspect of Spartan training, is the incredible focus that the young were forced to develop. Their lives were all about their jobs and they were toughened and taught to be "warriors." Instead of being coddled by schools, they were toughened by schools. They were pushed both physically and mentally in these schools. The emphasis in the schools was not on being academic. For example, while Spartan boys studied reading, music, and writing, the boys were punished if they failed to answer questions laconically (i.e., briefly). The idea for Spartans was that they were to be warriors who were educated but didn't sit around debating the nature of good and evil, for example. The idea of intellectualism and debate was not something that was part of Spartan society. A Spartan was trained as a soldier whose job was to get something done.

While I am not sure I would be all that comfortable with the Spartan educational system, what makes it so interesting is that it emphasized utility and action over the converse. Focus was most important. By being focused, you are much more likely to reach your point than by talking around the truth. The Spartans' educational system was geared towards this focus. In modern society, our academics will traditionally sit around debating this or that. Our best students are often those skilled in the art of giving long-winded answers. Lawyers spend a great deal of time debating this or that, and this makes up a giant portion of what goes on in our culture. Students in school are coddled and given the sorts of learning environments that "nurture" them. While I am not going to debate this in great detail, I would go so far as to argue that the nurturing of our modern educational system gives people in the United States a certain sense of entitlement about what society owes them, instead of what they owe society. This coddling ends up instilling a sense of entitlement that may go on in people's lives forever and continually put them in the role of being takers rather than doers. This is not something that would have happened in Sparta.

In Sparta, failure wasn't allowed. According to Thucydides, when Spartan men were going off to war, their mothers, wives, or a woman of significance in their lives would present them with their shield and the statement "With this, or upon this." This meant that the soldier could only return to Sparta having won the battle, with their shield in hand ("with this") or dead ("upon this"). Spartans who returned to Sparta without their shield were presumed to have thrown it at their enemies then fled-- something that was punishable by death or banishment from Sparta. The entire Spartan culture was one that enforced incredible discipline upon its soldiers. For example, one Spartan legend discussed a man who ran away from battle and back to his mother. Instead of comforting him, the mother chased him around the streets hitting him with sticks.

In our current society, failure is allowed. While there is nothing wrong with failure, it should never be an attractive option. Celebrities and well known figures repeatedly go into rehab for drugs and alcohol. We quit jobs if we don't feel we are treated as well as we could be. We coddle people for failing and give them "easier" tasks to do if one task seems too difficult for them. Our government steps in if people make horrible economic choices and doesn't allow them to fail. We pay people unemployment who get fired from their jobs. We bail out companies with government money that are making bad products that no one wants to buy. When a Spartan went off to battle, he had no choice but to succeed. There would be no warm homecoming for him if he failed. Consequently, the Spartans didn't fail and always won their battles among the city states of ancient Greece.

According to one commentator:

The life of a Spartan male was a life of discipline, self-denial, and simplicity. The Spartans viewed themselves as the true inheritors of the Greek tradition. They did not surround themselves with luxuries, expensive foods, or opportunities for leisure. And this, I think, is the key to understanding the Spartans. While the Athenians and many others thought the Spartans were insane, the life of the Spartans seemed to hark back to a more basic way of life. Discipline, simplicity, and self-denial always remained ideals in the Greek and Roman worlds; civilization was often seen as bringing disorder, enervation, weakness, and a decline in moral values. The Spartan, however, could point to Spartan society and argue that moral values and human courage and strength was as great as it was before civilization. Spartan society, then, exercised a profound pull on the surrounding city-states who admired the simplicity, discipline, and order of Spartan life.

Sparta's emphasis on military supremacy and a simple lifestyle was the major emphasis behind Plato's book, *The Republic*, which was one of the first attempts to formulate an ideal community. Was Sparta ideal? In many ways, I believe it was. In our current society, everything is far too complicated. Our emphasis on leisure and eating has made us a nation that is predominantly overweight. Our ability to manufacture goods the world wants to buy continues to decrease. As a group, we don't have discipline. Our military is not valued and held in esteem by many of our highest leaders. We surround ourselves with luxuries and more emphasis seems to be put on this for many of us than on the value of our work.

In contrast to Sparta, Athens was a very different society and far less rigid and militaristic. In Sparta, the emphasis of the society was on the military. In Athens, the largest emphasis was upon culture. Some very important accomplishments were made by Athenians in science, art, philosophy, and other disciplines. For example, the philosophers Plato, Socrates, Aristotle and the playwrights of Euripides, Aristophanes, Aeschylus all lived during Athens' golden age in the fifth century BC. Athenians believed that they were culturally superior to the Spartans. They enjoyed luxuries and foods from all over their empire. The homes of wealthy Athenians were very nice and had inner courtyards. A good description of Athens also comes from Pericles famous funeral oration:

Further, we provide many ways to refresh the mind from the burdens of business. We hold contests and offer sacrifices all the year round, and the elegance of our private establishments forms a daily source of pleasure and helps to drive away sorrow. The magnitude of our city draws the produce of the world into our harbor, so that to the Athenian the fruits of other countries are as familiar a luxury as those of his own.

In contrast, Spartan men were taught to get along with almost nothing. Spartan citizens weren't permitted to own gold or other luxuries. These differences between the Spartans and Athenians remind me of a conflict I see today all around me. There are people who talk a lot about what they're going to do and read a lot about what others are doing and have done, and there are people out there doing things and actually getting work done. Which are you? I would encourage you to be on the side of action and self denial, and create effective contribution, rather than on the side of those who simply talk and do very little.

One of the greatest conflicts I've personally witnessed in working with [thousands of job](#) seekers over the years has been a similar conflict--there are job seekers who are Spartans and there are job seekers who are Athenians. The Spartans are always the more successful in the long run.

When I was around 18 years old, my parents stopped giving me money. I didn't have a traditional home to come home to where parents cooked and looked after me, either. Without any money coming in and expenses that included car maintenance, gas for my car, clothes, books for school, and other essentials I was put in a position where I had to work. While I resented my parents for their personal situation which put me in this role at the time, it was something that I ultimately

came to appreciate as I got into my 30s because I realized how much more scrappy it made me compared to others. In ancient Sparta, the boys were intentionally underfed so they would always be hungry and so they would develop the skill of being able to steal food. Here, without any money coming in, I needed to toughen myself and learn skills that other kids my age weren't learning at the time. I sold knives on the street. I worked as a pizza delivery boy. I worked in the school bookstore. I started a business doing asphalt work. I worked on cars in my spare time. I didn't have the same luxuries and other accouterments as other kids. I also knew that I didn't have any "backstop" if I failed. If I didn't have any money then I would simply not be able to function. I needed to look out for myself. This was something that personally toughened me up. It made me quite self-reliant and it put me in a position where I learned over time how to make use of existing resources, find the best deals for things, and make the most of what I was given. This is an incredibly valuable skill to have, and as a "Spartan" I toughened myself up quite a bit.

What this means for you and your job search is that you need to put yourself in the position of a Spartan. If a Spartan were [looking for a job](#) today they would show up to an interview ready for work. They would not debate the idea of retreat or running home if they didn't [get the job](#). They wouldn't debate the idea of quitting the job if they were unhappy with the work conditions or they didn't like their boss—they would make it work. They would only accept victory. Moreover, a Spartan would go to work ready to work and would work very hard.

A lot of people enjoy sitting around and talking about things. They are undisciplined when it comes to their [job search](#) and quite lazy. Many may purchase a book or two here and there, and not do anything with it. Others may lament the state of the market and cite accounts in newspapers and other sources that there aren't enough opportunities. They will sit around and try to see what benefits they're entitled to. They will take all of their vacation and sick days. Instead of working on their existing weaknesses and acknowledging them, they may move between jobs to find employers who won't bring to light their weaknesses. None of this does them any good in the long run.

I think a lot of what is wrong with this country today is that we're too Athenian and not Spartan enough. I would encourage you, in your job search and career, to be more Spartan than Athenian.

THE LESSON

While Athens prioritized culture and intellectualism, the people of Sparta devoted themselves to simplicity and discipline. You need to approach your job search as a Spartan, not an Athenian. Don't retreat from the negative aspects of your life and current job. Rather, make them work for you and remain focused on your success.

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