

# It's All Greek to Me



If you think stand-up comedy is in a rut, you should hear Gholamhossein Elham, an Iranian government spokesman. Old Gholam had me in

stitches when he stood up and screamed foul over the blockbuster “300” a couple of weeks ago. He called the movie an insult and hostile behavior because it portrays the Persians as slobs back in 480 B.C.

Well, I've got news for Gholam. They were terrific slobs back then, and many of them continue to be slobs today. They wear tablecloths on their heads and sit on the floor to eat funny-smelling food with their hands. They also scream a lot, beat themselves to a pulp with chains, and think Uncle Sam is the great Satan. Persians, as they used to be called before the Shah decided to call them Iranians, are not popular with the neocons, however, which makes them popular with me. Sure they're slobs, but so are many people in Hollywood and Noo Yawk.

Back in the old country, we've been making jokes about the Persians since 480 B.C. But we also like them because they made heroes out of us Greeks. We only lost once to them, in Thermopylae, but there were 400,000 of them and 300 of us. A fool like Victor Davis Hanson calls that a defeat, but a far greater historian, Taki, calls it a resounding victory. Mind you, we never lost to them before or after. In 490 B.C., General Miltiades wiped the floor with them in the Battle of Marathon. Ten thousand Athenians routed 100,000 in close corps-à-corps fighting. Miltiades then ordered a fat hoplite, who had not mixed it up and was fresh, to run like hell back to Athens and tell the locals not to burn down the city as was the plan in case of a barbarian victory.

He ran the 42 kilometers, 385 yards and dropped dead as he entered the city

walls and pronounced “Enikikamen.” We won. Legend gave the credit to Pheidippides, a renowned runner, but Pheidippides was a general, and generals are not messenger boys. In any event, he was on his way to Sparta, a good three days away, to enlist Spartan help. The Spartans sat on the fence, so to speak.

But back to “300” and Gholam the angry. The historian Herodotus recorded Xerxes's army as one million strong, but it now seems to be an inflated number. The number of barbarians was closer to 400,000, or more than 1,000 to 1 against. The Spartans relished a fight, though—as long as they were the ones doing the fighting. In his book about the Peloponnesian Wars, Donald Kagan called

quickly, Western civilization would have never taken place. We'd be wearing tablecloths on our heads and would have even worse table manners than we do.

When the Spartans left their home to go up north and intercept the Persian hordes, most Greeks accepted that they would fight bravely then retreat in good order, surviving to fight another day. Not the Spartans. They actually fought to win, and could have pulled it off in the narrows of Thermopylae if it weren't for a traitor, Ephialtes, who showed the barbarians another path that enabled them to come around and encircle the Greeks. “The Spartans, reckless with their own safety and desperate, since they knew their destruction was nigh at hand, exerted themselves with the most furious valor against the barbarians,” writes Herodotus. A simple inscription marks their sacrifice: “Passerby, tell the Greeks that we have done our duty.”

**BACK IN THE OLD COUNTRY, WE'VE BEEN MAKING JOKES ABOUT THE PERSIANS SINCE 480 B.C. BUT WE ALSO LIKE THEM BECAUSE THEY MADE HEROES OUT OF US GREEKS.**

Sparta a “fascist place.” Thank God it was, otherwise it would not have survived as long as it did. My mother was a Spartan, as were both her parents, and our ancestral home is now the Spartan museum. When the Italians invaded Greece in 1940, my mother had five brothers and a husband fighting in the front. For some strange reason I suspect no Kagans ever did any fighting, but then I could be wrong.

Sure, helots worked the fields and performed all manual tasks. So do Hispanics today in America. Male Spartans were forbidden any profession, trade, or business except the business of war. Had the barbarian hordes overrun the Spartans

Athens was the cradle of democracy and birthplace of Western thought, but it was Sparta, 100 miles to the southwest, that made it possible. Their heavily armed foot soldiers used eight-deep shield walls moving in perfect step, like tanks, to bulldoze the enemy off the field of battle. In the Battle of Plataea, where they threw the Persians out of Greece forever, these Spartan formations broke through the enemy stockade and massacred everyone in sight. Never again would a Persian army invade the Greek mainland. Alexander the Great took care of them later on their home field.

Gholam, you're lucky to be living in the present. ■

NEW FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *RISE OF THE VULCANS* AND *ABOUT FACE*

“**THE CHINA FANTASY** cuts through the b.s. and lays out the truth.”\*

**JAMES MANN**

New York Times Bestselling Author of  
*Rise of the Vulcans*, *About Face*, and *Beijing Jeep*

# THE CHINA FANTASY

HOW OUR LEADERS EXPLAIN  
AWAY CHINESE REPRESSION



\* *Rocky Mountain News*

“A short, readable polemic that undertakes to blow up a persistent American illusion about trade with China.”

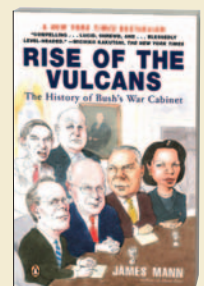
—*Seattle Times*

“Mann has perfectly described the blend of hope and cynicism that currently underpins American policy toward China.”

—*The New York Sun*

“*The China Fantasy* raises an awkward and important question . . . What would it mean for the United States—and, indeed, the world—if 20 or 30 years from now a much richer and more powerful China proved to be every bit as authoritarian as it is today?” —*Washington Post*

Also available  
from Penguin:



VIKING

[www.penguin.com](http://www.penguin.com)

A Member of Penguin Group (USA)