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The Threshold of Democracy: Athens in 403 B.C. (Reacting to the Past)

Josiah Ober, Mark C. Carnes

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Part of the *Reacting to the Past* series, *The Threshold of Democracy* re-creates the intellectual dynamics of one of the most formative periods in the human experience.

After nearly three decades of war, Sparta crushed democratic Athens, destroyed its great walls and warships, occupied the city, and installed a brutal regime, “the Thirty Tyrants.” The excesses of the tyrants resulted in civil war, and, as the game begins, they have been expelled and the democracy restored. But doubts about democracy remain, expressed most ingeniously by Socrates and his young supporters. Will Athens retain a political system where all decisions are made by an Assembly of six thousand or so citizens? Will leaders continue to be chosen by random lottery? Will citizenship be broadened to include slaves who fought for the democracy and foreign-born metics who paid taxes in its support? Will Athens rebuild its long walls and warships and again extract tribute from city-states throughout the eastern Mediterranean? These and other issues are sorted out by a polity fractured into radical and moderate democrats, oligarchs, and Socratics, among others.

The debates are informed by Plato’s *Republic*, as well as excerpts from Thucydides, Xenophon, and other contemporary sources. By examining democracy at its threshold, the game provides the perspective to consider its subsequent evolution.

Reacting to the Past is a series of historical role-playing games that explore important ideas by re-creating the contexts that shaped them. Students are assigned roles, informed by classic texts, set in particular moments of intellectual and social ferment.

An award-winning active-learning pedagogy, *Reacting to the Past* improves speaking, writing, and leadership skills, promotes engagement with classic texts and history, and builds learning communities. *Reacting* can be used across the curriculum, from the first-year general education class to “capstone” experiences. A *Reacting* game can also function as the discussion component of lecture classes, or it can be enlisted for intersession courses, honors programs, and other specialized curricular purposes.

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