

## CHAPTER 9

### THUCYDIDES AND CONTEMPORARY STRATEGY

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#### A POSSESSION FOR ALL TIME

Nearly 2 1/2 millennia have passed since the Greek historian Thucydides composed his famous history of the Peloponnesian War (432-404 B.C.E.).<sup>1</sup> Although well known among scholars, the text was not translated from the Greek original until 1478.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary interest in Thucydides dates to the European renaissance and emergence of the modern state system, whose dynamic of armed competition between contending sovereignties his work is often presumed to represent. Ever since, Thucydides has been a source of inspiration for policymakers as well as scholars. In our time no armed conflict anywhere in the world is fought to a conclusion without some attempt to use his work as a vehicle for interpretation.<sup>3</sup>

Thucydides' influence has been manifest in modern American strategic thought. In 1947 U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall turned to Thucydides to fathom the emerging Cold War: "I doubt seriously," he proposed, "whether a man can think with full wisdom and with deep conviction regarding certain of the basic issues today who has not at least reviewed in his mind the period of the Peloponnesian War and the fall of Athens."<sup>4</sup> A latter U.S. Secretary of State and former general officer, Colin Powell, speaking upon his retirement as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1993, cited Thucydides to the effect that "of all manifestations of power, restraint impresses men most." Powell kept the passage posted at his desk for many years.<sup>5</sup> When Stanfield Turner set out to revamp instruction at the U.S. Naval War College in the 1970s he made Thucydides the focal point of the curriculum. Today Carl von Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, and Thucydides are the only strategic theorists whose work predates the twentieth century that are systematically studied at U.S. senior service schools.

In the past several decades, there has been an explosion of work devoted to Thucydides, no longer addressed primarily to an audience of classical scholars, but rather the larger community of security and strategic studies.<sup>6</sup> This attention rests on an appreciation of his work's multi-faceted relevance. Leo Strauss represents Thucydides' text as a commentary upon war itself: "The Peloponnesian war is that singular event which reveals fully, in an unsurpassable manner, for all times, the nature of war."<sup>7</sup> Clifford Orwin sees it as a political primer; "Of all writers on politics, none stays closer than Thucydides to the world of citizen and statesman," whose work belongs "to students of political life of whatever time and place."<sup>8</sup> Richard Ned Lebow concentrates on Thucydides' contributions to international relations theory, as "the first writer to analyze the origin of war, the role of power in international relations, the relationship between domestic and foreign politics, the process by which civil and international orders unravel and what might be done to restore them."<sup>9</sup> Such commendations can be multiplied many fold. Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* is without question a seminal study of warfare and a "possession for all time" as the author aspired for it to be.<sup>10</sup>

Why is this so? What does *The Peloponnesian War* have to teach us about the problems of war and strategy? It is in fact generally easier to assert the text's importance than to discern the character of its insights. Like any great work, its message is ambiguous and has been read in different ways depending on the prevailing *Zeitgeist*. In the early modern centuries, Thucydides was viewed as a guide to the primacy of power and *raison d'état* in the Westphalian state system. The young Thomas Hobbes, who in 1624 authored one of the first English translations of *The Peloponnesian*

*War*, provides an example. Hobbes' philosophical work, which considered the urge to power to be integral to human nature and emphasized the insecurity that results from an anarchic state of nature, was deeply influenced by his classical predecessor.<sup>11</sup> The realist tradition in international relations theory has consistently claimed Thucydides as a progenitor—Joseph Nye calls him “the founding father of Realism.”<sup>12</sup> For Marshall, the war between Athens and Sparta became a prototype for the bipolar confrontation of the emerging Cold War, and the clash of values between democracy and totalitarianism that informed it. Others see the work as a humane reflection on the human condition whose overarching theme is “the suffering of war.”<sup>13</sup> Powell, from the perspective of the victorious U.S.A. of the post-Cold War, found a cautionary tale about the limits of power. Today, Thucydides' work is being applied as a vehicle for understanding the logic of terrorism in the world after 9/11.<sup>14</sup> This is as it should be. Classic works of strategic literature cannot be read as users manuals. They offer illuminations rather than answers—their status as “timeless” works in a sense demands that it be so.

Policy and strategy, defined as the craft of statesmanship and the use of military force in the pursuit of political aims, are practical undertakings. Many U.S. commanders carried copies of Antoine Jomini's work onto the battlefields of the American Civil War—the Swiss theorist made a conscious attempt to provide maxims that could be applied to tactical and operational problems. Alexander the Great is reported to have slept on campaign with a version of *The Iliad* prepared by his tutor Aristotle at his bedside (as modern commanders might carry a *Bible* or *Koran*)—cultural inspiration may also serve as a foundation for waging war. It is difficult to imagine Thucydides in a knapsack on campaign; his insights are too complex to serve as guides on the tactical level, and his conclusions too elusive to provide cultural inspiration. His work has a different kind of merit, however, that is perhaps no less relevant and profound.

What Thucydides provides is strategic insight. He offers invaluable points of orientation for statecraft and supreme command in the domain of national policy, as well as searing judgments about the factors that lead states to victory or defeat in protracted strategic competition. His subject is the institution of war in all its dimensions, and his text illustrates that although we no longer fight with shields and stabbing spears, on the strategic level warfare has remained remarkably constant over time. Those who read Thucydides for the first time are usually struck by his work's astonishing current relevance—not so much as an agenda for action as a guide to understanding.<sup>15</sup> As a reflection on war intended to help us to come to terms with the larger strategic environment, *The Peloponnesian War* remains unsurpassed.

## A WAR LIKE ALL OTHERS

Much of the current literature concerning the Peloponnesian War is focused on the conflict itself, considered as an event in space and time that can be understood empirically. Victor David Hanson's recent study, *A War Like No Other*, emphasizes the distinctiveness of the struggle, which he portrays as an armed conflict virtually unique in history in its scope and complexity.<sup>16</sup> This is potentially misleading. Almost everything that we know about the Peloponnesian War is based on what Thucydides tells us, and despite the best efforts of archeologists and classical scholars that is not likely to change.

There is an ongoing debate about the accuracy of Thucydides' narrative, but it rests on distressingly few supplementary sources (essentially stone tablets containing state records and a very small number of fragmentary primary and secondary accounts). Basically, much of Thucydides' story must either be accepted on faith or rejected as improbable. Thucydides was in an excellent position to assemble an accurate record of events. His appreciation for the importance of the war gave him

a strong motive to do so. And he went out of his way to demonstrate his objectivity, a trait for which his work has long been appreciated. David Hume, later echoed by Immanuel Kant, famously remarked that the first page of his text “was the commencement of real history,” while even the skeptical George Cawkwell lauds his “monstrous passion for the truth.”<sup>17</sup>

Up to the publication of Jacqueline de Romilly’s seminal study of Athenian imperialism in 1947, the issue of chronology dominated Thucydides scholarship – when the work was composed, the stages of composition, and how much the author was in a position to know.<sup>18</sup> Today, scholars broadly accept that *The Peloponnesian War* was conceived and composed as a whole. Scholarship has shifted from issues of accuracy in narration toward an immanent reading of the text, viewed as an artful reconstruction used to convey the author’s personal view of Greek political life.<sup>19</sup> This kind of research agenda may be exaggerated in its own right, but it is certainly true that Thucydides interprets as well as describes – his account is infused with the author’s perspective. “Thucydides has imposed his will,” notes the commentator Arnold Gomme, “as no other historian has ever done.”<sup>20</sup> The Peloponnesian War was indeed a great armed conflict, but it was not the only one waged in classical antiquity. It may be perceived as a “war like no other” only because of the brilliance of Thucydides’ rendition of events. And as a 19th century commentator warns, Thucydides’ masterly text can lead us to neglect the fact that “history does not consist of events in and of themselves, but rather in the impact that they have upon others.”<sup>21</sup> For the purposes of strategic studies, as distinct from classical studies and historiography, it is *Thucydides’ Peloponnesian War* that matters.

What do we know about Thucydides? Three vitae survive from the Byzantine period, but they are contradictory and sometimes clearly erroneous. Most of what we can assert derives from what Thucydides himself tells us in four brief references to his personal circumstances in *The Peloponnesian War*, and perhaps more importantly from what we can infer about the author from reading his text.<sup>22</sup>

Thucydides was born in the 5th century, around 460. He was therefore 29 years old and in the prime of life in 431 when the Peloponnesian War began, and 55 in 404 when it ended with Athens’ defeat. The date of his death is not known with certainty, but probably occurred around 400-397. The author records his full name as Thucydides son of Olorus from the deme of Halimous. This indicates Thracian origin and possible familial ties to the powerful and conservative Philaidea clan, which included the Athenian statesman Miltiades (550-489, the victor at Marathon in 490) and his son Cimon (510-450, ostracized from Athens in 461). Thucydides was clearly of high social standing, and a man of means. At one point he mentions that his family possesses the Athenian concession for gold mining in all of Thrace. In 424 the citizens of Athens elected him to the post of general, one of only ten individuals to hold that post annually and therefore a leading figure in the state. In the same year, ordered to come to the relief of the commercial center of Amphipolis in Thrace with a small fleet of seven triremes (warships), he arrived too late to prevent the city’s fall to the Spartan general Brasidas. Returning to Athens, Thucydides was condemned as a sign of disfavor and exiled from the city for 20 years (a fairly common punishment in the era). For the remainder of the conflict, he was therefore able to observe, from the perspective of a not entirely disinterested onlooker, the war swirling around him. During the war, when he may have spent much of his time on his Thracian estate, and after his return to Athens on its conclusion he composed on a series of papyrus scrolls, what was in effect a contemporary history, recording in great detail the course of events from 431 to 411. Thucydides’ history is left unfinished, and in fact breaks off abruptly in the midst of a paragraph.<sup>23</sup>

More important than the details of this modest biography is what it seems to indicate about the author’s intellectual orientation. Thucydides’ life ran parallel to the golden age of classical Hellenic civilization. He lived to see the triumph of Athenian material civilization with the raising of the

great temples on the Acropolis, the construction of the long walls linking Athens to the port of Piraeus, and the constant expansion of an Athenian maritime empire. He was contemporary with the political leader Pericles (495-429), the historian Herodotus (484-425), the sculptor Phidias (490-430), the philosophers Gorgias (483-375) and Socrates (469-399), and the dramatists Sophocles (497-406), Euripides (480-406), and Aristophanes (448-380).<sup>24</sup> Thucydides was therefore a participant in one of the greatest cultural flowerings in all of history, and present at the creation of what we call Western Civilization. He also lived to see the defeat and ruin of his native city, an event whose cultural as well as strategic importance he fully appreciated. Thucydides begins his history by remarking that its subject is “the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians . . . believing that it would be a great war, and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it.”<sup>25</sup> He makes no attempt to justify this focus, and in fact none is required. “War is the father and king of all,” wrote the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus (535-475), in a passage that is not incongruous for a civilization whose founding text was Homer’s *Iliad*.<sup>26</sup> It was a valuation that Thucydides shared. The sentiment was echoed from the other side of the world by Thucydides’ approximate contemporary Sun Tzu, for whom: “Warfare is the greatest affair of state, the basis of life and death, the way to survival or extinction. It must be thoroughly pondered and analyzed.”<sup>27</sup> Thucydides’ experience with hegemonic warfare led him to validate these conclusions, and to perceive war as the essential focus for all political life. The political, social, and cultural implications of the great war between the Athenians and the Peloponnesians are the real subject of his history.

One might surmise that as a young man Thucydides turned away from the oligarchic political preferences that would come naturally to someone of his social standing, and embraced the idealism of Periclean Athens. The tribute to the civic culture of democratic Athens that he transcribes in Pericles’ funeral oration in Book Two of *The Peloponnesian War*, where the Athenian leader honors the city’s fallen soldiers by evoking the cause for which they offered their lives, is obviously sincere.<sup>28</sup> Thucydides also sees and describes in brutal detail the dark side of democratic governance, but his allegiance to Pericles as the embodiment of the ideal of an open society never wavers. In this sense his history takes on the contours of a tragedy – the account of the downfall, occasioned by its own hubris and tragic flaws, of a great civilization. W. Robert Connor notes a “recurring paradox” in Thucydides’ history; “the intense emotional power of a work ostensibly so detached.”<sup>29</sup> The paradox is only apparent. Thucydides’ major themes, the harsh reality of warfare as a locus of political intercourse and the corruption of a civilized polity exposed to the pressures of total war, are passionately felt. It is the importance of these themes that leads him to insist on a dispassionate investigation of the questions of causation and responsibility. “The absence of romance in my history,” he writes, “will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future . . . I shall be content.”<sup>30</sup> Thucydides’ Peloponnesian War is important not primarily for what makes it unique, but for what it shares in common with and reveals about the nature of other hegemonic conflicts. It is a war like all others that poses themes of universal and enduring importance.

## THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR

The war that Thucydides recounts certainly merits his judgment that in scope and importance it was “much greater than the wars which preceded it.”<sup>31</sup> This is due to its length and extent, but also because of the cultural stakes. Thucydides begins his narrative with an account of the evolution of Hellenic civilization itself (known to modern students as the *Archaeology*), which demonstrates the development from the 7th to 5th centuries of a classic Greek civilization around the political unit of the city-state (*polis*). City states were engaged in constant feuding over agricultural land at the

margin of their territories, waging a “Greek way of war” with armed citizens’ militias deployed as heavy infantry (hoplites) fighting in close formation (the phalanx) in a strategic context heavily constrained by myth and ritual.<sup>32</sup> This relatively harmonious system, whose value system Homer depicted in his epics, was soon to be swept away – first by external shocks and then by war waged between its leading polities.

The Greek world drew together to repel the Persians in the *Persian Wars* (490-479) as recounted in the *Histories* of Herodotus, culminating with the famous battles of Marathon (490), Salamis (480), and Plataea (479).<sup>33</sup> What followed might be compared, with due allowance for changed circumstances, to the emergence of the Cold War after 1945, when disparate allies forced together to resist a common threat fell out when the threat was removed.<sup>34</sup> Athens and Sparta, the leading Greek powers, allies in the struggle against the Persians but possessed of radically different institutions and aspirations, were soon engaged in a struggle for dominion. Thucydides devotes a large section of his text (the *Pentecontaetia* or “50 years”) to describe the rise of a revisionist Athens, bent upon replacing Sparta as the leading power in Hellas, in the decades following the Persian War.

Thucydides’ analysis of the causes of war has a strong cultural dimension. The author repeatedly refers to the differences in style, attitude, and values that divide the major belligerents. Sparta represents a distinctive variant of the oligarchic tyranny, with an agricultural economy based on the labor of a massive population of enslaved helots, and defense provided by professional warriors or Spartiates organized in elite infantry units famed for their courage and discipline. Sparta’s force as a land power is justly famed – no other power in the Greek world is presumed to be capable of standing before it. Sparta also heads a loose alliance based on bilateral agreements with like-minded allies known as the Peloponnesian League. As an agrarian based oligarchy committed to traditional values and an unchallengeable land power with a status-quo geopolitical orientation Sparta may be said to represent a conservative force in Greek life. By way of contrast, Thucydides portrays Athens as dynamic and innovative. Though like all Greek city-states its economy rests on slave labor, it is ground breaking in developing democratic institutions and offers a considerable degree of empowerment to its free citizens. Its international position rests on sea power, commerce, and an empire of subject states (city-states in the Aegean, Thrace, and Asia Minor) that originally ally with Athens to resist the Persians and are organized under Athenian leadership in the Delian League in 478. Athens is culturally innovative, economically dynamic, and strategically expansive. After the construction of the long walls linking Athens to Piraeus in 450, it is also virtually invulnerable. Periclean Athens is bent on extending its power, and brash and assertive in its dealings with others.

When the city-state of Megara withdrew from the Spartan alliance and joined with Athens in 460, a First Peloponnesian War that pitted Athens and Sparta against one another as primary belligerents ensued. The war ended in 446 with a compromise known as the Thirty Years Peace, including a pledge to submit future differences to binding arbitration. Between 433 and 431, however, a series of events on the periphery of the Greek world drove the two antagonists to war once again. Thucydides’ Peloponnesian War was waged from 431-404, over a span of 27 years. For purposes of simplification (the distinction is not made by Thucydides), historians generally divide the war into three phases: the *Archidamian War* from 431-421, named for the Spartan King Archidamus, who ironically opposed a resort to arms and sought to contain hostilities once in progress; the *Peace of Nicias* from 421-412, named for the Athenian general Nicias who negotiated the truce in 421 and went on to meet a tragic fate as commander of the doomed Athenian expeditionary force on Sicily; and the *Ionian War* from 412-404 beginning with an Athenian revival but concluding with her final defeat.

The Archidamian War unfolded as a stalemate between Spartan land power and Athenian sea power. Each side was capable of hurting its opponent, but not overthrowing it. A turning point came

when Athens established a base on the Peloponnesus at the isolated outpost of Pylos, capturing several hundred elite Spartiate warriors and threatening to inspire a helot revolt. The Peace of Nicias was the result, but it did not strike deep roots. By this point the war had taken on a momentum of its own, with allies and local commanders refusing to respect ceasefires, and a war party on each side committed to pursue the conflict *jusqu'au bout*. Thucydides goes to some length to argue that the Peace of Nicias, which he calls a "treacherous armistice," does not divide the Peloponnesian War into two distinct parts, but rather represents an integral part of an extended conflict with a consistent strategic logic.<sup>35</sup>

In 416, with rivalry between the two parties unabated, Athens, led by the flamboyant, ambitious, and unprincipled young Alcibiades, launched a great armada with the intention of shifting the balance of power decisively by conquering the island of Sicily.<sup>36</sup> The destruction of its expeditionary force at Syracuse weakened Athens substantially, but not decisively. An oligarchy overthrew the Athenian democracy in 411, but democratic forces quickly regained political control of the city. Athens eventually recouped its strength and launched a military comeback, carrying the war into the Aegean and the Hellespont. The Ionian War was essentially a naval contest waged in these regions, with the Athenian fleet successful at the outset but unable to force the issue to decisive conclusion. In the end it was the intervention in the Spartan cause of the former common enemy Persia that turned the tide. In 405 at the battle of Aegospotami, the Spartan admiral Lysander caught the Athenian fleet drawn up on shore and destroyed it. In 404, with its real center of gravity eliminated, Athens surrendered. The Spartan army occupied the Acropolis, tore down the long walls, and imposed an oligarchic tyranny under a kind of junta known to history as the Thirty Tyrants. As a competitive polity in the eastern Mediterranean Athens' authority would eventually be restored, but its Golden Age, inspired by the ideals of Pericles, would not return. Thucydides' account of the war ends at the year 411, but it is clear throughout the narrative that he is aware of its eventual outcome, and that this awareness importantly shapes the way in which he structures his text and develops its themes.

## THUCYDIDES AND GRAND STRATEGY

Even in brief outline, the Peloponnesian War presents the observer with an extraordinarily wide variety of strategic gambits, military adventures, and political ploys. Thucydides' history includes detailed descriptions of major fleet actions, pitched battles, sieges, unconventional operations, plague, revolution, atrocity, and massacre, political confrontations, instances of decisive leadership, and in fact virtually every kind of circumstance that shapes the outcome of major wars. The story is engrossing, but as already argued, it is not unique. What is it that makes Thucydides' account the "classical and canonical work of Western culture" that it is universally considered to be?<sup>37</sup>

Part of the answer lies in the controlled emotion with which Thucydides infuses an account of a war that he firmly believes to be an unprecedented tragedy. Part lies in the author's methodological contributions. Thucydides sets out to chronicle a war, not to craft a general theory of warfare. But he clearly states the conviction that because human nature remains essentially the same, by examining the past we can identify recurrent patterns in social and political intercourse, learn from them, and on that basis develop strategies for more effective action in the future. The author's magisterial detachment, refusal to accept conventional explanations at face value, and unapologetic rationalism are nothing short of remarkable. Moses Finley calls Thucydides "the most careful and in the best sense the most skeptical historian the ancient world ever produced."<sup>38</sup> In this regard, his work provides a solid foundation for modern historiography and the discipline of political science. Most importantly, perhaps, *The Peloponnesian War* is timeless because it develops an appreciation of warfare

in a larger strategic context and poses classic problems in strategic analysis in a particularly lucid way. We can illustrate the way in which this occurs with three examples: Thucydides' reflections on the causes of war, the strategic level of warfare, and ethical and moral concerns.

### **The Origins of War.**

Identifying the causes and nature of war is a basic challenge that arguably has become more difficult in an era when declarations of war have become things of the past, when the state of war has lost much of its formal legal status, and when the U.S. finds itself engaged in an open-ended "war on terrorism and radical extremism" that may last for generations. Thucydides' account of the origins of the Peloponnesian War offers an interesting case study for working through these problems.

Thucydides devotes a great amount of attention to discussing the causes of the Peloponnesian War and makes a fundamental distinction, which he is sometimes said to have invented, between the immediate or short-term sources of the conflict and underlying or structural causes.<sup>39</sup> Simon Hornblower describes this aspect of his work as "a conscious, secular theory of causation in terms of deep and superficial political causes."<sup>40</sup> Perhaps the most famous sentence in Thucydides' history is the comment that however one might adjudicate immediate causes, ultimately "the growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable."<sup>41</sup> The pessimistic fatalism that seems to be reflected here, the view of political life as an endless striving for power and dominion, has found great resonance in the realist camp of international relations theory. Hans Morgenthau quotes Thucydides to the effect that: "Of the gods we know, and of men we believe, that it is a necessary law of their nature that they rule whenever they can."<sup>42</sup> Athens' ambition, opines Raymond Aron, condemns it to brutality: "The servitudes of power are inescapable."<sup>43</sup>

In fact, Thucydides does not make any effort to develop a systematic theory of causation. He describes the origins of the Peloponnesian War in considerable detail, but leaves the reader to draw conclusions concerning the relative weight of the various factors on which he touches. Thucydides mentions Sparta's fear of growing Athenian power on several occasions.<sup>44</sup> Clearly, the security dilemma occasioned by the rise of a great power challenger, competitive bipolarity, and an impending power transition are powerful structural factors that contribute to systemic instability and increase the likelihood of war.<sup>45</sup> Much the larger part of Thucydides' description, however, is devoted to immediate causes. One set of variables that he discusses concerns economic motivation. The Spartans emphasized the Megarian Decrees that imposed a commercial embargo on Athens' rival Megara as a primary cause of war. In response, Pericles enjoined Athens to rigorously enforce the decrees. The origin of the war in an obscure dispute over a small settlement on the margin of the Greek world is not unrelated to the fact that the settlement in question is strategically poised along the trade route leading to Italy. Thucydides does not offer a reductionist explanation that locates the roots of war in an Athenian imperialism driven by the merchants of the Piraeus, but he is not insensitive to the weight of economic factors.<sup>46</sup>

Thucydides also probes the diplomatic interaction leading up to the war. Neither of the belligerents necessarily seeks to provoke war, but all become caught up in a maze of misperceptions, ambiguous communication, erroneous calculations, and policies of bluff and bluster. As in the July Crisis of 1914, there is a sense in which the Peloponnesian War becomes a "war by accident" as a result of the failure of diplomacy. Domestic politics and policy processes, including the critical role of charismatic leadership, also have their place. The Spartans decision for war results from the crude *va-t'en-guerre* rhetoric of the ephor Stenelaidēs, who declaims that he does "not pretend to understand" the long speeches of the Athenians, but nonetheless urges a "vote for war, as honor

demands."<sup>47</sup> Pericles' personal authority and powers of persuasion are critical factors that turn Athens away from a policy of compromise that it might otherwise have preferred.

Thucydides' account does not resolve the issue of the relative importance of structural and immediate causes, nor does it seek to do so. What the text demonstrates is multiple causality.<sup>48</sup> Structural explanations alone do not suffice—the choice for war is an ambiguous action that is conditioned by numerous variables, “a confluence of causes at multiple levels of analysis.”<sup>49</sup> While the calculus of power may be a necessary context for a decision for war it must be filtered through a screen of perception and misperception, threshed out in the domestic policy process, refined by diplomatic interaction, and implemented in practice. Nothing is fixed and inalterable. Wars are seldom clear cut, war aims and strategic calculations are subject to change, and the precise combination of factors that may have motivated a choice for war at one point in time will alter as the dynamic of conflict unfolds.

### **The Strategic Level of Warfare.**

Thucydides' depiction of warfare is nearly unparalleled in its intensity and power. There is no more sophisticated rendering of the complementary roles of land and sea power, the burden of command, the consequences of defeat, the impact of political faction on strategic choice, or the role of chance and circumstance in effecting strategic outcomes. Despite the best efforts of responsible leaders, momentous events continue to turn on the unpredictable and unexpected—an eclipse of the moon and bolt of thunder, cloud cover during a night attack, unidentified terrain features, or the personal foibles of leaders under stress. The Peloponnesian War is one of the greatest books ever written about the theme of war itself. But Thucydides does not just depict the face of battle. He places warfare in a grand strategic context where a multiplicity of factors must be explored to account for the difference between victory and defeat. Thucydides' appreciation for the strategic level of warfare is one of the most important, and neglected, dimensions of his work.

Thucydides depicts grand strategy as *comprehensive*. In great wars, everything matters and nothing is superfluous. In *The Peloponnesian War* this includes such things as the *domestic political environment* (Sparta is chronically concerned with the possibility of a helot revolt, there is a constant struggle between oligarchic and democratic factions within individual city-states with serious strategic implications); *economic necessity* (control of commercial routes, access to strategic raw materials); *pride and reputation* (alliance defection becomes unacceptable because the hegemonic power will lose face); *military innovation* (the enhanced role of light infantry, including archers, slingers, and Thracian *peltasts*; as the war proceeds the new Corinthian ramming tactics that wreak havoc with the Athenian fleet in the Great Harbor of Syracuse); *geostrategy* (control of maritime choke points and lines of communication); *alliance stability* (much of Spartan strategy consists of attacking the integrity of the Athenian alliance system); and *decisive battle* (the encounters at Delium, Mantinea, or Syracuse where strategic outcomes hinge on a single day's fighting). Thucydides makes no attempt to identify a unique hub of power and movement capable of serving as a Clausewitzian Center of Gravity (even if his narrative provides plenty of material for making such an assessment retrospectively). What he depicts is an extraordinarily complex strategic environment where victory can be a consequence of many things, some of which are virtually impossible to predict.

In addition to being comprehensive, Thucydides' strategic environment is *dynamic*. At the outset of the Peloponnesian War, the two major belligerents have clearly outlined strategies for waging and winning the war. Sparta's intention is to invade Attica and force the Athenians to confront their army in order to prevent the ravaging of their lands and homes. Presumably the Spartans will defeat the Athenians in a major battle between opposing hoplite armies, leaving Sparta in a position

to dictate the terms of peace. Athens, led by Pericles, intends to withdraw its population from exposed rural regions and concentrate it inside the city walls, refuse battle, subsist by importing vital commodities via sea, avoid adventures, and use naval power to raid and harass the Peloponnesus. Eventually, the Athenians presume, Spartan resolve will flag, and Athens will be in a position to impose an advantageous peace.<sup>50</sup> Each set of assumptions proves misguided, and what follows is an extraordinary set of strategic innovations.

Athenian resolve is weakened by the great plague that strikes the overcrowded city in the second year of the war—a completely unforeseen event with great strategic consequences.<sup>51</sup> The most prominent victim of the plague is Pericles himself. After his passing, Athens, led by the demagogue Cleon, becomes more aggressive, establishing the base at Pylos and using it as a means for placing pressure on its enemy. Sparta, inspired by the generalship of Brasidas, counters by attacking the Athenian alliance in Boeotia and Chalcidice. Both sides make partial gains but come no closer to ultimate victory. The Peace of Nicias represents an attempt to impose a strategic pause, but it does not address the underlying sources of hostility and fails to break the momentum of confrontation. Enduring resentment allows the talented adventurer Alcibiades to up the ante by creating an alliance with Argos, Mantinea, and Elis to challenge Spartan control of the Peloponnesus. He succeeds in provoking a decisive battle at Mantinea in 418, in which the Spartans are compelled “to stake their all upon the issue of a single day,” but in the end it is Sparta that prevails.<sup>52</sup> Alcibiades’ next gambit is the Sicilian Expedition, a strategic disaster but not yet a decisive defeat. Athens recovers from the setback, and it is only when Sparta enters into a closer association with the Great King of Persia, builds a battle fleet, and finds a ruthless commander in the person of Lysander that it is able to win decisively at Aegospotami in 405.

This brief overview calls attention to a great diversity of strategic initiatives. Thucydides’ history demonstrates that in protracted conflicts strategy must be flexible and adaptive. Security, of course, is grounded in a capacity for self-defense. The author has composed the history of a war, and his image of strategy is firmly tied to “the part which is played by force, or the threat of force, in the international system.”<sup>53</sup> Strategy, the domain of force, is not a synonym for policy. But the clear implication of Thucydides’ study is that on the level of grand strategy all instruments of national power must be leveraged in conjunction with military means in pursuit of national goals. Events and local circumstances as they unfold and develop will determine what “mix” of factors will be most relevant at any given point in the conflict.

### **Ethical and Moral Context.**

Thucydides’ *History* is notable for its lack of illusion. War, he remarks, is a “rough master that brings most men’s characters to a level with their fortunes.”<sup>54</sup> The strategic environment that he depicts is filled with instrumental logic, cynicism, abuse of power, and brutal massacre.<sup>55</sup> It is a Hobbesian universe where the struggle of all against all is often the essence of strategic interaction and the limits of morality are defined by *Staatsraison*. Hugo Grotius used the remark of Thucydides’ Athenian emissary Euphemius to the effect that “for a king or a free city nothing is wrong that is to their advantage” as a foil for his effort to assert a law of nations.<sup>56</sup> Finley argued that “nothing so marks Thucydides’ work as the sense of living in a world where moral sensitiveness and inherited tradition were . . . a luxury, and the very survival of states hung on the skillful use of power and power alone.”<sup>57</sup> The discourse of power that drives interstate relations leads inexorably toward the harsh doctrine of might makes right, as imparted by the Athenians to the Melians: “You know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”<sup>58</sup>

In a recent attempt to update realist theory John Mearsheimer describes the above passage as “Thucydides’ famous dictum,” but it is no such thing.<sup>59</sup> The Melian Dialogue, in which Athens lays down the law to the representatives of the would-be neutral power of Melos, is perhaps not quite so clear in its implications as might appear at first glance. The Athenian representatives speak the words during their negotiations with the Melians; they do not necessarily express the opinions of the author. The views of the Athenians are far from being self-evident, and in fact they belie the larger spirit of Thucydides’ work as a whole. In *The Peloponnesian War* breaches of the moral order are punished, and pride comes before the fall. Sparta comes to believe that its early military misfortunes are the consequence of its unethical breaching of the Thirty Years Peace. Pericles’ glowing funeral oration is followed immediately by the terrifying description of the great plague. The doctrine of naked power defended at Melos is the prelude to Athens’ descent into the heart of darkness in Sicily. The blustering and violent Cleon comes to no good end. The unbridled ambition of Alcibiades leads him, and the policy he represents, to ruin.

These contrapositions are not accidental. Thucydides is not a moralist – he rejects the gods, strives for neutrality in his explanation, and does not preach. Nonetheless, his work forcefully poses the moral and ethical dilemmas of protracted strategic rivalry. Alternatives to the realist interpretation of Thucydides emphasize the compassion and austere humanity with which he contemplates the disasters of his time.<sup>60</sup> The Melian Dialogue, often read out of context as a set piece and touted as a foundation for political realism, can also be viewed as a depiction of the moral decline of Athens that leads inexorably to her defeat.<sup>61</sup> Viewed through this lens the Athenian discourse at Melos is not prudent but pathological, and the crass exercise of overwhelming force that it embraces is intended to provoke revulsion rather than encourage emulation. The dialogue is in fact unique in Thucydides’ text. Among the forty discourses cited verbatim it is the only one constructed as a real dialogue – a conversation between two parties with a theatrical structure and dramatic denouement. This gives it a unique intensity and centrality in the text that is clearly intended. In the dialogue it is the Athenians who are dogmatic and inflexible and the Melians who argue instrumentally. The Melians see the big picture, calculate the odds of defiance on a cost-risk basis (even if their calculations are faulty), and attempt to point out that by striking at the vulnerable without constraint Athens will place its long term interests at stake. And the Melians are right. Athens’ harsh conduct reflects an overweening pride that eventually leads to disaster. Its policies and attitude offend allies, alienate neutrals, create new enemies, and encourage rivals to redouble resistance.

In *The Peloponnesian War*, power without principle does not prevail. Thucydides does not portray interest and justice as antithetic, they are rather “inextricably connected and mutually constitutive.”<sup>62</sup> Thucydides does not shy from the carnage of war, but he also does not glory in it as some “blood and guts” realists suggest.<sup>63</sup> His gripping narration places the reader on the ground alongside leaders, soldiers, and citizens caught up in the midst of calculated violence and coping as best they can, but he laments the “general deterioration of character throughout the Greek world” that protracted war promotes.<sup>64</sup> War is indeed a violent teacher, and as such, in the words of Leo Strauss, “it teaches man not only to act violently but also about violence and therefore about the truth.”<sup>65</sup> *The Peloponnesian War* is in large part a cautionary tale about the use and abuse of power with the implicit moral warning “to use it wisely or lose it woefully.”<sup>66</sup> For much of the war and despite many setbacks, Athens sustains its great power status, but in the end it abandons the high ground of legitimate authority and is lost. In a harsh world, administering force effectively demands rigorous professionalism, including a strong sense of purpose and adherence to an elevated moral code.<sup>67</sup> Successful strategy, one may conclude, must be developed within a sound and stable ethical context.

## CONCLUSION

The real subject of Thucydides' history is the decline and fall of a political civilization under the strains of hegemonic warfare. Thucydides built the narrative on careful observation and detailed accounting, but the story line inexorably directs the reader's attention to the big picture, the grand strategic environment within which the decisions are made that lead to victory and defeat. What are the dynamics that cause great power war? Can they be contained, and if so, how? What kinds of policies are most conducive to the pursuit of victory? How can the various instruments of national power be combined in a coherent grand strategy? How should strategy be sustained or adapted in the course of protracted armed conflicts? What are the attributes of effective strategic leadership? How can power be linked to purpose, and justice to interest, in a balanced national strategy that sustains legitimate authority? These are the kind of questions that emerge from a careful reading of *The Peloponnesian War*. Thucydides does not reach the end of this history, and his text does not include a formal summary or conclusion, but he clearly intended it as a guide to statecraft and a plea for caution and moderation that is as relevant in our time as on the day it was written.

## ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 9

1. There are several excellent modern English translations. Rex Warner's version, completed in 1954, appears in Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1986. The Richard Crawley translation, originally published in 1874 and rendered in eloquent Victorian prose appears in Richard B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, New York: The Free Press, 1996. The Strassler compilation, with extensive reader aides including maps and explanatory notes, is an invaluable tool. Henceforward all dates cited will be B.C.E. unless otherwise noted.

2. The first English translation by Thomas Nicolls dates to 1550.

3. This is a long-standing tradition. See Gilbert Murray, *Our Great War and the Great War of the Ancient Greeks*, New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1920, for parallels with World War I, or Carlos Alonso Zaldívar, "Tucidides, en Kosovo," *El País*, May 17, 1999, for applications to the war in Kosovo during 1999.

4. Marshall made this remark in a public address at Princeton University on Washington's Birthday in February 1947. The articulation of the Truman Doctrine was several weeks away.

5. See George F. Will, "Powell's Intrusion," *The Washington Post*, November 25, 2001, p. B07.

6. The publication of *The Landmark Thucydides* in 1996 was both a reflection of and contribution to swelling interest. Some subsequent works (the list is long) include George Cawkwell, *Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War*, London, UK: Routledge, 1997, a sophisticated introduction; Gregory Crane, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity: The Limits of Political Realism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998; Simon Hornblower, *Thucydides*, Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000; Philip De Souza, *The Peloponnesian War, 431-404 B.C.*, New York: Routledge, 2002, a detailed general history; Donald Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War*, New York: Viking, 2003, a one-volume summation of Kagan's earlier four volume history; Richard New Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003; John F. Lazenby, *The Peloponnesian War: A Military History*, New York: Routledge, 2004; the eloquent introduction by Perez Zagorin, *Thucydides: An Introduction for the Common Reader*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005; and Victor Davis Hanson, *A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War*, New York: Random House, 2005, a series of essays that attempt to demonstrate the human dimension of the conflict.

7. Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*, Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1964, p. 155.

8. Clifford Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 3, 4.

9. Lebow, p. 26.
10. *The Landmark Thucydides*, 1.22.4.
11. David Grene, ed., *The Peloponnesian War: The Complete Hobbes Translation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959. Hobbes' work contains some technical errors in translation.
12. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Neorealism and Neoliberalism," *World Politics*, Vol. 40, 1988, p. 235.
13. W. Robert Connor, *Thucydides*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984, p. 32.
14. Hanson, pp. 89-122.
15. The conclusion is based upon student reactions in a seminar devoted to reading and discussing *The Peloponnesian War* conducted by the author at the U.S. Army War College for the past 8 years.
16. Hanson.
17. Cited in Connor, *Thucydides*, p. 20; and from Cawkwell, p. 9. In the early 19th century, Thomas Macauley could declare Thucydides "the greatest historian who ever lived." Thomas Babington Macauley, *The Letters of Thomas Babington Macauley*, Thomas Pinney, ed., 6 vols., Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1976, Vol. 3, p. 138.
18. Eduard Schwartz, *Das Geschichtswerk des Thucydides*, 3rd ed., Hildesheim, GE: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1960; and Finley, *Thucydides*, outline, respectively, the "stages of composition" and "unitarian" approaches to the Thucydides Question. See also Jacqueline de Romilly, *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism*, Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1963.
19. Richard Ned Lebow, "Thucydides the Constructivist," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 95, No. 3, September 2001, pp. 547-560.
20. Arnold W. Gomme, ed., *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, 5 vols. (vols. 4 and 5 co-edited with Anthony Andrewes and K. W. Dover), Oxford, UK: The Clarendon Press, 1945-1918, Vol. 1, p. 29.
21. Schwartz, *Das Geschichtswerk des Thucydides*, p. 19.
22. A survey of what we know of Thucydides' life appears in John H. Finley, Jr., *Thucydides*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1967, pp. 1-35.
23. The history of the Peloponnesian War from 411 to its conclusion in 404 is taken up in a conscious attempt to complete Thucydides' account by Xenophon in his *Hellenica*. See the Rex Warner translation in Xenophon, *A History of My Time*, Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1979.
24. Patrick translation from Heraclitus, *Fragments*.
25. *The Landmark Thucydides*, p. 1.1.
26. Patrick translation from Heraclitus, *Fragments*.
27. Sun-tzu, *The Art of War*, Ralph D. Sawyer, trans., Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994, p. 167.
28. *The Landmark Thucydides*, pp. 2.35-2.46.
29. Connor, p. 6.
30. *The Landmark Thucydides*, 1.22.4.
31. *Ibid.*, 1.21.2.

32. Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
33. Herodotus, *The Histories*, London, UK: Penguin Books, 2003.
34. Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969, p. 41, specifically compares the Delian League to the Cold War's North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).
35. *The Landmark Thucydides*, , p. 5.26.
36. Steven Forde, *The Ambition to Rule: Alcibiades and the Politics of Imperialism in Thucydides*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989, sees Alcibiades as the apotheosis of Athenian individualism and self-aggrandizement. His rise to prominence is not accidental—he embodies both the dynamism and self-destructive egoism of the polity he represents.
37. Zagorin, p. 8.
38. M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, New York: The Viking Press, 1965, p. 34.
39. Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*, p. 345, makes the assertion that Thucydides “invents” the distinction between immediate and underlying causes of war.
40. Hornblower, p. 191.
41. *The Landmark Thucydides*, 1.23.6.
42. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978, p. 38. The passage is cited from the Melian Dialogue, *The Landmark Thucydides*, p. 5.105.2.
43. Raymond Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations*, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966, p. 137.
44. When the Spartan assembly votes in 432 that Athens has violated the Thirty Years Peace, Thucydides remarks that the decision was made because “they feared the growth of the power of the Athenians, seeing most of Hellas already subject to them.” At the conclusion of the *Pentecontaetia*, he notes that Sparta has concluded that “the growth of the Athenian power could no longer be ignored” and “that they could endure it no longer.” *The Landmark Thucydides*, pp. 1.88 and 1.118.2.
45. See the classic study by Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, New York: The Free Press, 1973.
46. In his popular history of the Sicilian Expedition, Peter Green places particular emphasis upon Athens’ economic motivation: “The constant foreign aggression, the search for *Lebensraum*, the high-handed treatment of the subject-allies—all these things had as their aim the securing of desperately needed raw materials.” Peter Green, *Armada from Athens*, Garden City, NJ: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970, p. 46.
47. *The Landmark Thucydides*, p. 1.86.
48. Crane, p. 37, suggests that Thucydides’ famous reference to the growth of Athenian power as the “real cause” of the war can be adapted to multiple causation with more refined translation. The best rendering of the passage, he suggests, refers to the “truest cause,” that is one among many.
49. Lebow, p. 112.
50. German military historian Hans Delbrück interpreted Periclean strategy as a prototype for what he called strategies of “attrition.” Hans Delbrück, *Die Strategie des Perikles: erläutert durch die Strategie Friedrich des Grossen mit einem Anhang über Thucydides und Kleon*, Berlin, GE: Reimer, 1890.

51. Thucydides' description of the plague is justly famed. See *The Landmark Thucydides*, pp. 2.47-2.54.
52. *The Landmark Thucydides*, p. 6.16.6.
53. Cited from "The Strategic Approach to International Relations," in Michael Howard, *The Causes of Wars*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 36. See also Hew Strachen, "The Lost Meaning of Strategy," *Survival*, Vol. 47, No. 3, Autumn 2005.
54. *The Landmark Thucydides*, p. 3.82.2.
55. Hanson, *A War Like No Other*, pp. 89-121.
56. Hugo Grotius, *The Law of War and Peace*, Roslyn, NY: Walter J. Black, Inc., 1949, p. 3. This passage is rendered in *The Landmark Thucydides*, p. 6.85, as "for tyrants and imperial cities nothing is unreasonable if expedient."
57. Finley, *Thucydides*, p. 29.
58. *The Landmark Thucydides*, 5.89.
59. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001, p. 163.
60. See, in particular, Strauss; Lebow; Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides*; and Thomas L. Pangle and Peter J. Ahrensdorf, *Justice Among Nations: On the Moral Basis of Power and Peace*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999, pp. 13-32.
61. Finley, *Thucydides*, pp. 208-212; and Peter J. Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 178, 197-198.
62. Lebow, p. 166.
63. See Michael W. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace*, New York: Norton, 1997, pp. 49-92.
64. *The Landmark Thucydides*, pp. 3.82-85.
65. Strauss, p. 162.
66. Cawkwell, p. 19.
67. Note the uncompromising statement of this premise in the Antistrophe of Euripides' *Andromache*, composed during the Peloponnesian War: "It is better not to have a victory that sullies reputation than to overthrow justice by force and win hatred. Such gain brings men delight at first but in time it withers in their hands and voices of reproach beset their house. This is the way of life I approve, this the one I wish to make my own, to wield no power in my home or my city that transgresses justice." Euripides, *Andromache*, lines 779-784.