

# THUCYDIDES

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## Theorist of War

*Williamson Murray*

I have been teaching and reading Thucydides since the fall of 1975, and over that nearly forty-year period I have increasingly come to appreciate his enormous skills as a historian, as well as his sophisticated theoretical understanding of war. It is not that Thucydides set out to be a theorist in his account of the Peloponnesian War. Rather, the subtext of his depiction of the great war between Athens and Sparta presents a theory of conflict that in the power of its analysis helps to clarify not only the events of the war but also fundamental, theoretical truths about the nature and consequences of human conflict, truths as relevant today as they were late in the fifth century BC.<sup>1</sup> This combination of history with a sophisticated theoretical basis more than justifies Thucydides's claim at the beginning of his account: "And it may be that my history may seem less easy to read because of the absence in it of a romantic element. It will be enough for me, however, if my words are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future."<sup>2</sup>

Thucydides amply delivers on his hope that his account will prove useful to those who think about the issues surrounding war and strategy in the future.<sup>3</sup> In fact, in the Strategy and Policy course at the Naval War College, the week devoted to an examination of the Peloponnesian War is far and away the most popular among the students.<sup>4</sup> Why? My guess is that the students catch the interconnection in Thucydides's discussion between its account of the course of that particular war and its theoretical understanding of war's fundamental nature—a connection made in a way that is not true of that other great theorist of war, the Prussian theorist, Carl von Clausewitz.<sup>5</sup>

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In fact, there is a noteworthy and important difference between Thucydides and Clausewitz: the latter focuses almost exclusively on the conduct of human conflict and military operations, as he makes clear from the beginning of *On War*. Thus Clausewitz limits himself to a narrower field than Thucydides, although his discussion of human conflict is no less brilliant in its examination of war, the relationship of human conflict to politics, the conduct of military operations, and of course, war's fundamental nature. However, the larger issues involved—grand strategy, policy itself, morality, and the impact of war on the values of civilized states—he leaves to others to examine. Unfortunately there have been few other theorists or historians who have addressed those issues with anything like the sophistication of Thucydides.

Thucydides has taken as his subject the whole tapestry of the Peloponnesian War: the origins of the conflict; the impact of war on the human condition; the inherent tension among expediency, morality, and humane behavior under the unrelenting pressures of conflict; and the fundamental nature of war, including the psychological aspects of battle, where soldiers are engaged in the bloody business of killing. Significantly, John Keegan, in his brilliant, groundbreaking book *The Face of Battle*, identifies Thucydides as one of the few historians who have realistically described the “sharp end” of fighting.

It is the purpose of this article, then, to draw out some of the more significant theoretical observations that *The History of the Peloponnesian War* offers in its dark portrayal of that terrible war, which destroyed the economic and political basis of the greatest cultural and literary flowering in human history. We will begin with a general discussion of Thucydides's basic depiction of the fundamental nature of war and then move on to areas where I believe he presents his most pertinent and thorough observations on conflict and the human condition: his examination of the factors that led to the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War (factors that have contributed to the outbreak of other great wars as well); the impact of war on human society and civilized standards, including the tensions between morality and humane behavior; and finally, the reasons why civil wars represent the most terrible of all human conflicts.

The great classicist Bernard Knox laid out the intellectual accomplishments of fifth-century Athens in a lecture to the Naval War College in 1972: “The Athens in which [Thucydides] lived was one of the most intellectually and artistically creative cities the world has ever seen. . . . Yet of all this there is not one word in Thucydides except some extremely faint allusions in Pericles' funeral speech.”<sup>6</sup> The reason for this lay in Thucydides's single-minded focus on the complexities, difficulties, and consequences involved in the waging of war. That said, it is worth noting that this Greek historian's interests ranged from the highest levels of grand strategy to that of the battlefield, where men engage in the merciless processes

of killing each other.<sup>7</sup> By means of this focus Thucydides is able to examine with honesty and ruthlessness the reality of war—not glory, not colorful parades, little but desolation and tragedy, yet a fundamental and everlasting part of the human tableau.

The universe Thucydides describes is a remarkably grim one. The gods, if they exist, could not care less about human affairs. In this dark world, as Athenian negotiators warn the inhabitants of Melos in demanding their surrender,

the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and . . . in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.<sup>8</sup> So far as the favor of the Gods is concerned, we think we have as much right to that as you have. Our aims and our actions are perfectly consistent with the beliefs men hold about the Gods and with the principles that govern their own conduct. Our opinion of the Gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule wherever one can. This is not a law that we made ourselves, nor were we the first to act upon it when it was made. We found it in existence and we shall leave it to exist for ever among those who come after us. We are merely acting in accordance with it, and we know that you or anybody else with the same power as ours would be acting in precisely the same way.<sup>9</sup>

Much as has been the case for the modern world, war was a principal, if not *the* principal, preoccupation of the Greeks. In fact, one modern author has gone so far as to title his book on the period *The Warring States of Greece*.<sup>10</sup> Thucydides's view of war resembles closely that of Clausewitz. In *On War*, the Prussian military thinker comments that “no other human activity is so continuously or universally bound up with chance.” Thus, “from the very start, there is an interplay of possibilities, probabilities, good luck and bad that weaves its way throughout the length and breadth of the tapestry.”<sup>11</sup> He notes later in his account, “War is the realm of chance. No other human activity gives it greater scope: no other has such incessant and varied dealings with this intruder. Chance makes everything more uncertain and interferes with the whole course of events.”<sup>12</sup>

*Tychē* (chance) makes constant appearances throughout Thucydides's account.<sup>13</sup> One might even suggest that Thucydides, like Clausewitz, possessed a modern sense that nonlinear factors determine the course of events.<sup>14</sup> His universe is one where uncertainty, ambiguity, and friction, as well as incompetence, dominate the actions of men. Moreover, the impact of *tychē* renders nearly all great events and decisions contingent: on personalities, on the relations and interrelationship between and among statesmen and military leaders, on the impact of the unforeseen or the unpredictable, and on the ability, among a host of other factors, of a single individual, even at the lowest level, to retard or thwart the best-laid plans.<sup>15</sup> In particular, the competence, or more often the incompetence, of individuals plays an unpredictable role in the unfolding of history's

course.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, unexpected second- and third-order effects add to the difficulty of executing any strategy, whether political or military.<sup>17</sup> Finally, as U.S. forces rediscovered in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the enemy always “gets a vote.” Again, it is not that Thucydides spells out this atmosphere of chance, ambiguity, friction, and uncertainty but that they suffuse his account of everything from diplomacy to combat.

Thucydides’s discussion of the events surrounding the Theban attack on Plataea in *The History of the Peloponnesian War* underlines brilliantly the role that friction and *tychē* can and do play in thwarting the best-laid plans. At the time the incident occurs, in 431 BC, Greece is teetering on the brink of a long-awaited war between Athens and Sparta. The Thebans decide to capitalize on that fact to seize their longtime hostile neighbor, the smaller *polis* of Plataea. They have set the stage for a coup with meticulous planning; they have reached out to traitors within the city who have agreed to disarm its guards and keep the gates open. The Thebans sneak a commando force across the Boeotian hills separating the two cities. The advance party reaches its target and catches the Plataeans by surprise. The traitors open the gates, panic breaks out, and the Theban raiders announce that they have seized control of the *polis*. At the same time, in the early evening, a larger occupying force leaves Thebes to secure the victory. Thus far everything has worked perfectly.

But then friction and *tychē* intercede. As the main force makes its way across the hilly terrain in the gathering gloom, it begins to rain. The torches sputter, the Asopus River swells with runoff, and the trail, increasingly muddy, slows all movement. At times the guides lose their way in the darkness, and the force halts in confusion. Meanwhile, in Plataea, the locals, at first terrorized by the sudden eruption of Theban soldiers, recover their courage as they perceive there is only a small body of the enemy in their midst. The Plataeans regain control of the gates.

At that point the morale of the Theban commandos, who had been emboldened by their initial success, collapses. They realize that their reinforcements have been delayed, and the strangeness of their surroundings adds to their dismay. The Plataeans seize the initiative. Burrowing between their buildings, through the walls from building to building, and moving over the roofs, they harry their enemies and then eventually force them to surrender. In the early hours of the morning the main party of Thebans arrives, only to find the gates of Plataea barred and their commando force either dead or prisoner.<sup>18</sup> With that flawed military operation, caught up in the entanglements of friction and chance, the great war between Athens and Sparta begins.

But this is not the only place where chance, friction, and their handmaiden, incompetence, appear. As with the modern world, individuals at every level make an immense contribution to the tangled course of events. All too often they gum

up the works with their incompetence or (on all too few occasions) redirect the flow of events by virtue of the competence they exhibit on the battlefield or in debate. Nothing underlines that pattern more clearly than the sorry tale of the Athenian expedition to Sicily in 415 BC. As Clausewitz suggests, “The personalities of statesmen and soldiers are such important factors that in war above all it is vital not to underrate them.”<sup>19</sup>

In 415 BC, an angry debate took place before the Athenian assembly. Alcibiades, one of Socrates’s leading students, argued for a raid on the Sicilian city of Syracuse. His opponent was the conservative politician Nicias. The assembly then voted in favor of the proposal. On the next day Nicias, determined to undermine the proposed raid, spoke again, this time urging—in the belief the assembly would see thereby the foolishness of such an expedition—that the raiding force be vastly increased. But as was to occur again, Nicias was being too clever by half. The Athenians voted in favor of Nicias’s proposal, and if that were not enough, they appointed Nicias himself, along with Alcibiades and one other, to lead what was now to be a great expedition.<sup>20</sup>

To make matters even worse, shortly before the expedition departed some drunks knocked the erect phalli off the statues of Hermes that stood before many households. Alcibiades’s enemies accused him of the sacrilege and managed to have the young politician-general recalled from the expedition, which had by this time departed.<sup>21</sup> Instead of returning to the city, he deserted to the Spartans, knowing that with most of his supporters away on the expedition, his enemies now dominated in Athens, and the assembly would undoubtedly condemn him to death. The naval and ground force, now dominated by Nicias, continued on, ultimately meeting a disastrous end at Syracuse, even after the Athenians sent out major reinforcements at his urging.<sup>22</sup> Nicias’s extraordinarily incompetent performance led the Athenians to chisel his name from the various decrees and treaties that he had participated in signing.

Alcibiades’s fate further underlines the unique role that exceptional individuals play in history. Furious at his recall and fearing for his life, he had deserted to Sparta, where he provided his one-time enemies with a war-winning strategy against Athens. His time in Sparta was relatively short, however, as he managed to get the Spartan queen pregnant. He then fled to Persia, where he provided the former mortal enemy of the Greek city-states with a strategy to keep the Spartans and Athenians busy killing each other rather than interfering in the affairs of Greek city-states under Persian control. Alcibiades’s career reached its end when he returned to help the Athenians in putting down a revolt of Athens’s allies and in removing from power an oligarchy that had attempted to replace the democracy. This was indeed an astonishing political career, almost unmatched in history.

From the beginning of his account, Thucydides places enormous emphasis on the wild cards of history, those entirely unpredictable individuals of genius who appear and by their statesmanship or military leadership channel the course of events into entirely new and unexpected directions.<sup>23</sup> It was that ability that marks the extraordinary career of the Spartan general Brasidas, who led a Helot army—which by itself is an extraordinary comment on his leadership abilities, given the treatment the Spartans inflicted on their Helot serfs—from the Peloponnesus in a campaign against the Athenians. His efforts came close to undermining Athens's strategic position in the northern Aegean. Only his death at the battle of Amphipolis prevented a most dangerous situation from developing that might well have ended Thucydides's account at that point.<sup>24</sup>

### THE ORIGINS OF THE WAR

One of the most fundamental questions that those who study war, strategy, and diplomacy must address is why great wars occur, as well as the particular circumstances that lead to the outbreak of conflicts between great states. Not surprisingly, Thucydides is at his best in describing the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. He addresses the problem in a twofold manner. The overarching cause he places in a simple, straightforward sentence: "What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta."<sup>25</sup> Thus, he establishes the precondition not only for the war he is about to discuss but for most other major wars that have occurred. One might equally posit that the outbreak of the U.S. Civil War was the result of the growth in the power of the Northern states and the fear that it occasioned among Southerners. Equally plausible would be an explanation of the First World War that ran along the following lines: the growth of German power and the fear that it occasioned among the Entente powers.<sup>26</sup>

But the larger explanation is sufficient only for explaining why a war occurred during a specific period in history. It fails to unravel the tangled web of confusion, uncertainty, and miscalculation that are the bedfellows of all those who shape and form grand strategy. The strategic situation in the late 430s BC was similar to a fuel-air mixture waiting to explode. The second question, then, that the historian must address is why the war broke out in 431 BC and not 433 or 429. Similarly, the historian of the First World War must ask, Why war in 1914 and not 1911, or for that matter in 1916? That is precisely what Thucydides sets out to explain: "As for the reasons for breaking the truce and declaring war, . . . they are as follows."<sup>27</sup>

Winston Churchill aptly characterized the situation confronting the powers before the outbreak of the First World War: "It has been well said, 'there is always more error than design in human affairs.' The limited minds of even the ablest of men, their disputed authority, the climate of opinion in which they dwell, their

transient and partial contributions to the mighty problem, that problem itself so far beyond their compass, so vast in scale and detail, so changing in its aspect.”<sup>28</sup> Ironically, and as was to be the case with the First World War, the spark that exploded the growing tension between Athens and Sparta into a great war came in a peripheral area of the Greek world, along the coast of the Balkans.

There the city of Corcyra (modern-day Corfu) found itself involved in an increasingly nasty confrontation with its mother city (that is, having originally established it as a colony), Corinth. The quarrel spiraled into open conflict in which the Corcyrean forces crushed those of the Corinthians. Refusing to accept defeat at the hands of its colony, the Corinthians attempted to mobilize their economic and military power as well as that of their allies to crush their upstart colony. Fearful of the Corinthians, the Corcyreans went to the Athenians with a clear warning that they put in simple terms. Everyone in Greece knows, they argued, that war between you and the Spartans is coming. Ally with us and add our considerable naval power to that you already possess, which will ensure your naval dominance of the Greek world, when war comes, or stand aside and allow the Corinthians and their Peloponnesian allies—that is, the Spartans—to acquire our naval power and thus be in a position to challenge your control of the seas.

Interestingly, ambassadors from Corinth addressed the Athenian assembly as well, and at the same time, but their arguments, that war was not on the horizon between Athens and Sparta, proved less persuasive than those of their adversaries. By a close vote the Athenian assembly agreed to a defensive alliance with Corcyra and sent a small squadron of ten triremes to Corcyra to warn the Corinthians off.<sup>29</sup> The Athenians then reconsidered and sent a larger naval force, which arrived in the nick of time to save their new allies from defeat.

That action infuriated the Corinthians and lit the fuse for the great war that soon overwhelmed the Greek world. As a defensive measure, the Athenians attacked their own ally Potidaea, which they believed was too closely connected to Corinth, which was its mother city as well, an action that only further enraged the Corinthians. Thucydides lays out, in a series of brilliant speeches, how the Spartans found themselves drawn into the conflagration. In these debates statesmen with opposing views lay out the pros and cons of going to war. Here one must underline the crucial importance of such speeches to Thucydides’s account of the factors that led inevitably to war, as well as what the participants believed to be the proper strategic courses for their *poleis* to follow.

In our world, drenched as it is with the overblown rhetoric of campaign speeches, which are innumerable, are eminently forgettable, and reveal little of policy making, it is all too easy to skip over the speeches that Thucydides records. But in the Greek world, where literacy was a relatively new phenomenon and there was nothing resembling the modern media, speeches were the means

through which the major decisions of strategy were made.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, they represent a brilliant dissection of the making and shaping of grand strategy and operational strategy.

The most brilliant of these speeches is the oration given by the Spartan king Archidamus in the debate that took place before the Spartan assembly of warriors as to whether Sparta should go to war with Athens:<sup>31</sup>

Spartans, in the course of my life I have taken part in many wars, and I see among you people of the same age as I am. They and I have had experience and so are not likely to share in what may be the general enthusiasm for war, nor to think that war is a good thing or a safe thing. And you will find, if you look closely into the matter, that this present war which you are now discussing is not likely to be on a small scale. When we are engaged with Peloponnesians . . . , the forces on both sides are of the same type, and we can strike rapidly where we wish to strike. With Athens it is different. Here we shall be engaged with people who live far off, people who have the widest experience with the sea and who are extremely well equipped in all other directions, very wealthy both as individuals and as a state, with ships and cavalry and hoplites and a population bigger than that in any other place in Hellas, and then too, with numbers of allies who pay tribute to them.<sup>32</sup>

Archidamus then proceeds to lay out the extraordinary difficulties that the Spartans would confront should they embark on such a war. He asks his listeners, “What sort of war, then, are we going to fight?”<sup>33</sup> But his speech is not an antiwar speech, protesting the possibility of war between Athens and Sparta. Rather, it is a speech against war now in favor of war later, for solid strategic reasons. He warns that Sparta needs to make careful and thorough preparations before embarking on such a war with the other “superpower” of the Greek world. In every respect Archidamus’s speech represented a brilliant analysis of grand strategy, resting on what we would today call a thorough “net assessment” of the opposing sides. However, his arguments failed to resonate with the Spartan assembly of warriors, undoubtedly because it offered no easy, simple, direct path to victory. The other speaker whom Thucydides presents, the *ephor* (i.e., one of five elected leaders who served with the two kings) Sthenelaidas, dismisses Archidamus’s arguments with the clear notion that marching directly into Attica will end the war in short order. Ironically, Archidamus’s strategy will prove to be the path the Spartans will eventually follow to victory, but it will be that much more difficult because the Spartans will not have addressed the strategic issues that Archidamus has raised.

The Spartans instead vote for a simple and direct approach: march into Attica; burn the crops, temples, and houses that lie outside Athens’s walls; and then defeat the Athenian hoplites, who, furious at the destruction occurring before their eyes, would inevitably come out to fight. It seems simpleminded and obtuse, in

view of what we know will happen. Yet it is well to remember, as Thucydides indicates in Book 2, it would only be by the most desperate measures that Pericles, the Athenian leader, was to prevent the Athenian assembly from meeting when Attica outside the city walls was in flames—a meeting that would surely have voted to send the hoplites out to confront the invaders directly. It would have been a battle the Athenians would have lost. But as it is, the Athenian hoplites decline to take up the challenge, nor in subsequent Spartan invasions are they willing to meet the enemy directly in phalanx battle.

In the end, strategic decision making is a matter of choosing between different and difficult paths; sometimes both will be right, sometimes one will be right and one wrong, sometimes both will be wrong, but the future will always be opaque and difficult to estimate.<sup>34</sup> In the end, as James Wolfe commented before Quebec in 1759, “War is an option of difficulties.”<sup>35</sup>

At some point in the articulation of military forces against an opponent, things will go wrong, and more often than not they will go very wrong. Thus, whatever the perceptiveness and intelligence of the thinking and strategic preparation for war, the sophistication of the military preparations, or the brilliance of those in command, one must count on friction, chance, and unexpected enemy reaction to interfere with, delay, or even entirely thwart the efforts of military forces, whether one is dealing with strategy, operations, or tactics. Thucydides has made a sophisticated point in the contrast between Archidamus’s speech and that of the *ephor*, but he has not spelled it out for the reader. Rather, he has left readers to draw out its significance for themselves.<sup>36</sup>

## WAR AND THE COLLAPSE OF HUMAN VALUES

Perhaps the gravest warning that Thucydides left for those who came after lay in his description of the slow but steady decline in the behavior of the opposing sides displayed as the conflict continued. Immediately before the war’s outbreak, the Athenians justify the possession of their empire on the basis not only of expediency but of the assertion that they have behaved better toward their subjects and allies than might be expected under the circumstances.<sup>37</sup> That is certainly not a statement they would have dared, or even wished, to make later in the war. Again it is the subtle fashion in which Thucydides recounts the history of the war that allows him to underline the tragic collapse of humane values under the pressure and deadly atmosphere of war. There is in his view a clear connection between what the plague of 430 BC does to Athenian values and what the war itself does to them—except perhaps that war will do so in a more murderous fashion.<sup>38</sup>

The issues surrounding events on Mytilene and then on Melos highlight the collapse of values, and even common sense, in Athens over the course of the war.

In the first case a revolt had broken out on the strategically well placed island of Mytilene, but the Spartans had dithered in reinforcing the rebels, while the Athenians had reacted with dispatch and crushed the rebellion with the help of Mytileneans who remained loyal. The question came before the Athenian assembly as to what should be done with the captured islanders. Initially the assembly decreed that all the men should be put to death and the women and children sold into slavery. But the next day the Athenians, many appalled by the decision, reconsidered.

Thucydides condenses the debate to two speakers. On one side, the demagogue Cleon urges that the initial decision should stand as a warning to the rest of the Athenian empire. His approach rests to an extent on basic morality: they have done evil to you (and to their own oaths) and should be punished. On the other hand, Diodotus argues that the Athenians should punish only those guilty of instigating and participating in the rebellion.<sup>39</sup> His argument centers on the belief that such an approach would encourage others of Athens's allies and subject people who confront brewing rebellions to remain loyal. Cleon's approach, he warns, would only encourage those who have revolted to fight to the bitter end.

Twelve years later, shortly before the Athenian expedition to Sicily embarked on its disastrous course, the Athenians determined to remove the neutral island of Melos from the strategic table.<sup>40</sup> Most of the scholarly focus has remained on the brilliant dialogue between the Melian representatives and those of the Athenians, but Thucydides makes a fundamental point about the fate of the Melians that is too often missed.<sup>41</sup> In one sentence, he records the fate of the Melians: "Siege operations were now carried on vigorously and, *as there was treachery from the inside*, the Melians surrendered unconditionally to the Athenians, who put to death all the men of military age whom they took, and sold the women and children as slaves."<sup>42</sup>

What is noteworthy about this account is that it underlines that Diodotus was right—someone in Melos did betray the city. However, Thucydides gives no indication that there was a serious debate in Athens about what the fate of the Melians should be after their resistance had collapsed.<sup>43</sup> In other words, the Athenians were now willing to slaughter the Melians without even considering the potential negative consequences to their own future strategic interests.

As the war continued its terrible course, the Athenians seem to have lost not only their sense of humanity but their common sense as well. An episode in 406 BC offers a vivid example. Despite the disaster at Sicily and the revolt of some of their allies, the Athenians, with considerable help from Alcibiades, recovered. In 406 they were even able to win a devastating victory over the Peloponnesian fleet at the battle of Arginusae. They lost only twenty-five ships, while the Spartans and their allies lost seventy. Arginusae seemingly heralded the complete

restoration of Athenian fortunes. But at the end of the battle a storm had come up; the Athenian fleet had not been able to save many of the Athenians still alive in the water or bodies of the dead. Despite the victory, the assembly, urged on by a madness that had clearly gripped the city and its politicians, condemned six of the admirals to death for impious behavior in failing to attend to the living and dead in the water.

Unfortunately, Thucydides died before he could complete his historical account, so the dismal years that led to the final Athenian catastrophe were left to be covered by Xenophon—and Xenophon, though a student of Socrates, brought to his account none of the great historian's sophistication.<sup>44</sup>

## CIVIL WAR

Thucydides is equally clear in his warning about the consequences of “civil war.” It has become fashionable in the modern age, at least since the French Revolution, to believe that revolutions bring general benefits for the human race.<sup>45</sup> In his account of the events on Corcyra in the early years of the Peloponnesian War, however, Thucydides presents us with the course and consequence of a real case—civil war. The murderous conflict among the contending classes and factions on Corcyra, in which families found themselves torn apart, has found its echo all too often in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. At one point, according to Thucydides, the Corcyreans

seized upon all their enemies whom they could find and put them to death. . . . [T]hey went to the temple of Hera and persuaded about fifty of the suppliants there to submit to trial. They then condemned every one of them to death. Seeing what was happening, most of the other suppliants, who had refused to be tried, killed each other there in the temple; some hanged themselves on the trees, and others found various other means of committing suicide. . . . During the [next] seven days the Corcyreans continued to massacre those of their own citizens whom they considered to be their enemies. Their victims were accused of conspiring to overthrow the democracy, but in fact men were often killed on grounds of personal hatred or else by their debtors. . . . There was death in every shape and form. And, as usually happens in such situations, people went to every extreme and beyond it.<sup>46</sup>

In his depiction of the atmosphere that surrounded the civil war on Corcyra Thucydides is at his most brilliant. He points out that on Corcyra, in the midst of the civil war, “to fit in with the change of events, words, too, had to change their meanings. What used to be called a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would now expect to find in a party member; . . . any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character.”<sup>47</sup> George Orwell would underline the same phenomenon in both his great novels, *Animal Farm* and *1984*. In a depiction that eerily evokes the contest between

Stalin and Leon Trotsky for political control of the Soviet Union after Lenin's death, Thucydides remarks:

As a rule those who were least remarkable for intelligence showed the greater powers of survival. Such people recognized their own deficiencies and the superior intelligence of their opponents; fearing that they might lose by debate or find themselves out-manoeuvred in intrigue by their quick-witted enemies, they boldly launched straight into action; while their opponents, overconfident that they would see what was happening in advance, and not thinking it necessary to seize by force what they could secure by policy, were the more easily destroyed because they were off their guard.<sup>48</sup>

### HUMAN NATURE IN ITS TRUE COLORS

Thucydides's sharpest comment on the direct and indirect results of war is contained at the end of his discussion of the civil war on Corcyra. These dark words should be remembered by all who embark on war. It is not a warning aimed at preventing war, which, as Thucydides suggests, is a fundamental part of human nature. Rather it is a warning against embarking on war without thinking through the terrible consequences, direct and indirect, that will inevitably occur: "Then, with the ordinary conventions of civilized life thrown into confusion, human nature, always ready to offend even where laws exist, showed itself proudly in its true colours, as something incapable of controlling passion, insubordinate to the idea of justice, the enemy to anything superior to itself; for if it had not been for the pernicious power of envy, men would not so have exalted vengeance above innocence and profit above justice."<sup>49</sup>

Thucydides did indeed write a work of history "done to last forever."<sup>50</sup> It is deeply imbued with a theoretical understanding of war, its conduct, and the terrible consequences that it produces. The sad record of the 2,400-some-odd years since its completion is an endless repetition of the same pattern. Yet while *The History of the Peloponnesian War* is of great importance in the twenty-first century, the modern age is perhaps even less prepared than its original audience for its deep and abiding insights. Thucydides has provided us with an understanding of war and strategy from the highest to the lowest level. But to grasp that understanding, readers today must grapple with a number of issues. First is the fact that they have in most cases little knowledge of the geography of ancient Greece, much less the players.<sup>51</sup> But that is the least of the problems that beset the first-time reader of Thucydides.

In the largest sense, the real difficulty lies in the fact that *The History of the Peloponnesian War* is an enormously sophisticated and complex work, one that requires, like Clausewitz's *On War*, careful and deep readings. For a society that demands instant gratification, such sustained, focused effort represents a major

challenge. Simply put, Thucydides's history is not an easy or simple read. Rather, it demands concentrated thought and a willingness to grapple with the text—and also with the author, because as sophisticated and perceptive as he is, Thucydides sometimes, like all historians, loads the dice in favor of his perception of what occurred.<sup>52</sup>

But in the end readers willing to make the effort will find themselves richly rewarded by the understanding that they will be able to bring to the present. That great American soldier and statesman George C. Marshall, in an address at Princeton at the beginning of the Cold War, doubted “whether a man can think with full wisdom and with conviction regarding certain of the basic international issues today who has not reviewed in his mind the period of the Peloponnesian War.”<sup>53</sup> Marshall could not have been more right about his own time—or *ours*.

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#### NOTES

1. Above all let me emphasize that Thucydides is not a theorist of international relations but rather a historian and theorist of human conflict.
2. Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1954), p. 48.
3. The problem, unfortunately, is that most statesmen and military leaders throughout history have not been interested in studying history—or, for that matter, Thucydides—in their preparations to lead.
4. The author has participated in the teaching of the Strategy and Policy course at the Naval War College on three separate occasions: during the 1985–86 academic year, as a regular faculty member; during the 1991–92 academic year, as a Secretary of the Navy fellow; and at present, beginning in 2012, as a Minerva fellow. The Naval War College is the only American war college that has consistently used Thucydides as a basic building block of its curriculum. The Air War College did for a brief period in the 1990s but then relapsed, when the golf-playing fighter pilots regained control of its curriculum. The National War College has used Thucydides occasionally over the past several years, while the Army War College has never placed Thucydides in its basic curriculum.
5. Clausewitz, of course, relies heavily on history but at least in his great theoretical examination of war scatters his historical examples throughout the text, and unless one is a student of the French revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, it can be difficult to understand his allusions fully.
6. Bernard M. W. Knox, “Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War: Politics and Power,” *Naval War College Review* 25, no. 3 (January–February 1973), pp. 3–15. Knox continues, “In his lifetime the great tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides, as well as the comedies of Aristophanes, were staged in Athens; the Parthenon was built, and its great frieze cut in marble; Athenian potters and painters produced masterpieces which are the jewels of our museums; the philosophers worked out an atomic theory of the constitution of matter; the sophists revolutionized political, moral, and social theory.” Perhaps because his lecture was on Thucydides, Knox failed to mention Herodotus and Thucydides in the depiction of the brilliance of Athenian culture.
7. For the nature of the sharp end in Greek hoplite warfare, see Victor David Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989).
8. The fates of Germany, Japan, and Poland after the Second World War underline the accuracy of the harsh comments of the Athenian negotiators at Melos. In the cases of both

- Germany and Japan—two nations that had spread such devastation in unleashing the war—their strategic importance led to their rapid rehabilitations. Poland, however—an innocent victim of Nazi and Soviet aggression at the beginning of the war that had suffered terrible devastation during the next six years—found itself under the merciless heel of Soviet occupation for the next fifty years.
9. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, pp. 404–405. Some historians, most of them undoubtedly living in the comfortable, gated communities that our universities have become, have discounted these dark words as simply an effort by Thucydides to underline Athenian arrogance or the enormous strategic mistake of invading Sicily immediately after the destruction of Melos. The problem with such a line of argument is that there was nothing in the behavior of the Greeks in Thucydides's world—or for that matter in human behavior generally in the 2,400 years of subsequent history—to suggest that he was less than accurate in his depiction of the international arena.
  10. A. R. Burn, *The Warring States of Greece: From Their Rise to the Roman Conquest* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968).
  11. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 85–86.
  12. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
  13. In this regard, Otto von Bismarck, the great Prusso-German statesman who unified Germany under Prussian leadership in the 1860s and 1870s, noted: "Politics is a thankless job because everything depends on chance and conjecture. One has to reckon with a series of probabilities and improbabilities and base one's plans upon this reckoning." Quoted in Jonathan Steinberg, *Bismarck: A Life* (Oxford, U.K., and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), p. 130.
  14. For a brilliant depiction of the impact of nonlinear factors on Clausewitz's thinking, see the outstanding article by Alan Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War," *International Security* 17, no. 3 (Winter 1992/93). I am indebted to Professor Donald Kagan of Yale for pointing out to me the importance that *tychē* has for Thucydides.
  15. As Clausewitz notes in regard to the last point, "A battalion is made up of individuals, the least important of whom may chance to delay things or somehow make them go wrong"; *On War*, p. 119. That, of course, is the American military's "Murphy factor."
  16. For a discussion of the crucial role that incompetence played in the late 1930s and has played in human affairs in general, see Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–1939: The Path to Ruin* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984), conclusion.
  17. In this regard see Williamson Murray, Richard Hart Sinnreich, and James Lacey, eds., *The Shaping of Grand Strategy, Policy, Diplomacy, and War* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011), particularly chap. 1. In this regard Edmund Burke was particularly perceptive in his understanding of the baleful influence that second- and third-order effects could exercise on events: "The real effects of moral causes are not always immediate; but that which in the first instance is prejudicial may be excellent in its remoter operation; and its excellence may arise even from the moral effects it produces in the beginning. The reverse also happens, and very plausible schemes, with very pleasing commencements, have often shameful and lamentable conclusions." *The Works of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke*, ed. Henry Rogers (London: S. Holdsworth, 1837), p. 404.
  18. The whole incident is all described wonderfully by Thucydides in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, pp. 124–27.
  19. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 94.
  20. To have two individuals diametrically opposed in their views as to the possibilities open to the expedition was a guarantee of failure.
  21. In the Greek world of the *polis* there was no differentiation between citizen and soldier, nor was there between general and politician.
  22. In fact he had made that proposal in the hope that the assembly would recall him and the expedition, thus allowing him to argue that it was the responsibility of others that the attack on Syracuse had failed. After the reinforcements failed to turn the tide, Nicias delayed the retreat until too late, and the entire expedition went down to disastrous defeat.

23. It is significant that in his chapter discussing genius in war, Clausewitz does not use the most brilliant general in modern history—namely, Napoleon Bonaparte—as an example.
24. Brasidas's success did end, however, Thucydides's career as an Athenian military leader. The capture of Amphipolis was attributed to Thucydides, and he was promptly exiled from Athens. That removal at least provided him the time and perspective to write his great history.
25. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, p. 49.
26. Thucydides's explanation works in the case of most major wars. There are other wars, however—such as the conquests of Alexander the Great, most Roman wars after the defeat of Carthage in the First Punic War, Napoleon's wars, and the Second World War—where the ruler, like Adolf Hitler, of one great state deliberately unleashed, with malice aforethought, war on his neighbors and eventually the world. In the case of the Pacific War, which began with the attack on Pearl Harbor, the explanation is more in line with that of Thucydides: the massive building program that Franklin Roosevelt's administration had embarked on beginning in 1938 confronted the Japanese with the choice of either fighting now or waiting and surrendering in 1943 to the overwhelming power the United States would possess. In the end they chose to fight in 1941, and they got to surrender in 1945.
27. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, p. 49.
28. Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1911–1918* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1931), p. 6.
29. The first vote of the assembly had been to reject the Corcyrean appeal for an alliance, but the Athenians had then reconsidered.
30. For the speeches, Thucydides indicates that “in this history I have made use of set speeches some of which were delivered just before and others during the war. I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches which I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced the same difficulty; so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation.” *History of the Peloponnesian War*, p. 47.
31. One of the most bizarre trends in the academic world dealing with the history of the ancient world is the argument that Greek and Roman statesmen and generals had no understanding of grand strategy, because they lacked a word for such a concept. Archidamus's speech alone puts paid to such nonsense.
32. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, p. 82. One might also note that Pericles's speech before the Athenian assembly on why war with Sparta was necessary is equally compelling, but it proved more flawed in its long-range analysis of the future.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
34. As Michael Howard has suggested, military organizations will always get the next war wrong, which is why the crucial enabler in military effectiveness is the ability to adapt more quickly than one's opponents. For a discussion of these issues, see Williamson Murray, *Military Adaptation in War: With Fear of Change* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011).
35. Quoted in Williamson Murray, *War, Strategy, and Military Effectiveness* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1911), p. 58.
36. See, particularly, Paul Rahe, “Thucydides as Educator,” in *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession*, ed. Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011).
37. As the Athenians tell the Spartans, “Those who really deserve praise are the people who, while human enough to enjoy power, nevertheless pay more attention to justice than they are compelled to do by their situation.” Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, p. 80.
38. “In other respects also Athens owed to the Plague the beginnings of a state of unprecedented lawlessness. Seeing how quick and abrupt were the changes of fortune which came to the rich who suddenly died and to those who had previously been penniless but now inherited their wealth, people now began to venture into acts of self-indulgence which before they used to keep in the dark.” *Ibid.*, p. 155.

39. Interestingly, Diodotus makes no mention of humane values in his speech; rather, he rests his case entirely on the basis of expediency. One of the basic problems of modern thinking is the belief that humane behavior and morality are congruent. That is something that Thucydides makes clear is not the case in the real world.
40. Melos lay on the direct route from the Peloponnesus to the Persian empire. Moreover, it was a colony of Sparta and could hardly be expected to remain neutral if the war were to go against the Athenians. There is among those who read the debate for the first time a sense that the Melians were the “good guys” and the Athenians the “bad guys,” the latter because they were a dominant power. What is missed in such an understanding is that the Melians were oligarchs. When the Athenians requested an opportunity to talk to the citizens of Melos, the oligarchs refused, undoubtedly because of the distinct possibility the *demos* would agree to surrender to the Athenians, who would then replace the oligarchy with a democracy.
41. The debate among scholars has revolved around, on the liberal side, the belief that Thucydides provides the dialogue over the nature of power only to underline the arrogance of the Athenians, who were about to set off for Sicily. On the other side, there are those, more in consonance with the real world, who argue (like the author) that the dialogue in fact reflects Thucydides’s fundamental belief as to the nature of the real world of power politics and war. The history of the past 2,400 years would seem to suggest that the Melian dialogue is all too accurate a depiction of the world of states and men.
42. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, p. 408 [my italics]. Not all Athenians were happy with the outcome. The following year the great dramatist Euripides wrote and had produced his ferociously antiwar play *The Trojan Women*.
43. Nothing better underlines the collapse of the values of humane behavior than British bombing policy in the Second World War. In fall 1939 British bombers were forbidden from dropping bombs on German warships tied up to quays, for fear of killing civilian dockworkers. Three years later the Royal Air Force’s bombers were dropping four-thousand-pound bombs, nicknamed “cookies,” with the explicit intention of “dehousing” the German population, and while its members were in their houses. However important such bombing was to the winning of the war—and it was very important—the collapse of humane values is graphic.
44. Xenophon’s history is not a bad record of events, but it possesses none of the sophistication that Thucydides would have provided had he been able to write the history of the last years of the war. Thucydides himself appears to have died in the midst of writing Book 8, which contains none of the speeches laying out the nature of political and strategic debates among the Greeks that are so central to the account of the war, speeches that he provides in the other seven books.
45. That was certainly the message that Karl Marx trumpeted in the nineteenth century and that contributed to the ruthless and murderous civil wars characterizing so much of the blood-drenched history of the twentieth century.
46. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, p. 241.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 244.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 245.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
51. The problem of dealing with the geography of the Peloponnesian War has been substantially addressed by Robert Strassler’s edition, which, while it is not as satisfactory a translation as the one I have been quoting in this article, provides extraordinarily good maps that indicate the geographic position of virtually every place identified in the text. *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, trans. Richard Crawley (New York: Free Press, 1996).
52. The brilliant work of Donald Kagan, the greatest living commentator on Thucydides over the years, has underlined this reality.
53. Quoted in W. Robert Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984), p. 48.

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