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The role that power has played in international politics has often been judged in terms of morality. National leaders, publicists, and scholars have either viewed the exercise of political and military power as subject to some higher morality and therefore justifiable, or they have indiscriminately criticized all recourse to power politics as immoral per se. In his classic study of the dynamics of war and public policy, Thucydides takes neither of these approaches, but rather chooses to analyze what he views as the enduring realities of man, his nature, and that element which defines order among men—amoral power as it is expressed in terms of a capacity to make war.

THUCYDIDES AND THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR: POLITICS AND POWER

The Opening Lecture for the Strategy Curriculum
at the College of Naval Warfare

by

Dr. Bernard M.W. Knox

The Greek word *historie* gave us our word "history," but its original meaning was less precise. It meant "enquiry," "research," and it came to have its present meaning "research into the past" because it was the word used by the first historian, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, to characterize his own work. His book, which deals with the wars between the Greeks and the Persians in the opening decades of the fifth century B.C., is the product of the questions he asked; of the visits he made to cities, temples, and battlefields; of his insatiable curiosity about the past not only of the Greeks but also of the foreign, especially the Eastern, nations with whom they came into contact.

His "history" has an immense scope. It describes not only the Persian invasions of Greece in 490 and 480 B.C. but also everything that led up to them;

he ranges far back into the past—in the case of Egypt, thousands of years back. His work is enlivened at every turn by fascinating stories about people, places, and customs; one sometimes has the impression that he was not too much concerned about whether the story was true, so long as it was good. He often gives two or three different versions of one event and declines to choose between them; sometimes he will tell a story that he finds hard to believe. "It is my duty," he says at one point, "to report what people say, but I am not required to believe it." As he approaches his own time, his history becomes more reliable (but remains just as fascinating), and Thucydides, in the next generation, though he does not mention Herodotus by name, pays him the compliment of starting exactly where he left off: the flashback on the

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foundation of Athenian seapower in Thucydides, Book I, begins exactly at the point where Herodotus' narrative ends.

With Thucydides, however, we enter an entirely different world of thought and feeling. Unlike Herodotus he is a child of the intellectual revolution; its achievements and also its limitations are reflected everywhere in his work. The charm and endless fascination of Herodotus' stories and his digressions about everything that aroused his interest—the crocodiles in Egypt, the strange sexual arrangements of the Lydians—all this is deliberately avoided. "It may well be," said Thucydides, "that my history will seem less easy to read because of the absence in it of a romantic element." He is quite right. It is less easy to read. But the sacrifice is justified. His purpose was "to be 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 way be repeated in the future." And in this he was successful. The events themselves, compared to other wars, especially our own, were small scale. But the profound analysis to which Thucydides subjected them has made them a working model of the dynamics of war and policy for all succeeding generations. He has produced, as he promised, "a piece of writing designed to last forever."

Unlike Herodotus, who wrote of the events of the far and immediate past (he was 6 years old in 478 B.C., the date at which his history ends), Thucydides writes the history of his own time, contemporary history. For earlier times Herodotus had to rely on local traditions, many of them obviously mythical; his history of the Persian wars was based on the accounts of old men who had fought the war in their youth or the stories their sons remembered hearing from their fathers. Thucydides, on the other hand, fought in his war as a

general, or rather an admiral, and could talk to others who had fought it or were still fighting it. He could compare eyewitness accounts, and, unlike Herodotus, he was only interested in them as a means of establishing the truth; he does not report "what they say," no matter how good a story it might have made, but what in his judgment actually happened. The eyewitness accounts, he says, he "checked with as much thoroughness as possible." And the truth, as we all know, is often less spectacular than what the people who fought the battle remember, or claim to remember, long afterwards.

His sources, with the exception of the digression in Book I where he reconstructs the "probable" history of early Greece, were contemporary. He drew, first of all, on his own observation and participation; he probably listened to the speeches of Pericles which he reports in Books I and II, and he was active as a naval commander in the north where he lost the city of Amphipolis to the Spartans, Brasidas. Secondly, he utilized eyewitness accounts, and since he was exiled for 20 years because of his failure in the north he was able to talk to participants on both sides. Thirdly, he consulted official documents, but these were very rare. Treaties, for example, were inscribed on blocks of stone, and he gives us the texts of some of these; but the paperwork which we associate with war did not yet exist. And lastly, he reports speeches made at important discussions of policy during the course of the war.

This last item, the speeches, calls for some comment. Nobody today, writing a history of the war in Vietnam, would give too much space to the speeches of Presidents Johnson and Nixon and still less to those of President Thieu. The policies governing the war are not hammered out in public speeches; the speeches are merely justifications (sometimes cover stories) for the real bases of policy which are to be found, if they

can be found, in secret memoranda, diplomatic documents, and government position papers. In fifth century Greece, however, and above all in democratic Athens, it was in public speeches that policy was made. The statesman had to persuade an assembly of his fellow-citizens that his proposal was to their interest and also likely to be successful; in the decision to sail to Sicily the speech of Alcibiades undoubtedly was a crucial factor, just as Thucydides reports. The speeches of Greek political leaders were not just an important source, they were essential items in Thucydides' account of the events of the war.

But, as he admits himself, they were a problem for the historian. They were not recorded, taken down in shorthand, nor even published (it was not until the next century that statesmen circulated their public speeches in book form). Thucydides has to rely on memory, his own for the speeches of Pericles and the debates between the Corcyreans and Corinthians in Athens, and other people's memories for speeches in Sparta and elsewhere.

It is true, of course, that in Greek civilization, where literacy was a comparatively recent phenomenon, people's memories were much more reliable than ours. Nevertheless, Thucydides had to admit his limitations here. "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 he compromised. "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." What this method enabled him to do was to present, in addition to phrases he remembered, the political and military background of the action under debate, the conflicting opinions, the alternative courses of action—all the

material which a modern historian presents editorially as his own analysis.

Some of the speeches fall at times to a level of obvious generalization that tempts one to think Thucydides might better have used the modern method of so-called "objective" presentation. Nevertheless, most of them combine "what was called for by the situation" with a dramatic personality which clearly reflects the actual speaker. And in the greatest of them—the Corinthians' contrast between Athenian dynamic activism and Spartan conservative isolationism, Pericles' funeral speech with its celebration of Athens' free institutions and cultural magnificence—the method Thucydides has invented for his recreation of the speeches presents intellectual analysis expressed with a passion and a dramatic immediacy which have never been equalled.

From these sources he constructed an account of the war so reasonable, so clear, and, on the surface, so unemotional that it seems to have been written by the pen of a recording angel. He was acclaimed by the historians of the 19th century, who were attempting to write history scientifically, as their predecessor, their great example. He was for them the first scientific, objective historian. Today, of course, we realize that there is no such thing as scientific, objective history; the historian is part of the process he attempts to record, or a result of it. Thucydides does have his blind spots and his prejudices. He does not very often express a personal opinion or judgment, but in his treatment of Cleon, for example, he is not exactly fair. Cleon was certainly the most violent of the Athenians (we have other sources to confirm this judgment) but he was not a fool or a coward, and Thucydides presents him as the one in the debates over Pylos and the other in the battle at Amphipolis.

Even when a historian does not express his own opinion, his emphasis and his judgment of what is important

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will be clear from his selection. Select he must; there is too much data—there was too much even for Thucydides, in an age before the invention of paper-work. Some things have to be left out, some treated in summary fashion, while others are emphasized or presented in full detail. In Thucydides' case it was only too clear what interested him above all other things, indeed to the exclusion of almost everything else. It was war. "Thucydides the Athenian"—this is how the book begins—"wrote the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, how they fought against each other . . .," and there is practically nothing in his history which is not directly relevant to that subject. It is particularly appropriate for a Naval War College to devote some time to him for he is the only great historian I can think of who concentrates rigidly and exclusively on the dynamics, the methods, the causes, and results of war between sovereign states.

This exclusive emphasis is all the more remarkable since the Athens in which he lived was one of the most intellectually and artistically creative cities the world has ever seen. 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. Yet of all this there is not one word in Thucydides except some extremely faint allusions in Pericles' funeral speech. If Thucydides' history were the only document that this century had left us, we could never have guessed what a brilliant cultural life the city possessed. What was important to Thucydides was Athenian power, and power for him was expressed in terms of a capacity to make

war. We can be sure he admired the tragedies of Sophocles, but they were not, for his purposes, relevant.

This preoccupation with war and the power to make it is present throughout; it is even the guiding thread of his brilliant reconstruction of early Greek history in the introductory chapters. In the second half of the fifth century the idea of viewing human history as progress was in the air. Protagoras wrote a history of man's conquest of nature and advance to civilized communal living; in the Hippocratic collections we have a text which describes human progress from the doctor's point of view, the advance from savage to civilized diet, the discovery of disease and its treatment. What Thucydides presents us with is a history of Greece in which progress is measured in terms of military and naval power. At first there is nothing but poverty, disorganization, constant migration. Then the first light in the dark: Minos, King of Crete, organized a navy, suppressed piracy, and founded a sea empire. Agamemnon led the united Greeks against Troy, but the expedition was not as important as Homer would have us believe; lacking reserves and supplies, the Greeks were forced to dissipate their military power in cattle raids and piracy. The Trojan War was followed by more confusion, migration, emigration, colonization. But soon progress begins again. "The Corinthians are supposed to have been the first to have adopted more modern methods of shipbuilding"; they built a fleet, put down piracy. Later the Ionians were a great naval power, then Polycrates of Samos, the Phocaeans . . . But these navies did not possess triremes, fast maneuverable warships. These were used first by the Sicilians; then Themistocles persuaded the Athenians to build a fleet of them. Thus Athenian naval power came into being. After the defeat of the Persians, Athens built up her empire, which in turn set the stage for Thucydides' sub-

ject, the Peloponnesian War, the greatest war of all. It is the high point of a history of Greece conceived in terms of the growth of naval and military power.

This exclusive concentration on war is not just a reflection of the fact that Thucydides was himself a general officer in the war, and it does not mean that he was what some people today would call a militarist, if not a warmonger. He is simply taking for granted what most of his fellow Greeks took for granted, that war was a perfectly normal aspect of human life. Their whole history is one of constant war: small repetitive struggles between neighboring cities over borderlands, larger clashes between alliances of cities with common interests, and the great war against the Persian invader in which, characteristically, some Greek cities were neutral, and some even fought on the Persian side. A modern historian, A.R. Burn, has entitled his short history of ancient Greece *The Warring States of Greece*, and that is a very good title. The Greeks accepted war as inevitable. Even their Utopias, the *Republic* of Plato, the perfect state of Aristotle, make full provisions for military training and defense. They would have regarded the maxim of Clausewitz, "War is the continuation of politics by other means," as so obvious that it did not need to be said. War was the most concentrated expression of those competitive values the Greeks so valued in their dramatic festivals and in their athletic contests, and to them as to Thucydides it was a function of human nature, that basic "nature" which the sophistic teachers opposed to conventional law. War revealed human nature in its naked form—in the heights of courage and endurance to which it could rise and the depths of cruelty and degradation to which it could sink. It is in these terms, of war as a crucible in which the elements of human nature are refined and revealed, that Thucydides speaks, both of the men who died heroically in defense of their coun-

try—"The consummation," says Pericles, "which has overtaken these men shows us the meaning of manliness in its first revelation and in its final proof," and also of the hideous carnage at Corcyra—"in peace and prosperity, cities and individuals alike follow higher standards. . . . But war is a violent teacher; in depriving them of the power of easily satisfying their daily wants it brings most people's minds down to the level of their actual circumstances."

This human nature, which Thucydides claims will always behave in the same way in similar circumstances, is described and analyzed in purely secular terms. Homeric man lived in a world full of gods ready at any moment to encourage, warn, threaten, or mislead, but in Thucydides' vision of the human condition there is no divine governing will, no cosmic justice, not even a nameless destiny. Man is alone and, as far as he can see, master of his own fate. With power and foresight there seems to be no reason why he cannot mold events to his own liking. This is the underlying assumption of Pericles' three speeches in which he assures the Athenians that with the right policy they cannot lose the war.

This is a new vision of man's place in the universe; Herodotus saw things differently. Everywhere in his work we are confronted with prophecies made by divine voices, the oracles, and in Herodotus they always turn out to be right even though human beings may not understand them correctly until it is too late. In Thucydides such prophecies are mentioned where they have a psychological effect on those who believe in them (that, after all, is a fact), but it is clear that Thucydides did not. "For those who put their faith in oracles," he says, "here is one solitary instance of their being proved accurate"; he refers to the prophecies which had been in circulation to the effect that the war would last 27 years. The irony of this is that only Thucydides thought it did; his

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contemporaries and later historians too thought of it as two separate wars, the first lasting 10 years, the second eight, with a period of peace in between. Only Thucydides saw that the so-called Peace of Nicias was really a continuation of the war. Equally characteristic is his acid comment on the oracle which was supposed to have predicted the plague. "A Dorian war will come," it said, "and a plague with it." But there had been another version in circulation which, with one vowel slightly different (*limos* instead of *loimos*) predicted a famine. Since the war brought with it a plague, everyone was convinced that what the gods had said was *loimos*, a plague. "But," said Thucydides, "if we get another war with the Peloponnesians and it brings a famine, everybody will claim that the oracle said *limos*, famine."

In Herodotus these oracular voices are the expression of a universal justice which in the rise and fall of individuals and states sees that in the end everything is paid for. It so happens that at one particular point the histories written by the two men intersect, and the contrast between their attitudes to the event is revealing. Herodotus tells how in the opening stages of the great Persian war the Persian king sent heralds to Sparta demanding earth and water, the usual tokens of submission. The Spartans threw the heralds into a well and told them to get earth and water there; their deaths were a violation of the custom of nations, for heralds, as ambassadors, were sacrosanct. The Spartans later found that because of the anger of the long dead hero Talthybius, the patron saint, so to speak, of heralds, their sacrifices were refused. They got the point; they asked for two volunteers to go to the Persian King to offer themselves in exchange for his heralds, and two men at once volunteered. Their names were Spercheius and Boulis. But when they got to Persia, the King refused to kill them; he would not act

like the Spartans, he said, and he would not let them get off so lightly. So Spercheius and Boulis came home and lived out the rest of their lives. But, says Herodotus, the anger of Talthybius was not appeased. It fell 60 years later on their sons Aneristus and Nicolaus who, many years later, were sent by the Spartans to the Persian King to ask for help against Athens in the Peloponnesian War. They were betrayed to the Athenians in north Greece and put to death. "This seems to me," says Herodotus,

one of the most plain proofs of divine power. Justice, of course, required that retribution should fall on ambassadors, but that it should fall exactly on the sons of the men who went up to the Persian King, this seems to me quite plainly to be the work of the gods.

Thucydides also records the capture of the two Spartan envoys to Persia. "At the end of the same summer, an embassy consisting of Aristeus from Corinth, Aneristus, Nicolaus, and Stratodemus from Sparta, Timagoras from Tegea, and a man from Argos called Pollis . . . was on its way to Asia . . ." Herodotus' two men, Aneristus and Nicolaus, are there all right, but they are part of a group of six, and Aristeus of Corinth is in command. Thucydides tells how they were handed over to the Athenians as the result of Athenian intrigue with the King of Macedon; when they arrived in Athens the Athenians, fearing that Aristeus, who had done them much harm already, might do more if he remained alive, put them all to death without a trial . . . They did this in retaliation for the way the Spartans had been behaving—putting to death all the Athenian and allied traders they captured at sea.

We know that Thucydides had read Herodotus; he must have realized that

he was describing the same incident, but in his account he does not even bother to correct his predecessor, still less to argue with him; he does not even refer to him. The execution of these two Spartans, which for Herodotus was such a firm proof of divine justice, is treated as a detail incidental to the really important matter, the execution of Aristeus of Corinth.

Herodotus' view of the incident may not seem too comforting: gods who exact punishment from the sons whose fathers had escaped it (through no fault of their own) are not exactly merciful gods—they may even seem vindictive. Yet there is an element of comfort in the story: even though the justice of the gods is harsh, there is a justice, and this gives meaning to whatever happens. It is all part of a pattern which we may not understand, but which gives some meaning to our lives and, above all, our deaths. The fate of the two Spartan ambassadors, as Herodotus presents it, is a detail in a pattern of order imposed by the gods; it makes a kind of sense and has a certain dignity. But in Thucydides it simply happened. There is no particular reason for it except that the two men were unlucky to be caught at that time and in that company.

Thucydides proclaimed that his history lacks "a romantic element." It also lacks any religious feeling. There is no heaven above to judge, encourage, or punish; no pattern ordained by divine providence; only the conflicting wills of human beings organized in sovereign states locked in unremitting struggle. In this empty universe things can happen which have no explanation, no possible justification. They are, in fact, pure accidents, and when they are also hideous calamities, the fact that they are meaningless makes them almost too much for the human mind to accept. Thucydides goes out of his way to describe one such incident, one which had no effect on the war one way or the other.

Athens had sent for some Thracian savages to hire as mercenaries. They arrived too late to sail with Demosthenes to Sicily, so they were sent home with an Athenian commander in charge and a roving commission to do some damage to Athens' enemies on the way back. This commander attacked the city of Mycalessus, but his Thracians got out of hand. They began slaughtering the inhabitants; they went berserk, in fact, and killed men, women, children, farm animals, and everything they saw. Particularly horrible was the assault on the boys' school where they killed all the children. "It was a small city," said Thucydides, "but in the disaster . . . its people suffered calamities as pitiable as any which took place during the war." Nobody wanted it to happen this way. There is no rhyme or reason for it. It is an utterly meaningless event.

It is precisely because Thucydides had no religious view, no mystical sense of destiny or divine justice at work in human history that he can observe without preconceptions and analyze so mercilessly that human nature which, he suggests repeatedly, will always be the same. The mainspring of human nature in action, as he sees it, is the will to power, to dominate others, and in the actions of states this will expresses itself as politics and war. "It is a general and necessary law of nature," say the Athenian negotiators to the Melians, "to rule wherever one can. This is not a law that we made ourselves; we found it already in existence and we shall leave it to exist forever for those who come after us." In his examination of the operation of this law, Thucydides presents us with a number of analyses of power politics in action which have been admired and studied ever since as the purest distillation of political experience.

Among them is the famous Melian dialog in Book V. The Athenians bring overwhelming force against a small neutral island and then sit down at the

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negotiating table. They want no words wasted. "If we have met here for any other purpose than to look facts in the face . . . there is no point in going on with the discussion . . . We will use no fine phrases" (they do not attempt to justify their actions with the usual appeals—"a great mass of words that nobody believes") and they don't want to hear similar arguments from the other side. "You should try to get what it is possible for you to get, taking into consideration what we both really think." And then this terrible but true statement: "when these matters are discussed by practical people, the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel." The United States and the Soviet Union may discuss the justice of their claims against each other, but in the case of the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia or the United States and, say, Santo Domingo, such discussion is irrelevant. In fact, "the strong do what they may, and the weak accept what they must."

The Melians reply that even in such a case there is a need for fair play, for the superior power may be itself one day defeated. "This is a principle which affects you as much as anybody since your own fall would be visited by the most terrible vengeance . . ." This warning is countered by a cynical but cogent argument. "We are not afraid," say the Athenians, "of being conquered by a power which rules over others as Sparta does . . . You can leave it to us to face the risks involved." And they are right. When Athens fell at last, she was deprived of her fleet, her fortifications, her empire, and her democratic regime, but she was not destroyed; she did not suffer the massacre and enslavement she had decreed for Mitylene and actually inflicted on Melos and Scione. The Corinthians and the Thebans wanted to raze Athens to the ground, but Sparta would not allow it; not for love of Athens, but because the destruction would have made Thebes and Corinth

too powerful, created a power vacuum Sparta was not ready to fill. Furthermore, Sparta, which had won the war with Persian help, now had to face the problem of Persian pressure in the Aegean. After World War II there were many who wanted to destroy Germany and Japan as states, but we did no such thing. On the contrary, we built them up. We needed them against our former allies, Russia and China.

The Melians then ask simply to be allowed the privilege of neutrality, but the answer is negative. Melos is an island, and a neutral island cannot be tolerated by a naval empire. "Our subjects would regard it as a sign of weakness in us." We can translate that into our own terms; "our credibility is at stake." And so it goes on. The Melians appeal to the chances of battle, their hope to save themselves, but the Athenians reject hopes as foolish. They appeal to the gods, but the Athenians claim the gods as power-politicians like themselves. The Melians proclaim their reliance on Sparta, but they are told that no help will come from that quarter, and indeed it did not—as no help came from the European democracies to the Spanish Republic or the Czechs, for, as the Athenians say, "good will shown by the party that is asking for help does not mean security . . . what is looked for is a positive preponderance of power." So the Melians went down fighting, and when the city fell the men were slaughtered, the women and children sold into slavery.

Equally penetrating is Thucydides' analysis of the appalling cruelties which accompanied revolution and civil war in Corcyra. Revolutions were not rare in ancient Greece, but this one and the many which followed it were made more brutal by the presence of the war which invited foreign intervention. "The consequent savagery was the cause of many calamities, as happens and always will happen while human nature is what it is, though, as different circumstances

arise, the general rule will exhibit some variety." The collapse of law and moral standards was accompanied by a process of corruption in the language men spoke: "to fit in with the change of events, words too had to change their usual meanings. A thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect to find in a party member: any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character." We know this phenomenon very well. George Orwell (who apparently did not realize that Thucydides had anticipated him) satirized the perversion of language for political ends in his chapter on "Newspeak" in his novel *1984*, but the process has continued undeterred. The half of Germany which calls itself the Democratic German Republic is the one ruled by Communist dictatorship, and the "peace-loving nations" are the members of the Warsaw Pact; to come closer home, the word "pacification" is used to describe some activities of ours in Vietnam which have very little to do with peace, and George Orwell would have taken off his hat to the unnamed genius in the Air Force who thought up "preplanned protective reaction."

In these same chapters on Corcyra, Thucydides gives us a lucid analysis of the aftermath of successful revolution; once the safeguards of rule by law have been destroyed, the revolutionaries themselves fall victim to the furies they have unleashed. In the struggle for power among the victors,

those who were least remarkable for intelligence showed the greatest powers of survival . . . They recognized their own deficiencies and the superior intelligence of the opponents; fearing that they might lose a debate or find themselves out-manoeuvred in intrigue by their quick-witted enemies, they boldly launched straight into action, while their opponents

over-confident . . . were the more easily destroyed.

Truer words were never spoken. In the French Revolution, Danton, the great orator who had roused France to drive out the invaders and whose impassioned oratory dominated the revolutionary Convention, did not imagine that he could be overthrown by a pettyfogging lawyer, a poor speaker, a pedantic schoolteacher named Robespierre—but it was Robespierre who sent Danton and his friends to the guillotine. Leon Trotsky, the fiery speaker, the brilliant writer, the organizer of the first Red Army, the companion of Lenin, had no fear of the crude Georgian peasant who called himself Stalin, but Stalin drove him out of Russia and many years later engineered his murder in Mexico City. The whole passage in Thucydides is the most probing analysis of the effects of violent revolution and civil war ever made; here, if nowhere else, Thucydides justifies his claim to be useful forever.

Armed with this power of surgical analysis and with a fierce devotion to the truth, Thucydides wrote the history of the war which began with Athens at the height of her economic and naval power and ended 27 years later in her total defeat. In the opening books, especially in the speeches of Pericles, he prepares the stage for what seems to be the inevitable victory of Athens. She is invulnerable at home because of the long walls which connected city and harbor—"if only we were an island," says Pericles, and the walls in effect made her so. Her resources in money, ships, and trained naval personnel were infinitely superior to those of her enemies. In order to win she had only to stand pat; the war was an attempt to destroy the Athenian Empire, but it could never succeed as long as Athens retained control of the sea. All she had to do was to avoid large-scale battles on land and refrain from any attempts to extend the empire. If these two restrictions were observed, the war was bound

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to end in a stalemate, and since the enemy had begun the war as a challenge to the status quo, a stalemate would be an Athenian victory. Such a policy would require great discipline (the Athenians would have to watch the enemy burn their farms), but in Pericles they had a leader who could hold them to it. Yet Athens lost the war. Something was wrong with Pericles' calculations. Why did Athens lose?

Thucydides never poses the question in quite those terms, but his answer to it emerges from his narrative. In Pericles' first speech the strategy is outlined, a calculation of resources made; a supreme confidence is expressed—Athens cannot lose if it follows the Periclean guidelines. A warning note, however, is sounded in the speech of the Spartan King Archidamus as his troops invade Attica. "There is much," he says, "that is unpredictable in war." Pericles was soon to learn that lesson himself. No amount of calculation and preparation can foresee the accidents and combinations of circumstances that war is liable to produce. Pericles had foreseen the Spartan invasion and the destruction of the Athenian crops but not the plague which caused such havoc in the overcrowded city. He admits this in his last speech. "When things happen suddenly, unexpectedly, and against all calculations, it takes the heart out of a man; and this has certainly happened to you," he tells the Athenians, "with the plague coming on top of everything else." The plague dealt a terrible blow to Athenian manpower and morale, but it did something even more damaging, it killed Pericles. And his death opened the way for new leaders who made the mistakes he had feared—involvement in land battles (at Delium and later at Mantinea) and expeditions to enlarge the empire (the disastrous expedition to Sicily). This last mistake came at a time when, strictly speaking, Athens had won the war. When peace was made in 421, she had, it is true, sustained heavy losses

in the plague and in the unnecessary land engagement at Delium; she had also lost her subject cities in the north to a Spartan captain of genius, Brasidas, but she had captured, at Pylos, enough Spartan soldiers and officers to induce Sparta to sue for terms. And after all, this was, as Pericles foresaw the way the war would end. The war was a challenge to Athens' rule over the empire; if the enemy settled for less, he admitted failure. With the return to something like the *status quo*, a dynamic Athens was now free to rebuild her resources to the level, or above it, of her position in 431.

But the Athenians not only proceeded to engage Sparta in an infantry battle at Mantinea (which they lost); they also gambled their whole fleet and the bulk of their fighting manpower on an attempt to take over Sicily, a place they could hardly expect to hold even if they conquered it.

The fault then lay in the leadership, and this raises the question of Athenian democracy and Thucydides' attitude toward it. Pericles' funeral speech, of course, is one of the great documents of Western democratic ideals. But when Thucydides pays his tribute to Pericles after describing his death, he says something rather disturbing. "In what was nominally a democracy power was really in the hands of the first citizen." True, Pericles had to be reelected to the board of generals each year, but he managed to do so for a period of some 15 years before his death in 429, and he did it without flattering the people or playing on their prejudices. "He was so highly respected," says Thucydides, "that he was able to speak angrily to them and to contradict them." His successors, however, had no such personal authority. They had to adopt "methods of demagoguery which resulted in their losing control over the actual conduct of affairs." This loss of control by the successors of Pericles resulted in the disastrous abandonment

of his strategy; they were unable, unlike him, "to respect the liberty of the people and at the same time hold them in check."

The trouble with Athenian democracy was, of course, that it was a direct democracy. The modern slogan we hear so often from our radical left, "All power to the people," exactly describes it. Policy was decided in an assembly which any citizen could attend; clever orators could play on passions and fears to promote their own interests, as Alcibiades did in his advocacy of the expedition to Sicily. In the last years of the war (Thucydides did not live long enough to describe this incident, though he must have known about it) the admirals at the battle of Arginusae, who in the turmoil of a successful naval engagement failed to rescue the crews of their wrecked ships before a gale made it impossible, were recalled, tried before an assembly whipped up to a rage by their political opponents, and condemned to death. When Thucydides puts into the mouth of Alcibiades at Sparta the statement that democracy is a system which is "generally recognized as absurd," one cannot help feeling, with all due allowance made for the slipperiness of Alcibiades and for the fact that he was addressing a Spartan audience, that Thucydides may have been to some extent in agreement. Periclean democracy was one thing; it was almost like our own democracy in that it had a powerful executive capable of a consistent policy; but the democracy which was to be dominated by Cleon and led to catastrophe by Alcibiades was quite another. In fact, in Book VIII, where Thucydides describes the antidemocratic revolution in Athens which followed the disaster in Sicily, he says of its final phase (an assembly restricted to 5,000 property-owning citizens) that "during the first period of this new regime, the Athenians appeared to have had a better government than ever before, at least in my time." For

once Thucydides seems to have been in agreement with that Cleon he so despised; Cleon in the debate over Mitylene had said, "A democracy is incapable of governing an empire."

What did Thucydides think of the empire? I, for one, have no doubt that he thought the empire, ruled with tact and wisdom as it was under Pericles, was the justified reward of Athens' crusade against Persia and of her creative energy and administrative skill. He gives a great deal of emphasis to the claim that Athens under Pericles governed her subjects with moderation and benevolence. There is a ring of truth in the words he puts into the mouth of the Athenian representative to the Congress in Sparta before the war. "Those who really deserve praise," he says, "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. Certainly we think that if anyone else was in our position it would soon be evident whether we act with moderation or not." He goes on to explain that the subject allies complain that lawsuits involving Athenians and allied citizens are tried in Athens, but, as he points out, the fact that the cases are tried at all is unusual. Other imperial powers do not bother with such things. "Our subjects, on the other hand, are used to being treated as equals; consequently, when they are disappointed in what they think right and suffer even the smallest disadvantage . . . they cease to feel grateful to us for all the advantages we have left them." In Pericles' funeral speech there is a sentence that points in the same direction—the liberal handling of the allies, and their treatment as equals, except insofar as the basic matter of foreign policy is concerned. "We obey the laws," says Pericles, "especially those which are for the protection of the oppressed and those unwritten laws which it is an acknowledged shame to break." But even if Athens' claim to rule with a

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benevolent despotism which distinguished it from all other ruling powers were to be rejected, the empire, as Thucydides clearly realized, was Athens' only guarantee of security. "It may have been wrong to take it," said Pericles, "it is certainly dangerous to give it up."

Nevertheless it is also clear that Thucydides would have repudiated the reckless doctrine of permanent expansion preached by Alcibiades:

It is not possible for us to calculate like housekeepers exactly how much empire we want to have. The plain fact is that we have reached the stage where we are forced to plan new conquests and forced to hold on to what we have got because there is a danger that we ourselves may fall under the power of others unless others are in our power.

This doctrine of limitless expansion was proclaimed in Alcibiades' speech in favor of the Sicilian expedition, the fundamental and fateful departure from Periclean strategy.

Thucydides' attitude toward Cleon's imperial policy is harder to define. There is no doubt that he hated and despised Cleon as a vulgar mob-orator and violent demagog, but it is remarkable that he attributes to him a description of the Athenian Empire which must be a deliberate repetition of a phrase of Pericles. "You hold your empire as an absolute power," they both say; *tyrannis* is the Greek word, a dictatorship, an absolute rule established and maintained by force. Pericles, I feel sure, would not have proposed the slaughter of the male population of Mitylene, but I suspect that if he had been obliged to defend his position against Cleon, he would have used the same line of argument as Diodotus, an appeal, not to humanity, but to Athenian interests. So it is not easy to assess Thucydides' attitude to the Melian dialog. Would his beloved Pericles have spoken like that? One

finds it hard to believe. But he would have recognized the logic of the position. Power over others may be disguised, it may be gently used, it may be beneficial to those who are ruled, it may even be in the interests of humanity at large, but in the last analysis it rests on superior force.

Many historians, great ones among them, have seen Thucydides' history as a repudiation of Athenian imperialism as a whole. He does not specifically condemn it, of course, but a case can be made (and a good one has been) to show that in his dramatic arrangement and emphasis (the cynicism of the Melian dialog followed immediately by the Sicilian expedition, for example), he is suggesting that Athens had transgressed the moral law and now has to pay the penalty. That, in other words, even though Thucydides excludes divine providence or justice from the world, he still sees a moral law operating which punishes all excess; that his mood after all is not so different from that of Herodotus and the tragic poets. And some critics have gone further to see in his work a condemnation of all power over others in any form and at any time as leading inevitably to the same results.

On the other hand, some students of his work take the opposite extreme and feel that he is simply an analyst of power who believes that in power relationships morality of any kind is irrelevant. This view has recently been put forward in a brilliant book by A.G. Woodhead, *Thucydides and the Nature of Power*; he sums up Thucydides' concern as "power described and illustrated as the object of effort, held and retained by those who have it, envied and hated by those who do not have it, but in itself characterless and without moral content."

My own view is that the truth is somewhere in between. Thucydides, it seems to me, felt deeply that the Athens of Pericles, as described in the funeral speech, was a superior form of society

which deserved its preeminent position and was justified in fighting to retain it. It ruled its empire with moderation and gave its subjects much in return for the independence of action it took away. I think that one can even read between the lines a belief that Greece could only be saved from perpetual internecine war by the emergence of a predominant unifying power and that Athens, under Pericles, was uniquely fitted for that role. But the failure of statesmanship, after Pericles' death, left Athenian democracy in the hands of leaders who ruled the empire with the mailed fist without the velvet glove and who launched Athens on a course of mad adventurism.

His history, then, is in a sense a tragedy, but the tragedy for him is that Athens lost the war. The sense of waste and loss which his writing conveys is, to my mind, best summed up in the English poet Auden's epitaph on the defeat of the Spanish Republic:

History, to the defeated
May say Alas but cannot help or
pardon.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Dr. Bernard M.W. Knox did his undergraduate work at St. John's College, University of Cambridge and holds a Ph.D. from Yale University and a LL.D. from Princeton University. He has served as pro-

cessor of classics at Yale University and as the Sather Lecturer at the University of California at Berkeley. Professor Knox was on active duty with the U.S. Army in the European Theater in World War II, during which time he was awarded the Bronze Star with OLC and the Croix de Guerre; since 1961 he has been the Director of the Center for Hellenic Studies at Washington, D.C.

Among professional soldiers, anti-intellectualism can also express itself in an uncritical veneration of the military treatises of the past which, with almost metaphysical reverence, are taken as permanent contributions to military doctrine.

Morris Janowitz: The Soldier and the State, xx, 1960