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Thucydides Beyond the Cold War

The Recurrence of Relevance in the Classical Historians

Joseph H. Lane Jr.

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- 1 When I was a classics major in college in the 1980s, everyone read Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* through the Reagan-era Cold War lens: Athens was the U.S., Sparta the U.S.S.R. The lesson was supposedly about bi-polar superpower politics, and the wrong team won.
- 2 It was during this time that I first discovered Steven Forde's 1989 treatment of Thucydides, *Ambition to Rule: Alcibiades and the Politics of Imperialism in Thucydides*. Several of my professors praised it, although never assigning it, in class. Hearing them talk about it, Forde's book fit the dominant Cold War paradigm quite well. Infatuated with that paradigm and the predictive power that it appeared to offer through Thucydides, I found and bought Forde's book. This proved to be quite a trick for an undergraduate at a small rural college, miles from a real bookstore in pre-Amazon.com days. It was the very first academic monograph I ever purchased. In that regard, it was a significant marker in my life. When you are buying commentaries on ancient texts with the beer money, it likely means that law school is growing less attractive and graduate school is in the near future. I did not know what I was getting myself into.
- 3 On the other hand, although I remember *reading* Forde's book at the time, and I even remember thinking that I enjoyed it, it did not provide one of those "Eureka!" moments when the world comes into decisively sharper focus. Whatever insights it implanted in my mind were of a narrow sort, so that I remembered the book for a good general treatment of how the parts of the *Peloponnesian War* fit together and a useful overview of previous scholarship. I put it away, maybe looked at specific sections a couple of times in grad school, and worked on other topics.
- 4 But Forde's book was a totem for me – my first academic

monograph – and since I was writing on ancient historians, it was still “in my field.” It survived numerous purges of my collection; and as I followed the trail of short-term appointments that are ubiquitous in the early careers of my generation of academics, it traveled with me from Virginia to Massachusetts, back to Virginia and thence to Maine, and back to Virginia again. I could not say for sure that I *ever* opened it in Maine, but I carried it with me there and back again so that it could sit on my shelf as a badge of my trade and so that I could have it close at hand should its use be called for.

- 5 In the fall of 2002, Forde’s book burst back into my thought. This essay is a review of sorts. Like much scholarship, Forde’s book is itself akin to a review of previous scholarship as well as the original work on which that scholarship is based. Rediscovering Forde’s commentary on Thucydides helped stimulate both a fundamental re-thinking of Thucydides and an intense series of personal reflections on the meaning that books should hold in my life. I encountered a new Thucydides made young and, if not beautiful, powerful by the fortuitous intersection of our present circumstances, the incredible timelessness of Thucydides’ own analysis, and several surprising elements of Forde’s reading that appear to resonate more powerfully in our current circumstances than they did in those in which they were originally written. As a result, this essay is also about the value of “the great books” and scholarly analyses of them. It reminds us how the incredible *hubris* of writers who declare that they have written “not to meet the taste of an immediate public but . . . to last forever” (Thucydides I.22) might yet be redeemed.
- 6 My re-reading of Forde nearly coincided with my reading of an article by Ruth Grant (2002) on the purpose of political thought. I was impressed by her clarity in arguing that we should not become confused about what we are doing in liberal-arts scholarship. We are *not* simply, or even predominantly, trying to discover new knowledge that goes into a great book of wisdom where universal and eternal principles are inscribed. Our best essays share little with the write-ups of geneticists who run tests in controlled environments and who pronounce definitively that gene X and protein Y controls development of Z. Instead she argues that, by engaging in the scholarly study of political theorists, we are teaching ourselves to exercise *enlightened judgment* in the world we are given: assuredly an *uncontrolled* environment. We should read old, deep, complicated books in light of new conditions because they can help us understand our own times from new

perspectives that we might otherwise neglect. In doing so, we learn how to judge our problems. If we do not read the old books, we too seldom learn judgment; but if we do not read the newspapers, we have nothing to judge.

- 7 So in the Fall of 2002, I became fascinated by the shifts in rhetorical emphasis between Pericles' famous "Funeral Oration" and his less famous, considerably more ominous, final speech. Forde's book was there, on my shelf, waiting to be consulted. It was one of many authorities on Thucydides that I had ready to hand; but this time I opened it to discover that, at least for me as reader, Forde as commentator, and Thucydides as subject, the "Eureka" moment had arrived. As I read the newspapers in the fall of 2002 in the long shadow of the previous September 11, amid what seemed to me to be the slow-motion train crash of the run-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, I was hearing in the political rhetoric of Americans echoes of Pericles' speeches. It occurred to me that that these echoes might suggest some problematic long-term consequences for our democratic polity. I have since committed myself to trying to understand what these echoes might indicate about our American predicament and trajectory in the world after 9/11, a world in which neo-conservatives like David Frum and Richard Perle are pedaling imperial projects as *the* way to fulfill the promise of an *End to Evil*.

I

- 8 So why is a reading of Thucydides so important in these days? We must recognize that Thucydides has become a significant and contested resource; he has been cited repeatedly over the last sixty years to justify significant claims in foreign policy. It would not be an exaggeration to say that, whenever we get a new war, we get a new Thucydides. Three different interpretations of Thucydides, one historical and two more current, are in play here.
- 9 First, as I and many others have already suggested, the view of the Peloponnesian War as a precursor for the Cold War exercised clear power for nearly fifty years. George Marshall first suggested the connection in a speech at Princeton University in 1947, and his protégé Louis J. Halle published "A Message from Thucydides" in the *Foreign Service Journal* in August 1952. If the Cold War has turned out differently than the Thucydides model might have predicted, we might become cautious about asserting new historical parallels that bring "Thucydides . . . still closer to us so that he now speaks to our ear." Yet the urge to call on Thucydides

as a guide to new problems remains great. The famous invitation from Thucydides is to think about ways in which “exact knowledge of the past” might serve as “an aid to the understanding of the future, which in the course of human events must resemble if it does not reflect it” (I.22). Readers of Thucydides’ have proven more than willing to oblige. I should know; I’m one of them.

- 10 Thus when it was time to justify the aggressive foreign policies that followed 9/11, Victor David Hanson and Donald Kagan led the way in advancing a second set of interpretations for Thucydides. Hanson is widely recognized as one of Vice President Cheney’s leading intellectual influences. He sounded the call in “A Voice from the Past: General Thucydides Speaks about the War,” in the *National Review Online* for November 2001. In this article, Hanson wrenches quotations from Thucydides, sometimes taking them desperately out of context, trying to lend credibility to an aggressive strategy of attacking all America’s potential enemies to forestall future 9/11s. In this essay and those that followed, collected in *An Autumn of War* and *Between War and Peace*, Hanson claims insistently that Thucydides’ wisdom confirms the prescience of the President’s preemptive approach to destroying any and all perceived terrorist threats.
- 11 Similarly Daniel Mendelsohn draws attention to the ways that Kagan, likely our most eminent Thucydidean historian, has fashioned his new one volume history as a revisionist defense of the Athenian hawks. Simply titled *The Peloponnesian War*, Kagan’s book turns Thucydides’ history into an argument for “a very twenty-first century project indeed: a unilateralist policy of preemptive war” (2004, p. 82) Anne Norton puts it bluntly, calling Kagan the man “who made Thucydides the architect of American empire” (2004, p. 47).
- 12 I want to offer a third reading of Thucydides, as explicitly relevant for our times. I do so hesitantly. I am less persuaded than Hanson and Kagan that we can easily mine historians of the past for axioms directly applicable to the present. We must never lose sight of the complexities of Thucydides’ presentation; we must never make it trite or formulaic. Equally, though, we must not cede the field to those who would make of his work a simple call to aggressive war. If those who see in Thucydides numerous suggestions of current dangers more deep and disturbing than any immediately apparent go unchallenged, we can lose the wisdom that Thucydides might offer. We also can lose a powerful tool, both theoretical and rhetorical, for reconsidering our present

position. I would not be read to say that, just because something happened to Athens, it must happen to the U.S. Instead I would pursue a different way to learn from Thucydides. It comes from rediscovering his text and Forde's commentary on it as they interact with my own sense of our current travails. But let me begin by offering a few suggestions about ways in which our situation might be closely analogous to that of the Athenians at the outset of the Peloponnesian War.

II

- 13 Today America is increasingly seen as an "imperial" power; and if the invasion of Iraq has multiplied these accusations, we must admit that it did not initiate them. Without undertaking a full-scale content analysis, there is plenty of reason to think that we are talking more and more about ourselves as an empire or as a nation seen by others as an empire. Even if we limit ourselves to those books published in 2004, examples abound: Chalmers Johnson's *The Sorrows of Empire* (2004); Gore Vidal's *Imperial America* (2004); the classically titled *Imperial Hubris* by a former CIA station chief writing as Anonymous (2004); Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair's *Imperial Crusades: Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yugoslavia* (2004); John Judis's *The Folly of Empire* (2004); Niall Ferguson's *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (2004). Even noted conservatives, like George Will of the *Washington Post*, have not flinched from announcing that Americans are "doing the business of empire" (May 11, 2004)." The list could be much longer, but let this suffice.
- 14 As for the architects of America's current policy, we have conflicting reports. In both his April 2004 press conference and his 2003 State of the Union Address, President Bush maintained that "we are not an imperial power" – in the same paragraph where he stressed the importance of maintaining U.S. troop levels in many foreign countries, including Iraq. Vice President Cheney's 2003 Christmas card featured the telling quotation, "And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can grow without his aid?" (Kristof 2004). Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, President Bush's choice to lead the World Bank, is fond of speaking of a *Pax Americana*, strongly suggesting that our age of peace, like the *Pax Romana*, will be the result of imperial pacification.
- 15 As eminent a scholar as Joseph Nye has argued that the U.S. is not an empire. His is a fairly narrow definition, however, and we

certainly look like an empire in the Athenian sense. Our troops are quartered in more than 100 countries all over the world. We placed them there in the aftermath of World War II, when we completed a war as the most powerful leader of an alliance against a totalitarian aggressor, Nazi Germany. But we were acting to protect our allies (and of course ourselves – using others as “buffers”) against a new totalitarian threat, our former ally in the Soviet Union. In the traditional Cold War reading of Thucydidean analogues, we assumed the role of Athens, Nazi Germany played Persia, and the USSR played Sparta.

- 16 Today we find ourselves still occupying military posts in far-flung countries, even though the Soviet Union has collapsed. Russia may be a threat, but seems much less powerful and imminently aggressive. We could now place ourselves in the familiar Athenian role, but the Russians ought to be re-considered in the role of the Persians. We, like the Athenians in the 430s, have a tenuous control over an alliance or series of alliances: not just NATO, but SEATO, our commitments to the defense of South Korea and Japan, our Middle Eastern associations with Israel and certain more moderate gulf states, etc. We maintain these even though the threat that necessitated them has now receded. We should not be surprised that some of our allies, who once welcomed us as protectors, have come to see us as occupiers. Like the Athenians, we exercise military superiority over nations who once viewed our military as the bulwark of their freedom and now view it as an impediment to that freedom. Their interpretations of our military commitments, as well as their attitudes towards us, have changed accordingly.
- 17 The analogy does not offer a clear antagonist to take the role of Sparta, but this fact does not entirely undermine the value of the parallel. We might be in the odd position of having to create a Sparta in order to justify our role as Athens. There is some evidence that we are doing so in treating the “forces of worldwide terror” as a single, monolithic threat. It is an illusory monolith characterized by its oligarchic, theocratic (Islamic type only), and reactionary resistance to American democracy.
- 18 In a major foreign policy speech at the U.S. Air Force Academy in June 2004, President Bush painted the “enemy” as fundamentally akin to “other totalitarian movements” that “seek to impose a grim vision in which dissent is crushed and every man and woman must think and live in colorless conformity.” His efforts to paint this picture, similar in tone and imagery to the one we once painted of

Soviet communism, serve to suggest that our “enemy” is like a nation, even if it is not unified, let alone monolithic. His description of this “nation” is not all that different from Thucydides’ description through Pericles of a Spartan regime in which each citizen exercises “a jealous surveillance over each neighbor.” As Mark Danner noted on the op-ed page of the *New York Times*, President Bush’s speechwriters started almost immediately after September 11 to cast “terrorists” as “the moral descendents of Communists, embodiments of evil, who ‘hate our freedoms’” (October 9, 2002).

- 19 On this basis, we can connect our aggressive reaction to the terrorism to the hesitance that has begun to mark even our allies, the U.K. excluded. We can discern what we might paraphrase as “the growth of the power of the United States, and the alarm which this inspired in others.” The reader of Thucydides can recognize a parallel in the widespread suspicion of Athenian power that Thucydides took to be the “real cause” of the Peloponnesian War (I.24, compare I.88). We might infer that our terrorist enemies *and* our hesitant friends have similar apprehensions. It is one thing to recognize in celebrations of the Soviet Union’s fall that the post-Cold War world would have “only one superpower.” It is another thing altogether to experience the economic, cultural, and military predominance by the United States in the resulting world. Any nation intent on preserving its identity and its autonomy has reason to wonder whether it can be itself in a world so dominated by the American presence.
- 20 In this context, we should not be surprised by the extraordinary conjunction, on both the left and right, of debates about whether that the United States is properly conceived as an “empire.” America might be an “empire” of a special character: specifically a “democratic empire,” perhaps even an “empire of liberty.” Nonetheless we are widely seen as an “empire.”

III

- 21 The second setting for this reading comes from several articles (Hersh 2003; Schlesinger 2004; West 2004; Xenos 2004a) and at least two books (Norton 2004; Xenos 2005) that suggest that the development of America’s “imperial strategy” has been supervised and engineered by Straussians. The followers of Leo Strauss, the German-born teacher of political philosophy who taught at the New School, University of Chicago, and St. John’s College from the 1940s until his death in 1973, were once the topic of discussion

only in the academy. Today they are regularly the topic of popular publications, and the idea that Straussians in the administration master-mind current policy is now cited as accepted wisdom.

- 22 As a student of political theory who was educated in the Straussian tradition and whose thinking about recent events stems from re-reading Thucydides, I can add that connecting current issues about imperial strategy to intellectual considerations associated with Strauss re-confirms a sense that Thucydides is important for us now. Long before the Strauss connections to Shulsky, Perle, Wolfowitz, and Krystal gave birth to talk of a special (and insidious) association between his teachings and the politics of American empire, Straussians routinely treated Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* as the account of "empire." They have written about Thucydides' account of Athens as an analysis of "democratic empire" or, to use a Straussian formulation, "the empire problem *par excellence*." If Straussians are authors and architects of current foreign policy and concomitant domestic deceptions, we have special reason to consider anew the "Straussian teaching" about empire. This teaching can be found, as much as anywhere, in Straussian commentaries on Thucydides.
- 23 Straussian discussions of Thucydides turn out to relate directly to current contexts because they focus largely on whether or how seizing and holding an "empire" may be justified. Clifford Orwin takes this approach in *The Humanity of Thucydides* (1994). There the question he considers "above all" is "To what extent is the empire to be understood as a project freely undertaken and sustained, and to what extent as a burden that Athens had had no choice but to shoulder and to continue to bear?" (p. 29). As James Boyd White asks, "Was Athens compelled by circumstances to talk as she did . . . , or could she have talked in other, less destructive ways?" (1984, pp. 85-86).
- 24 Orwin argues that such questions have both theoretical and practical importance. The theoretical issue is fundamental for understanding the theoretic essence of political life: Was Machiavelli correct to argue that the rule of force is the only rule that matters for politics? Yet the narrative by Thucydides never loses sight of practical implications. Ever the *political* historian, he was acutely aware of tensions like those that the war on terrorism brings forcefully to our attention: Are democracies devoted to freedom ideologically incapable of such imperial requirements as the willingness to exercise domination? Straussian commentaries on Thucydides refer insistently to

tensions between “freedom and empire” as “the theme of political history” (Strauss 1989, p. 73; Bruell 1974a, p. 11; Forde 1989, pp. 41-42).

- 25 *Freedom and empire*: we say these two words together time and again because they are strange antonyms in a strict way but potential synonyms in a looser sense. They appear as antonyms in George Will’s reference to the events at Abu Ghraib: “But empire is always about domination. Domination for self-defense, perhaps. Domination for the good of the dominated, arguably. But domination” (2004). As Forde reminds us, however, “freedom for some” can consist of “rule over others” (1989, p. 42). Thus to treat expansion of freedom as coeval with domination of the Other is to make them synonyms. Are these flip sides of the same coin?
- 26 The brutal irony of the idea that we could (and might have to) erect an “empire of liberty” is the irony that Thucydides displayed at the heart of the Athenian dilemma. An illustration for the *Harper’s* article by Thomas de Zengotita’s on “The Romance of Empire and the Politics of Self-Love” (2003, p. 34) captures this irony for us in an anti-war cartoon that shows an American soldier aiming a machine gun at a petrified Arab while demanding: “fe - ree - dom, say it!!” It was easy to foresee that the invasion of Iraq would lead to such ironies; this cartoon appeared nine months *before* similar images associated with the Abu Ghraib prison-abuse scandals grew to dominate discourse about the Iraq War. We do well to specify tensions between our democratic ideals of freedom and the disciplines of domination that characterize “the business of empire.” Otherwise we slip into choices without recognizing them.
- 27 There are deeper, rhetorical levels to the problem. Political theorists need to specify and confirm how the Machiavellian view of the world as an endless struggle for power might hold, and thus learn to how the requirements of empire might be necessary for “free” nations to learn if they are to survive. Beyond this theoretical question, statesmen who accept such views face rhetorical challenges: How can they persuade people who might not share a Machiavellian view of the world to take actions required to protect themselves in precarious environments? Athenians and Americans alike must be persuaded that the dangerous “business of empire” is for them. Democracies may be hesitant to adopt imperial projects, especially when it calls for citizens to fight and die. As Lewis Lapham writes, “Americans are an authentically civilian people, devoid of an exalted theory of the state that might allow us to govern subject races with a firm hand

and a quiet conscience. The imperial project [may serve] the interests of the propertied classes, but the work must be performed by the laboring classes, and it is never easy to harness the energy of the latter to the enthusiasms of the former” (2004 p. 10). Lapham concludes that politicians must tell Americans lies, and he is certainly correct that it requires telling them *something*. But what rhetoric does it require?

- 28 Again there is reason to think that Thucydides might help us understand our own position and our own possibilities better than other thinkers, even more current ones. He is the historian who most carefully integrates rhetoric into his account of the tension between “freedom and empire.” He constructs speeches and places them in the mouths of major actors in the business of the Peloponnesian War. He makes them “say what was in [his] opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what was really said” (1.22.1).
- 29 These speeches form the backbone of the *History*, even though Thucydides insisted that the war’s “real cause,” the widespread fear of Athenian power, was the one “least spoken.” His interest in “causes of action” extends to knowing in a way that is “more complicated and more useful than a simple statement of Spartan apprehensions” (White 1984, p. 60). Yet if the “real cause” was not spoken, others must have been cited rhetorically, and those are important too. Had they no rhetorical power, the war might have happened differently or not at all. The phrase is well worn but apt: Thucydides knew the capacity for rhetoric to “take on a life of its own.” This living rhetoric exhibits a number of themes that are shared by the Athenians in Thucydides’ time and the Americans in ours. The similarities are striking.
- 30 Orwin’s question signals the two rhetorics in Thucydides for justifying the Athenian empire, and they express two theories of empire. One argues that the empire is necessary for security, compelling Athenians to defend it. The other argues that the empire is a “freely chosen Athenian project,” representing Athenian decisions for good or ill that we can judge as unjust or imprudent. The outcome of the *History* suggests that any Athenian choices of empire prove open to weighty objections.
- 31 The Straussian commentaries on Thucydides provide careful discussions of the speeches for positions taken in the *History*, especially speeches that treat empire as necessary for Athenian

survival by contrast with speeches that portray Athenian empire as a “freely chosen project.” The text and the commentaries help analyze the impact of older speeches that resemble current ones. The analysis can take advantage of our emotions being less inflamed by the older speeches even as we know more about their outcomes. As a Straussian reflection, Forde’s book (1989) is a close cousin to Orwin’s *The Humanity of Thucydides* (1994) and Bruell’s “Thucydides’ View of Athenian Imperialism” (1974a). All are progeny of Strauss’s own accounts of Thucydides in *The City and Man* (1978) and “Thucydides: The Meaning of Political History” (1989).

- 32 The next two sections explore the two explicit explanations of the Athenian empire offered by Athenians in speeches that Thucydides composed for the *History*. I use these discussions to trace echoes in current American rhetoric.¹ The differences between the originals and the echoes are important, and I do not want to lose sight of them. Yet the telling commonalities reinforce the suggestion that the United States might be caught in an imperial trap. The *History*’s account the character and contours of this trap are what I take to make it so clarifying for America’s current situation. What should Americans now guard against in imperial power and the two rhetorics that would justify it for a democracy? The *History* offers no blueprint for action by the United States or prediction of its futures. But it does help identify troubles with the recurrent rhetorics advanced so far to support an imperial policy of preemptive war.

IV

- 33 The *History*’s most famous speech is the “Funeral Oration” by Pericles. Offered in honor of “the first Athenians to fall” in the Peloponnesian War, it reveals the thinking by Athenians about their place in the world at the war’s outset. Forde’s account treats this speech as a justification for an imperial policy, and his reading of the long-term influence that it had on the Athenians ought to be sobering for us. Alert readers of Thucydides might object that Pericles was arguing for Athenian restraint in not seeking new foreign conquests. Yet Thucydides’ Pericles explicitly praised restraint as the best method to preserve Athens’ empire in the short term and to expand it in the long term. Forde insists that the Funeral Oration argument is prudent but nevertheless imperial. He holds that the Funeral Oration and the final speech by Pericles provide crucial openings to Thucydides’ account of the trajectories

that define Athenian politics. In these speeches, Thucydides reveals the “logic of empire” in Athenian public discourse and the connections between this logic and the eventual collapse of Athenian political life.

- 34 Insofar as we Americans are in the early stages of what leaders say is a long-term war to defend of an imperial position, a war that may require extending our reach to defend what we have, we are in a position somewhat analogous to that of ancient Athens. No doubt there are some important differences. But if we are living the logic that Forde identifies in the early speeches of Pericles, and if Forde is right that this logic led the Athenians to defeat, we do well to recognize sooner rather than later the dangerous position that we share with the Athenians.
- 35 Among the Straussian commentators on Thucydides, Forde and Orwin, in particular, read the *Peloponnesian War* with American concerns in mind. Both stress the internal corruption that empire can work on democracy. Forde demonstrates how imperial rhetoric prepares Athenian culture for the rise of Alcibiades, the reckless political and military genius who dominated and betrayed Athens in the last ten years of the Peloponnesian War. As much as it may be said that Straussians are infatuated with Alcibiades, it is much harder to argue that they approve of him or the political developments that produce such characters. At times, Forde seems to argue that the Athenians might have prevailed in Sicily if they had not alienated Alcibiades, but this need not mean that Athens would have been better as a result or that such a victory would have been good for the Athenian regime. Forde focuses on Alcibiades as the most conspicuous example and symbol of the corruption that empire inflicts on Athens. According to Forde, Thucydides wanted readers to recognize Alcibiades as a symptom of the dangers in empire. Forde emphasizes the incompatibility of Alcibiades with a healthy regime in Athens. So does Orwin, who portrays the imperialism of Athens as “partially analogous to the plague” and “fever” of which Thucydides would “cure” political people (1994, p. 205).
- 36 The roots of our recent interventionist foreign policy, which many have been willing, and with good cause, to label “imperial,” extend to the earliest impulses of America’s engagement in the world. But the issues raised by American imperialism has been placed in particularly sharp relief by the invasion of Iraq and suggestions by the Bush administration that this is only one in a series of actions for a larger “war on terrorism.” The ebb and flow of imperial wars

challenge democratic leaders to take different rhetorical tacks, moving between the two different explanations of empire to justify their interventions. The relationship can become a contrapuntal dance where political leaders draw first on one argument then on the other. The shifts might meet political exigencies in the short term, yet they also might introduce dissonances that undermine specific policies or even entire democracies in the longer run.

- 37 John Kerry's 1971 testimony toward the end of the Vietnam War asked what justification could be given to its "last man to die." The time was late, the tone was plaintive, and any answer would be defensive. The positive case for democratic empire seems more suited to beginning a war. Thus, today, it is peculiarly appropriate that we look to the speech that Thucydides places in the mouth of his Pericles toward the start of the Peloponnesian War; and a leading candidate for the *locus classicus* of Bush's positive and programmatic appeal for democratic empire is the speech on November 6, 2003 to the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). A prominent supporter of the President's foreign policy, William Safire has said that this is the address that best clarifies the policy's gravity and promise. Safire's column in the *New York Times* on November 10, 2003, calls for readers to examine the speech's structure and design. After cautioning against the distorted accounts of "summarizers," Safire presents the address as a "detailed, coherent, and inspiring" explanation to rally Americans to "our mission."²
- 38 Bush's NED speech is an account of American greatness, just as the Funeral Oration by Thucydides for Pericles is an account of Athenian greatness. To be sure, there are differences of note. Many relate to contrasts in setting and form. As a public eulogy for those fallen in war, the Pericles speech directly addresses questions of sacrifice. President Bush has yet to deliver a major speech on such an occasion; nor has he been willing to talk much, let alone directly, about American war deaths, particularly in Iraq. His public statements make vague references to the sacrifices of our military personnel, sometimes conflating the inconvenience of time away from home with the loss of loved ones killed. America's closest analog to a military funeral address might be the President's Memorial Day appearance at Arlington National Cemetery. On that occasion, Bush has told brief anecdotes about soldiers killed in Iraq, but he has added little to justify their dying. In the NED speech, he twice insists, without elaboration, "Freedom is worth fighting for, dying for, and standing for." Such words are as close as he comes to direct justifications for American

deaths in current wars. Still there are striking similarities between the Bush speech to the NED and the Pericles Funeral Oration in construction, imagery, argument, and purpose.

- 39 The two speeches share key features of structure. Both open with arguments that the Athenian or American people are contributing forms of government that enhance the world. Thucydides' Pericles celebrates "the form of government under which our greatness grew." He connected that "form" to the character of "our greatness." Then he explained how that greatness gets transmitted from his country to others. Pericles famously praised Athens as "the school of Hellas," capable of producing the greatest human individuals and "alone of her contemporaries . . . greater than her reputation." He insisted that the great power of Athens and the monuments erected to that power guarantee "the admiration of the present and succeeding ages" (2.41.1-4).
- 40 President Bush advances the broader thesis that the United States is the "school of the world." In doing so, he passes judgment on the pretensions of "sophisticated Europeans" who could not recognize in Ronald Reagan's anti-communism of the 1980s the emergence of a new world order. By implication, they would be wrong to resist the change that his United States is now introducing. Even before this speech, Mark Danner (2002) heard in the Bush rhetoric a "comprehensive, prophetic, evangelical" mission that would animate the American people to pursue "freedom's triumph over all its age-old foes." Echoing Pericles in the Funeral Oration, Bush would rally us to "realize the power" of America and to "feed [our] eyes upon her from day to day, till love of her fills [our] hearts," thus animating the conviction needed to pursue the "historic opportunity to change the world."
- 41 Like Pericles, Bush argues that the relationship between "form" and "greatness" resides in our ability to generate effective commitment to the "public good" by allowing citizens to pursue "their own good" as they see it. In his NED speech, he champions the American system as one where "[f]reedom honors and unleashes human creativity," allowing Americans to pursue their own ends and allowing their "willingness to sacrifice" to develop naturally rather than as the result of what Pericles called the "painful discipline" of the foe. Bush's claims about America echo those found in Forde's gloss of the Periclean praise of Athens: "the Athenian regime, based on this unprecedented liberalism, this liberation of human faculties repressed or restricted under the conditions of ordinary political life, has discovered a source of

power broader and more explosive than that available to any other city known to their political experience” (1989, p. 38). As Thucydides had Pericles say of the Athenians, Bush holds that Americans are powerful precisely because we are free. The full expression of this freedom will result in the greatest power, unlike any the world has seen before.

- 42 To advance democracy, says President Bush, Americans act without the compulsion or religious delusion, without any “ideology of theocratic terror,” like that which characterizes the “capricious and corrupt” elites who force people to fight for enemy regimes. Like Soviet communism, today’s religious tyrannies will fail precisely because they do not respect their “own people, their creativity, their genius and their rights.” Building on this contrast with enemy forces as oppressed and conscripted, Bush maintains that voluntarism, like liberty in the Athenian account, makes American sacrifices especially remarkable because our citizens have so much to lose.
- 43 After proceeding in parallel with the Funeral Oration throughout much of the body, the NED speech turns away near its peroration. The President’s account seems less nationalistic and more idealistic, even ideological.³ Pericles appeals to his fellow citizens to fill their hearts with the love of “the power of Athens” and “the imperishable monuments” that Athens has erected as “mighty proofs” of that power. Even if this power of Athens could have some transcendent or universal appeal, Pericles sells it as peculiarly Athenian. If democracy is exportable, Pericles celebrates the claims of Athens to being its author, its greatest prophet and its foremost symbol.
- 44 Thus Forde focuses on what he sees as Pericles’ self-conscious eroticizing of Athens’ politics. He argues that it is the “liberated erotic passion” of the Athenians, marked by Pericles’ erotic language, that commits the Athenians to these politics. He claims that “Thucydides’ presentation of the sequence of events that set all this in motion carries a strong impression of inevitability; that is an impression that a democracy characterized by such liberation of human faculties must inevitably become imperialistic” (1989, p. 38). Forde’s subsequent account of Athenian military moves foregrounds this erotic commitment. It is what makes the rhetoric of “liberty” resonate with the Athenians: “the first and perhaps the primary attachment of eros in Athens is the attachment to freedom itself. That is to say, in the Athenian case at least, eros comes close to revealing itself as a pure and promiscuous desire for freedom as

such” (p. 39).

- 45 By comparison, the American invocation of freedom may seem more noble, more generous, and less dangerous. President Bush appears to be less parochial in his offer to the world. As Safire says with emphasis, “America has put our **power** at the service of principle.” Bush’s praise of “freedom” as the keystone of “every successful society,” “the design of nature,” and “the direction of history” suggests that all can participate equally in its blessings. He offers a share of its glorious realization to all as “the right and capacity of all mankind.”
- 46 We should not be too eager, however, to think that America avoids the narcissism of Athens in this positive statement of the case for imperial democracy. President Bush is quick to point out, “It is no accident that the rise of so many democracies took place in a time when the world’s leading nation was itself a democracy.” “United States commitments” are central to the story; and while “the spread of freedom can be hard,” “America has accomplished hard tasks before.” The Bush speech leaves no doubt who leads the march of this universal ideal and to whom the greatest glory will be due when victory is secure.
- 47 The American account never faces the conflict in its call for a general triumph of freedom and its suggestion of continuing leadership by America. Is this a defect? Have we utterly neglected the conceptual and practical difficulties inherent in joining “freedom and empire,” the very difficulties that Thucydides seems so intent upon exploring? “There is,” Forde writes, “the sense in which rule or dominion over others is itself the greatest form of freedom – a fact we are not accustomed to acknowledging but which the Athenians seemed to relish. . . . The democratic love and defense of freedom at Athens could have passed insensibly into the impulse to rule over others by a transformation more natural than we generally suppose” (pp. 39-40). Thucydides’ Pericles recognizes this tension and faces it self-consciously, while we tend to overlook it. There can be little doubt that, whenever President Bush praises “freedom,” he refers first and foremost to American freedom and that, whenever American freedom collides with others, it is preferred. Our “love and defense of freedom” can pass “insensibly into the impulse to rule over others.” Events at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo suggest that this is already happening.
- 48 Such events evoke a deeper conviction about the meaning of

freedom that transcends any rogue or misguided actions of particular MP's. The Periclean appeal explicitly elevates Athenians' claims to freedom over others, and the Bush speech implies confidence that Americans possess a special character that may justify a similar preferential status. I doubt that any broadly preemptive foreign policy can be sustained without such a parochial premise. There is little sense in dying for freedom that remains wholly abstract, with no tie to other goods that we can call "our own"; and there is little reason for individuals to die only for their personal, individual freedom, since death ends personality and freedom. What remains is the ideal of dying for freedom as part of a higher, encompassing cause that includes others as well as oneself. The patriotic call is to die for a country that enjoys its distinctive freedom even after the personal sacrifice of its successful defenders.

- 49 Arriving in Baghdad for what turned out to be brief service as the head of Iraqi reconstruction, Lt. General Jay Garner emphasized the special boldness produced by a sense of patriotic purpose. To the troops, he said, "You ought to be beating your chest every morning. You ought to look in the mirror, suck in our bellies, and say, 'Damn, we're Americans!'" (de Zengotita 2003, p. 31). Not every appeal to patriotism is tainted with "supremacist" sentiments, but many commentators have noted in talk of the Bush administration what Stanley Hoffman has called the "new exceptionalism" (2004). To sustain public support for wars likely to be long-term where immediate physical survival of the country is not obviously at risk, public appeals must take on a particularly powerful, even hyperbolic, intensity. We might blush or recoil at the openly parochial eros in the Funeral Oration; yet we should recognize how we are drawn toward similar appeals, even when we think that the promise of "freedom" can be perfectly inclusive.

V

- 50 It is often noted that the sense of optimism and purpose in the Funeral Oration sets up readers for a stunning reversal. Sara Monoson and Michael Loriaux explain how this shift in emphasis should temper our enthusiasm for the patriotic call of Pericles. They show how the "antithesis" construction of Thucydides's text mimics for readers the terrible disorientation suffered by Athenians who have their "expectations nurtured at one point" and "dashed" the next (1998, pp. 287, ff.). Thucydides followed the Pericles call for public-spirited action with the dual tragedy of

Sparta invading Athens while plague assaulted the Athenians trapped within their city walls.

- 51 The Funeral Oration urged Athenians to engage in the most selfless patriotic behavior, but the sense of doom that followed military retreat and death from disease made the Athenians preternaturally insecure and self-absorbed. Any sense of public spiritedness is likely to be short-lived among individuals under the threat of imminent death. In a democracy, widespread pessimism (whether caused by foreign-policy failure, economic downturn, or even natural disaster) can disarm political commitments. The NED speech came near the end of a long period of confidence, shortly before excitement surrounding the capture of Saddam Hussein marked one of the last major upswings in optimism about the war in Iraq. Since late 2003, public opinion on the war has moved mostly downward. If Americans have not experienced the stunning reversal, the utter collapse, that struck the Athenians in the summer of 430, the possibility of such a turn lurks in only one terrorist attack on American soil or a truly terrible defeat in Iraq: An attack that took massive casualties, something akin to the Beirut bombing of Marine barracks in 1983, could easily turn lurking unease about the occupation into widespread public outrage and hostility.
- 52 Vulnerability to such abrupt shifts is an enduring trouble for any democracy that would maintain an imperial policy. As Danner and others observed even before the invasion of Iraq, shifting “moods” of public opinion can keep democracies from sustaining the long-term commitments to foreign enterprises that an imperial, preemptive policy requires. Between March 2003 and July 2004, CNN-Gallup polls showed that the percentage of Americans who thought that going to war in Iraq was a mistake increased by 27%. CBS- *New York Times* polls for the same period have Americans who approve the war’s conduct dropping by 17%. The percentages who thought that the U.S. was doing “very well” or “somewhat well” in Iraq fell from 72% in May 2003 to 43% in July 2004. From the beginning of 2003 to the middle of 2004, at least one in three Americans surveyed changed their minds at least once about Iraq. Such fluctuations are not surprising. Thucydides knew to expect them for Athens; pollsters know to expect them for America. However, the former recognized that these swings in public confidence made imperial policies nearly unsustainable over the long-term. It is not at all clear that our leaders recognize the dangers that they pose on our current course.

- 53 Thucydides traces how fluctuating confidence made it increasingly difficult for Athenian leaders to maintain their policy of preemptive imperialism. He shows how hawkish leaders anxious to play offensive strategy to the hilt were driven to ever more extravagant rhetoric in trying to hold citizens on course. Yet their hyperbolic efforts to construct stable grounds for agreement on empire proved futile, and, in the readings of Forde, White, Orwin, and others, it is this collapse of public agreement that ultimately undermined the very basis of Athenian democracy.
- 54 Even the relatively moderate rhetoric of Pericles contributed to setting the stage for the later reversals suffered by Athens. So even it had to go. Hardships created by the plague and the Spartan invasion fed doubt about Pericles' policies, and these pushed him toward a different account of Athenian empire. His final defense need not clash with the Funeral Oration; it even echoes the earlier account at times, but the real tensions between Thucydides' Pericles' two justifications of empire are vitally important for us to understand. Just as promises from the Funeral Oration resound in Bush's NED talk, aspects of Pericles' negative rhetoric for empire have begun to appear in Bush's speeches on America's role in the world.
- 55 When Athenians seemed least inclined to imperial policy, Thucydides presents Pericles as employing a rhetoric of fear. It stresses the costs of abandoning empire. In pointing to the dangers that Athenians face, though, it also speaks openly for the first time about the magnitude of Athenian power (Forde 1989, pp. 54-55). In his last speech, Pericles argued that Athenians have never before appreciated the great extent of their powers, especially their naval power (2.62.2). Thus this speech combined a new, more forceful, even boastful, declaration of Athenian invincibility with a new, more negative, specifically frightening account of risks run by Athenians if they fail to contribute fully to the public good: for then they cannot make full use of their powers in the face of grave dangers.
- 56 Elements of this odd juxtaposition have re-surfaced in some speeches by President Bush. At Northern Michigan University in June 2004, the President claimed that "America's future also depends on our willingness to lead in the world. The momentum of freedom in our time is strong, but we still face serious dangers. Al Qaeda is wounded, but not broken. Terrorists continue to attack in Afghanistan and Iraq; regimes in North Korea and Iran are challenging the peace. If America shows weakness or

uncertainty in this decade, the world will drift toward tragedy.” This speech says at least eight different ways that “America is safer” as a result of the current, preemptive policy; and yet it says in at least six different ways that America faces awful, imminent dangers. “In a country as big as ours, there’s no such thing as perfect security, and threats to our homeland are real. We know the terrorists want to strike the United States again, to spread fear and disrupt our way of life.” The specter of fear has been even more prominent in other forums, including the ominous voiceovers for 2004 campaign commercials. These predict death and destruction, and one features the President’s most frightening line from the State of the Union address in 2002: “It would take one vial, one canister, one crate slipped into this country to bring a day of horror like none we have ever known.”

- 57 Critics of Bush policy have said repeatedly that fear-mongering has become its main defense. Announcements of terror alerts, leaks of foreboding intelligence, and reports on the whereabouts of terrorists all contribute to a rhetorical strategy that Maureen Dowd (2003) characterizes as “scaring up votes.” Sheldon Wolin (2003) characterizes each of these tactics as contributing to the “generalized fear” that Hannah Arendt declared the operative principle of totalitarianism. Anne Norton (2004, pp. 157-159) builds on Wolin’s analysis to argue that Americans have become increasingly trapped by an “unendurable fear.” The formulation is plausible, but a more complex rhetoric may feed the war on terrorism: one apparent in Thucydides’ Pericles’ final efforts to tie Athenians to his imperial policies. The language of fear and danger does intensify in Bush speeches as public support for imperial policies becomes less stable. Like Pericles, however, Bush tempers his expressions of fear and difficulty with a confident emphasis on American strength and a conviction of ultimate victory.
- 58 The trouble is that this shifts the foundation for action from freedom and democracy to power. In the first Pericles address, Forde argues, there is a paradoxical restraint on the most imperialist impulses. It comes from framing the call for Athenian action in terms of the polity’s special character and historic mission. When horizons were bright and the “positive” argument for empire suited Athenian moods, the polity’s special mission could animate Athenians. When difficulties shook their confidence and the “negative” argument fit the times, the special mission of Athens turns into its special power. To communicate the situation’s gravity, Pericles stressed its awful dangers. But to

prevent Athenians from becoming dispirited and resigned to failure, he invoked the polity's power as the *real* basis for its firm prospects for success. Even when successful, this rhetoric unfortunately tended to replace the earlier sense that Athens was a world leader because of its *politics* with the starker suggestion that Athens was a world leader because of its *power*.

- 59 The President's campaign rhetoric in 2004 mimicked the final speech of Pericles in juxtaposing images of weakness and strength. It also followed the Pericles strategy of absorbing opponents and doubters into an amorphous form of collective responsibility. "If I voted for war," said Pericles, "I only did as you did yourselves" (2.64.1). Likewise a leading line in the 2004 stump speech reminded audiences that both Senator Kerry and Senator Edwards had voted for the resolution authorizing force in Iraq (see Balz 2004). Bush campaign spots included clips of Kerry statements stripped of context to suggest that he earlier gave blanket endorsements to the President's war in Iraq.
- 60 The Bush rhetoric included an insistence that Americans have had no choice because the enemy would have attacked in any event "if [we] refused to comply with his demands." It also features a variation on the broad insistence of Pericles that vacillation represents the weakness of those who are unable or unwilling to "stay the course": "the apparent error of my policy lies in the infirmity of your resolution, since the suffering that it entails is being felt by everyone among you, while its advantage is still remote. . . . your mind is too much depressed to persevere in your resolves" (2.61.2).
- 61 The difficulties in keeping these elements side by side surfaced briefly when, on the eve of the Republican National Convention, the President made his infamous statement that "we cannot win the war on terror." His spokespersons were anxious to "walk back" the President's comment, insisting that he misspoke, that he only meant there would be no peace treaty to end the war, that he was merely recognizing the obvious truth that there would be no "VT Day." But the remark revealed one of the problems with this rhetoric that we can see clearly in Thucydides' account of its consequences as well as more dimly, yet unmistakably, in our own recent experience. Mobilizing America demands fear-mongering but requires avoiding any doubt about America's eventual success, because a relentless sense of danger could induce despair. America must be imminently endangered but preeminently strong. There must always be light at the end of the tunnel,

however long. Bush forgot that for an unscripted moment. And yet if the situation is dire and still the outcome, provided that we stay the course, is inevitable, this rhetoric inevitably casts domestic opponents to the reigning imperialist policy as the *real* enemies of the state. We are led to believe that al Qaeda could never defeat us unless the president's domestic opponents get to make policy.

- 62 Thucydides' Pericles is far more aware of the tensions in his rhetoric than President Bush appears to be. The current administration is guilty of ignoring the real costs, both financial and rhetorical, that we are paying to maintain the war on terrorism. Still conflicts over the long-term compatibility of democracy and empire will have consequences, even if they stay submerged or receive less explicit attention in America. The negative argument of Pericles makes the main perplexity unmistakable: "Besides, to recede is no longer possible, if indeed any of you in the alarm of the moment has become enamored of the honesty of such an unambitious part. For what you hold is, to speak somewhat plainly, a tyranny. To take it perhaps was wrong, but to let it go is unsafe" (2.63.2). The logic is chilling. The empire's strength is so great that only (democratic?) unwillingness to use it can defeat the empire, yet disaster is imminent because willingness to use the full powers of empire enrages a wide range of potential opponents, and any sign of weakness, even domestic, political disagreements, will encourage them to strike.
- 63 Thucydides had Pericles admit what we will not: that vigorous exercise of a preemptive, imperial policy continually raises the stakes for abandoning that policy. Most supporters of the policy, like President Bush, insist that there is no tie between our actions in support of the policy and the escalating risks that we run. During a Rose Garden press conference on August 4, 2004, in response to "suggestions" that the administration's actions have been "responsible for fueling the recruitment of al Qaeda," President Bush responded that any such claim is a "fundamental misunderstanding of the war on terror." He concluded by insisting that "the best way to protect the American homeland is to stay on the offense. It is a ridiculous notion to assert that, because the United States is on the offense, more people want to hurt us. We're on the offense because people want to hurt us." Pericles' defense of Athens' imperial policy tacitly admits that the notion is not ridiculous, but Bush has insistently repeated not only that "an aggressive" policy is the only tenable answer to the malice that some harbor but also that this policy does not increase the amount

or the intensity of that malice.

- 64 Some people would want to attack the United States regardless of its policies. Some are, as President Bush claims, “cold-blooded, committed killers” who are “interested in destroying our way of life.” Others have been moved by its policies to oppose the United States. White (1984, pp. 77-78) says that the Athenians are completely unrealistic, even in their most “realist” exchanges, when they refuse to take seriously the Melian insistence that Athenians should assess how their actions affect the views that others have of them. Bush’s dismissive response to much the same suggestion implies that today’s American policies may be dangerously naïve and short-sighted. Forde maintains that the Athenians eventually find themselves trapped in their imperial policy, unable to sustain it or to let it go. Failing even to see the imperial trap for democracies seems a real possibility for us, given the optimism of Bush rhetoric, and it might intensify our dangers.
- 65 We can see these problems emerging in the persistent American confusion in the face of foreign resistance to our plans. We seem at a loss when confronted by others who are not immediately persuaded by the stories we tell ourselves. We should pay careful attention to those places in the *Peloponnesian War* in which Thucydides shows Athenians following the domestic example of Pericles to justify their empire for foreign audiences on grounds of fear. The usual results were unhappy (Forde 1989, pp. 61ff.).
- 66 The first Athenian visit to Sicily during the Peloponnesian War came at the invitation of Camarina, who wanted Athens to oppose Syracuse. But when Athenians came back in 415, they faced an unexpected debate with the Syracusans to win support from Camarina. In this debate, the aptly named Euphemus defended the Athenian return by explaining that “our empire, and of the good right we have to it” must fear domination if it does not “order matters” to provide for its safety (6.82). He said that “fear makes us hold our empire in Hellas, and fear makes us come . . . not to enslave any but rather to prevent any from being enslaved” (6.83). Since Camarinans had warred against Syracuse in the past, Euphemus held that they should not distrust the Athenians, who would renew that war (6.86). He even said that all Athenian dominion based itself entirely on self-defense: “we are rulers in Hellas in order not to be subjects; liberators in Sicily that we may not be harmed by the Sicilians . . . we are compelled to interfere in many things, because we have many things to guard against” (6.87). This amoral vindication spurred Camarinans to fear that

the Athenians would subjugate Sicily. *In spite of* earlier sympathy with the Athenians, once they had heard Euphemus explain the grounds of Athenian action in terms that might be well-suited to marshalling domestic support for a war in Sicily but that could not persuade Sicilians that Athens was not coming to stay, the Camarinans decided to play both sides, offering help to Syracuse as well as Athens (6.88).

- 67 As in the infamous speeches at Melos, the subtle juxtaposition by Pericles of fears about exposure with claims to power lapses into a blunt rhetoric of “destroy with us or be destroyed by us.” Such blunt statements mark the *hubris* that corrupted Athens. It reveals how the early, restrained, seemingly moderate rhetoric by Pericles for democratic empire provided a basis for the more aggressive rhetoric adopted by Athenians later in the war. The rhetorical tactics needed to maintain popular support for imperial policies when war fortunes wane can produce commitments to the principle that “might makes right” in a dangerous world where the same people starts to feel their powers. The dynamics of imperial politics almost inevitably call forth the reasoning of Pericles’ final speech, and this rhetoric easily becomes a justification for expanded commitments and a total reliance on power as the basis for security.

VI

- 68 Two particular lessons from Thucydides’ account of the Athenian attempt to hold both democratic commitments and an imperial policy simultaneously may be worth considering at this point. First, in democracies, domestic politics confound foreign policies. Thus shifts in public moods require shifting rhetorical strategies like those of Pericles or Bush, and these shifts, in turn, stay open to manipulation by outsiders who try to turn internal politics to their own advantage. Second, imperial foreign policies disaggregate private and public goods, forcing people to choose between them. This tends in turn to undermine the sense of political cohesion needed for domestic tranquility as well as foreign perseverance.
- 69 In democracies, domestic politics *always* distort the presentation of foreign policies. Some might think this point too obvious to mention. Others dismiss it or argue that we should be able to rise above it. The Thucydidean account of Athens demonstrates the problems with failing to take it seriously. Forde’s gloss on one particular incident in the *Peloponnesian War* brings the contemporary importance of this consideration into focus. Egesta

was a city in Sicily allied with Athens. In 416 bce, Egesta sent envoys to Athens asking for help against their neighbors and enemies, the Syracusans. The Egestans knew that the Athenians feared a Spartan attack, and insisted that, if Athens did not help by destroying the Egestan enemies, including the powerful city of Syracuse, the Syracusans would win in Sicily then join Sparta in destroying the Athenian empire (6.6.2-3). By saying that Athenian help in Sicily was necessary to keep Athens secure, the Egestans explicitly framed their request in terms of the purpose cited by Athenians for their empire, thus using Athenian rhetoric to pull Athens into another far-away fray. Open processes for policymaking invite any foreign power to *play* the domestic politics of democracies to its own advantage. Claims like Egesta's insistence that its enemies were planning to join the Spartans in a future assault on Athens are notoriously difficult to confirm and nearly impossible to discredit.

- 70 Thucydides illustrates the intractability of this problem by emphasizing two claims that the Egestans made in order to secure Athenian aid. First, they said that great sums of money in the treasuries of Sicilian cities would be Athens' for the taking, so that invading Sicily would pay for itself. Second, they said that the other cities of Sicily were internally divided and thus likely to fall with the lightest of pushes. An Athenian fact-finding group dispatched to discover the truth of these claims returned with a report that was as "attractive as it was untrue" (6.8.1-2). It was misled by clever manipulation and its own hopes of spoils from a Sicilian invasion. There are remarkable similarities to claims by Iraqi expatriates, most infamously Ahmed Chalabi, who persuaded the Bush administration to invade Iraq: Saddam Hussein had both the strength and the plans to launch or sponsor terrorist acts against American interests in the short-term future (not true); his regime was weak, corrupt, and ready to fall (true); Americans would be welcomed as liberators of Iraq (not so true); and revenues from Iraq's oil industry would pay for the invasion and then some, making it revenue-neutral or perhaps even profitable (not at all true).
- 71 The Athenians were not entirely uncritical, but available evidence could neither confirm nor rebut these claims. As a result, the Athenians soon divided into competing parties based on their pre-existing inclinations. Each side interpreted the inadequate evidence based on its own presuppositions. The recent choices about projecting American power have proceeded along similar lines. Those inclined to war focused on evidence that the threat

was great and immediate, and that the war would be easy and cheap. Those less inclined to foreign adventures assumed the opposite. As citizens, none of us *knew* whether Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction or plans to use them. We could not personally verify his ties to al Qaeda or involvement in 9/11 terrorism. In a democracy, even so, we citizens have to make decisions about matters that we cannot evaluate independently. It is neither surprising nor irresponsible that we tend to follow our pre-existing politics as we do so. Cognitive economy leads us to treat inconclusive evidence as supporting our preferred positions.

- 72 Most so-called foreign intelligence, in ancient Athenian and modern America, is created and assessed mainly for its impact on the political balance of power at home. It is pursued less as “intelligence” than as “support” for positions that parties are inclined to accept. As George Soros has argued in looking back on recent decisions in regard to Iraq, “Participants are under the spell of the prevailing bias. Events seem to confirm their beliefs, strengthening [even] their misconceptions” (2003, p. 65). Political considerations generally dictate which stimuli enter domestic politics, whether from friends at home or enemies abroad. We interpret foreign events mainly by their meanings for political parties and political issues at home. As a result, shifting opinions of publics necessitate shifting rhetorics from leaders, and these dominate foreign as well as domestic policies in democracies.
- 73 This is evident in the narrative rhythm of Thucydides’ *History*. It is punctuated by sharp shifts between Athenian heights of power or enthusiasm and Athenian depths of fear, confusion, or self-doubt. Often the changes are abrupt. Only days after the Athenians were “enflamed” into their most “daring” war and voted in overwhelming numbers for an unprecedented armament to invade Sicily, they recalled Alcibiades, the general who was to lead the attack, on the suspicion that he *might* have undemocratic sympathies. Discussing such erratic politics, Forde shows how, over the course of the *History*, the periods between mood fluctuations shrink until the Athenians appear to be in perpetual vibration between a bold disregard for danger and the opinion of others and a near paranoia about the intentions of domestic friends and foreign adversaries alike.
- 74 Attempts to construct and maintain the popular agreement necessary for stable policy pose the greatest threats to preconditions for democracy. To read Thucydides’ *History* as the “tragedy of Athens” warns us that the political requirements of a

preemptive imperialism to protect a democracy against threats from abroad eventually can undermine a democracy from within. Intensified appeals to a unique national character may sustain for a time a sense of the special significance of *our* freedom, to ennoble sacrifices offered for *our* greatness, but they can diminish the ideal that freedom matters for others. Forde's gloss on Thucydides is that the Athenians begin the war committed to an arguably noble goal (preservation of their democracy as the most beautiful form of regime) as well as a practical goal (preservation of their power in the form of an empire to buffer them against Spartan and Persian aggression). As the war proceeds, practical and imperial considerations are confounded, and they overwhelm others until eventually the Athenians vote away their democracy to create an oligarchy claiming it may impose the discipline needed to conduct the war successfully. The imperial policy inverted means and ends. The war urged as necessary to save democracy in Athens ultimately results in Athenian rejection of democracy in order to win the war.

- 75 This sobering account of ancient Athens may not be a perfect match for modern America, yet it yields points of reference for making inferences about how rhetorics for current policies may impact American ideas and institutions. Many commentators say that challenges of the war on terrorism differ from any in American history, but few can say what this might mean for America in the long run. This trajectory, which may be as evident in America today as in Athens in the early stages of the war, is one that we should not dismiss out of hand.
- 76 The rhetoric of empire led Athens from democracy to oligarchy: to government by the so-called "Four Hundred." Forde reads Thucydides to show that oligarchy appears as a desperate measure to secure the polity, which becomes persuaded that the "fickle and untrustworthy" democracy cannot adhere to a consistent policy (1989, p. 141). Oligarchy offers the discipline required for the victory needed to protect the polity. So the installation of the oligarchy appears, at first, as a reasonable and necessary measure. In presenting it in this way, the *History* puts its readers in the position of Athenians who, feeling the pressure of a war going wrong, change their form of government to gain the right leadership for winning the war. Forde even takes seriously the possibility that Thucydides provided an apology for the Four Hundred by presenting its leaders as men of "virtue" whose first goal was to save Athens.

77 Yet Forde also shows how Thucydides revealed the corruption of these talented and well-educated people. They first took power because they believed that their talents, particularly their political realism and their ability to stay the course, were needed to save Athens. In time, their self-interests diverged from requirements of the public good. Given demands that imperial policies placed on Athens, Forde argues, the decision to entrust power to the oligarchy may seem “a great display of public spirit.” That the oligarchy degenerated into self-interested rule by a small minority “is certainly a fact,” however, “and not even a surprising fact” (p. 141).

VII

78 We would do well to view the two speeches of Pericles already discussed plus their American cognates in the context of a third speech for which I know no American parallel. It is arguably the most important speech for understanding Thucydides’ teaching on democratic empire, and it is a major fulcrum for most analysts of the *History* – including Forde, Bruell, Orwin, and Strauss. It is the speech of an otherwise unknown character: Diodotus, son of Eucrates.⁴

79 After the submission of Mytilene, once a leading ally of Athens, the assembly voted to kill all Mytilenians to warn that Athens is not to be trifled with. After a day to reflect on this, Athenians were seized with remorse and met to soften their stance. Diodotus spoke after Cleon, the foremost hawk, “the most violent man at Athens, and at that time by far the most powerful with the People” (3.36.6ff), had excoriated people for even suggesting that they might reconsider the death sentence. To understand Diodotus requires an appreciation of the unique dilemmas that he faced in speaking *after* Cleon.

80 Cleon upbraided Athenians in the harshest terms, insisting that they must hold the line and impose the full penalty on the Mytilenians. Even though justice might require mercy, Cleon argued that Athenians, threatened by the defection of allies in a dangerous world, must follow self-interest. They must send a message that the wrath of Athens would be ruinous to rebels. No one, he reasoned, should doubt the resolve of Athens, and its actions must make that clear to all. Anticipating the rhetoric of some recent Americans, Cleon’s was a “rambling, vehement, and contradictory” insistence that Athens must guard against dangerous “elites” persuading the people to be too easy on the

Mytilenians. “He forcefully argues that all who would speak for repeal of the decree are traitors to the people, and he thus seeks to cow them into silence” (Orwin 1994, p. 144). Thus he put his opponents in a difficult, if not impossible, position: if they spoke against offensive measures, they risked being seen as enemy sympathizers. “If incoherent in theory,” Orwin observes, “this works admirably in practice” by appealing “to the two harshest passions: fear and anger” (p. 194).⁵

- 81 Cleon’s warning relates closely to the stark rhetoric that the Athenians employ in the infamous Melian dialogue. The Athenians were utterly transformed by their own rhetoric into believing that *security only exists in power* and that all increases in power are increases in security. On a foreign policy level, it is analogous to President Bush’s insistence that “the only way to defeat the terrorists is to stay on the offensive, attacking wherever they might be.”⁶
- 82 Cleon’s critique makes the distinction that separates Athens from Melos into a division *within* Athenian democracy. Hence it marks a turning point for the imperial democracy of Athens, as seen by Thucydides, with discussion eventually replaced altogether by civil war as the *modus operandi* of Athenian policymaking. Athenian democracy became a casualty of its own imperial strategy for self-defense. I would like to think that even the most staunch supporters of President Bush’s interventionist policies are at least a little dismayed by feeling forced to denounce American policy opponents as “in league with the terrorists,” but this has become a common usage nevertheless.
- 83 Some of the harshest instances of such framing measures have succeeded. Saxby Chambliss unseated U.S. Senator Max Cleland with a campaign that pictured Cleland with Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein while associating Cleland with opposition to the homeland-security bill that he has, in truth, helped author. Once Kerry had clinched his presidential nomination, Bush launched a series of spots with battlefield images and ominous voices to suggest that Kerry’s votes were depriving U.S. troops of needed weapons. These ads cast dissent as treason and undermined the possibility for any constructive reconsideration of policies. Thucydides showed that such rhetoric comes from nearly endless, preemptive, imperial wars. Every time we blur the lines between fellow citizens and foreign enemies, we should reflect on Forde’s argument that a key theme of Thucydides is the way in which preemptive imperialism dissolved the bonds that sustained a

shared democracy in Athens.

- 84 Courtesy of Cleon, any counsel of restraint that Diodotus might have wanted to offer, had already been cast as treason. This made all the more remarkable his ability to restrain the passions of Athenians. He appealed openly and effectively to qualities that had been the pride of Athenians: their strength, realism, and willingness to endure risks to advance their interests. Facing the possibility that any focus on justice had been foreclosed by Cleon, with any solicitude for the Mytilenians now treated as treason, Diodotus prudently announced that he would set aside all claims of justice to speak only about Athenian interests.
- 85 Diodotus began with the sobering claim that “Plain good advice has thus come to be no less suspected than bad; and the advocate of the most monstrous measures is not more obliged to use deceit to gain the people than the best counselor is to be in order to be believed” (3.43.2). As the plain provider of good advice, he engaged the angry passions incited by Cleon by appealing to them. He rejected the relevance of justice, insisting that the only true measure of policy must be Athenian self-interest. He held that the Athenians should show no scruple about using force to advance their interests, but he added that they should avoid offensive actions that undermine Athenian security (3.46). Orwin claims that “Diodotus’ true difference with Cleon is not over whether punishment deters, but over how reliably it does so and how to manage it so as to enhance its reliability” (1994, pp. 148-150).
- 86 Among major Athenian speakers in the *History*, only Diodotus reconciled all the ideas and passions that drove the Athenians. For the moment, at least, he synthesized the strength of Athens with its decency or gentleness. He did so by conceding that the apparent “candor” and harshness of his opponent is attractive and offers some rhetorical advantage in the affairs of empire when “trust” is essential to effective guidance in foreign affairs. Thus he accepted, as Orwin puts it, “the permanent necessity of what we call ‘image politics’” (p. 162).
- 87 Diodotus succeeded in identifying his view with that of ordinary Athenians. By this route, he persuaded them to adopt, however briefly, a perspective apart from patriotism. He enabled them to see the position they shared with adversaries, even as he appears to accept the most strident patriotism: the ruthless concern for nothing beyond the polity’s self-interest. He showed Athens why treating enemies harshly would make them more, not less, likely to

carry rebellions to the worst possible conclusion: forcing Athens to absorb “the expense of a siege” only to “receive a ruined city from which we can no longer draw the revenue which forms our real strength against the enemy” (3.46.3).

- 88 Orwin explains that the method of Diodotus is explicitly amoral but still grounds itself in “the still, small voice of justice” (1994, p. 154). Advising Athenians on their interests, Diodotus reminded them that the Mytilenians (especially the ones who did not begin the rebellion against Athens but joined in trying to save their city once Athens placed it under siege) were essentially like the Athenians. “Diodotus’ speech thus cures us alike of our indignation at others who disregard our good in favor of theirs and of our qualm at preferring our good to theirs” (p. 157), while showing how the others are like us (pp. 153-154). Thus Diodotus forged an elegant, if fragile, consensus for justice. He constructed this public commitment under the guise of self-interest to undermine the dangerous effects of jingoistic rhetoric in the Funeral Oration, to sate fears aroused by the darker, final speech of Pericles, and to sidestep the trap imposed by Cleon.
- 89 This example might be cited to suggest that contemporary anti-war activists fail to persuade most Americans in part because they are not as clever as Diodotus. A rhetoric that begins by denouncing the injustice of American policy is doomed to failure. It misses how Americans think the war in Iraq is about realism: “We must attack to be secure.” Critics must take the power of that widely credited claim into account. They must take seriously the pervasive belief that “we have to attack them there before they attack us here.” Americans who regard themselves as realists dismiss anti-war protesters as soft-headed moralists who fail to face hard realities. These realists are easily persuaded when President Bush shrugs off criticisms by saying that “you can’t win a war if you don’t believe in fighting.” Diodotus’s speech can be cited as evidence that effective criticisms must refute the realist arguments on their own grounds: by showing how “we are *not* safer” as a result of preemptive war.
- 90 Lest we be too tempted, however, by Diodotus’s rhetoric of realism, though, we must recognize how Diodotus reinforces Cleon’s harsh reasoning. By operating within the limits of Cleon’s demagogic insistence that those who speak against his policies are unpatriotic and untrustworthy, Diodotus cures his listeners of their “indignation at others who disregard our good in favor of theirs.” But Diodotus equally absolves his listeners of any “qualms

at preferring our good to theirs” (p. 157). By showing how Mytileneans are like Athenians in pursuing their own interests, Diodotus persuaded the Athenians that they should not hate Mytileneans for resisting Athens and countered Cleon’s suggestion that anybody who believed Mytileneans to wish no ill for Athens must be naïve and unpatriotic. Yet this approach licensed Athenians to indulge their most self-interested impulses. The irony is that Diodotus averted one potential Melos only to endorse rhetoric that led straight to more. Once the Athenians decided their interests would be truly served by killing Melians, Diodotus’s arguments offered no obstacle.

- 91 The Diodotus case is complicated. Successful advocacy against any counter-productive aggression in defense of a democracy requires a tone of realism, but it also demands an effective appeal to sentiments of justice, however submerged they might seem in the popular conscience. For us, this requires some echo for the familiar charge that current opposition to the U.S. springs from unjust impulses or ingratitude by foreigners who refuse to cooperate with America. We can see this in letters to the editor that ask, “Have the protesters forgotten September 11?” We can hear it in popular criticism of the ingratitude shown by the French, whose disdain for American policy in Iraq is taken to show that they have forgotten their rescue by Americans in World War II. Diodotus echoed popular equivalents that animated the Athenians. Like Diodotus, we need a rhetoric that can dignify such sentiments, even ground itself in them, while showing them to be “compatible with, and to some extent conducive to, a certain gentleness” (Bruell 1974a, p. 16).
- 92 Arguments for restraint must not offend our pride in our realism and resolution. Still we must recognize that such rhetoric stays problematic because it reinforces principles that can have disastrous consequences when enacted by people who pride themselves on being hard. Rhetorics of self-interested realism are difficult even for democracies to stop short of imperial domination.

VIII

- 93 There are many differences between ourselves and ancient Athenians. I have made no attempt to consider how American appeals to “natural rights” might temper the harsher qualities that empire breeds. Given that we are the first nation of imperial might that is explicitly (or ostensibly) devoted to a natural rights

philosophy, we might think that our future history will provide the first accurate data on that question. In September of 2004, President Bush added to his stump speech the image that America is on a “march of freedom.” He regularly declares that “America is safest when freedom is on the march,” and he proclaims as an applause line that “Freedom is on the march in Iraq and Afghanistan.” It is safe to say that this “march of freedom” limits devotion to “natural rights.” Advocates of natural or human rights have criticized the constitutionality and advisability of the Patriot Act, but the Bush administration seems to find liberty less in respecting rights at home than in assertive action abroad to ensure security – freedom itself is understood as freedom from threats external and internal, and the suppression of any forces that may undermine security, whether they are domestic or foreign, is justified as the prerequisite of “freedom.” The excusing of the role that high-ranking officials played in Abu Ghraib and our other military detention centers implies a low priority for natural or human rights, at least for those who may be construed as enemies of American freedom, and there is little respect of any kind apparent in the fact that the United States neither counts nor apologizes for the casualties of non-American civilians in Iraq or Afghanistan.

- 94 That said, the contrapuntal dance between fear and power, or danger and destiny, keeps us in the rhetorical realm of Thucydides. Straussian commentaries see the *History* as favoring the speech of Diodotus: His was the counsel that would serve Athenians best if only they would follow it with his characteristic “gentleness.” Yet Forde’s account of Thucydides’ portrait of Athens’ transformation by imperial war suggests that the Diodotus counsel declined in success as the policies of democratic imperialism advanced. Following an imperial strategy can render a democracy less capable of heeding the best advice, even when it comes cleverly packaged by a brilliant rhetorician who appears out of nowhere as a “gift of god.” We must hope to hear such speakers, and particularly the best, if hidden, elements of their speeches. Perhaps they can tell us how to address our legitimate fears while tempering our enormous powers. Perhaps we can heed their appeals to show justice and gentleness toward others.
- 95 I have no memory of what I thought of all of this, *if* I thought of any of this, when I was reading Thucydides and Forde’s commentary on him back in the winter of 1989-1990 as a twenty-one year old college senior. I wonder why I wasn’t more impressed by parallels between the rhetorical dynamics of American politics

then and Forde's analysis of Thucydides' Athens. Perhaps, I, like so many others, was fascinated and distracted by the brilliant twilight of the Cold War that the Marshall-Halle readings of Thucydides' stories had become too familiar, thus allowing me to slide all too easily into seeing everything through well-prepared categories and prejudices. Perhaps, the Soviet threat, more obviously analogous to Sparta as a potent adversary who might truly defeat us, placed me more firmly into the Athenian position, making me (as the Athenians were) more "in the moment," more afraid of losing the impending battles and less likely to think about the long-term impacts of our rhetoric on our politics.

- 96 But when I returned to Forde's commentary in 2003, when the familiar categories of my college days had been rendered largely moot and when new challenges to my ways of thinking were appearing daily, I was reminded that to read Thucydides can be to question our assumptions. He wrote a cautionary tale about a democratic people, devoted to liberty, who became the only ones in the world able to "go where they please, without . . . any other nation on earth being able to stop them" (2.62.2). He showed how the fear and envy of others but especially their own ambition and aggression undid their democracy and their empire. Thucydides insisted that anything human "will at some time or other and in much the same ways, repeat itself." It will not *always* repeat itself, nor will it repeat itself in *all* the same ways. What is constant, he said, is human nature; but within that constraint, he held that many variations on human themes may occur.
- 97 It is vain to *trust* that we are somehow better human beings than those Thucydides depicts in the Athenian assembly. But Thucydides can help us learn from them. From the *History*, we can learn about the short-sighted decisions that appear inevitable to those held hostage by the categories that they use to justify their own imperial policies. We can learn about losing the individual liberty and self-actualization that have provided for our self-confident action in the world. We can learn about the political pitfalls that lurk in adopting a partial and self-serving realism as the idiom of our political rhetoric and the justification for our political actions. Our judgment, the intellectual capacity most cultivated by education in the liberal arts, can be educated by the Athens of Thucydides. As political theorists we must put our training and our traditions to work in crafting a rhetoric that can undo the logic that now leads America from democracy to empire and, all too possibly, disaster.

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I have studied many of President Bush's speeches on the "war on terror" and particularly his justifications for and exhortations on behalf of the Iraq War. For purposes of this article, I have limited myself to speeches delivered before the November 2004 election. Speeches that are directly alluded to in this essay include two State of the Union Addresses (2002 and 2003); the speech to the National Endowment of Democracy (November 2003); remarks at the presidential press conference (April, 2004); and recent speeches from the foreign policy series of summer 2004 including remarks at the Army War College (May, 2004), Commencement Ceremonies for the U.S. Air Force Academy (June, 2004), and Northern Michigan University (July, 2004).

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Notes

¹ When I presented an earlier form of this analysis, a scholar of international relations suggested that I could shrink the essay by citing the Defense Department's strategic planning documents rather than individual speeches by President George W. Bush. True, but this would defeat my purpose. In Thucydides, we see how a public debate about the necessity of empire can occur in a more or less democratic environment. I want us to see that debate as a factor contributing to our own situation, but I also want us to assess it as a possible basis for understanding our situation. If the political speeches most heard by Americans are among our most common sources of ideas about what we are doing in foreign affairs, the challenge is to see how they (rather than the government plans circulated among bureaucrats) explain American foreign policy. Thus to compare Thucydides speeches for Athenians with Bush speeches to Americans enables us to see ourselves in the distant mirror of old stories "less propaganda than the setting of previous actions in a context that helped the collectivity better appreciate what it was doing to itself and to others" (Euben 1990, p. 52).

² Bush repeated this particular call to "change the world" several times in his press conference on April 14, 2004. Some say that post-invasion troubles in Iraq have chastened policy talk of imperialism, but the President's speech on July 13, 2004 at Northern Michigan University and his broad appeal to the "march of freedom" in his 2005 Inaugural show that he still argues for "remaking the world." Rhetorical shifts from broad, positive, and programmatic accounts of American intentions to more limited, negative, and defensive accounts seem to be spurred by shifts in domestic politics, not changes of heart.

³ On whether Athenian imperialism was ideological, see Orwin's discussion (1994, p. 149, especially note 10) of Marc Cogan's *The Human Thing: The Speeches and Principles of Thucydides' History* (1981). Like Orwin, I think that it anachronistic to find ideological motives in the modern sense in the Athenian position. Furthermore Forde's argument calls into question the tenability of any ideological empire, so there also is room to question whether American motives are ideological.

4 On the importance of the names of father (“he who is properly strong”) and son (“gift of Zeus”), see Corsi (1974) and Bruell (1974b).

5 Mendelsohn (2004) does a masterful job of showing how both Kagan and Davis praise the “wisdom” of Cleon’s speeches while failing to give proper weight to the criticisms that Thucydides made of Cleon’s character and reasoning. On the wisdom of Diodotus and his connection to Thucydides, see Forde (1989, pp. 40ff), Bruell (1974a, pp.16-17), and Orwin (1994, chapter 7).

6 This statement, offered in the second presidential debate on October 9, 2004, echoes similar sentences repeated as part of the President’s standard stump speech during the fall of 2004.