

THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR, 460-404 BCE

Contents of brackets [] suggest cases of "deja vu all over again."

I. THUCYDIDES: WHAT A GUY!

Many later readers across many centuries felt that Thucydides' Peloponnesian War evoked their own times and tragedies. Are they right? Does this book identify general laws of motion in warfare that govern events across time and circumstance?

Yet everyone sees a different central meaning in this book. Some see an anti-democratic Thucydides warning that publics are folly-prone and popular rule is misrule. Some see a ruthless celebration of the inexorable cruelties of international politics and the use of force. Some see an anti-war book, warning that force often produces unforeseen or unwanted results, hence force should be a last resort. Who is right?

II. PHASES OF THE WAR

- A. 480 BCE: Greece vs. Persia
 - B. 460-445 BCE: Athens vs. Sparta Round #1
 - C. 431-421 BCE: " " Round #2--the "Archidamean War"
 - D. 415-404 BCE: " " Round #3
- Rounds #2 and #3 are the focus of Thucydides' book.

III. MILITARY POWER: ITS CHARACTER AND DISTRIBUTION

- A. Athens and Sparta were the two strongest powers in Greece, each leading a large alliance/empire.
- B. Athenian power was growing relative to Spartan power.
- C. Athens had a MAD-like military strategy. If Sparta attacked it by land Athens would leave its farmland undefended, instead withdrawing its population within Athens' strong walls while sending its navy to torch Spartan coastal cities.

IV. SPARTAN AND ATHENIAN SOCIETY

- A. **Sparta**: an oligarchic slave state--an oppressive "human volcano." A small Spartan population ruled a large slave population. The Spartans themselves were ruled by a Spartan oligarchy.
- B. **Athens**: a quasi-democracy. Half its subjects were disenfranchised slaves, and women could not vote, but all male citizens could vote. Public questions were decided at popular assemblies.

V. THE SECURITY DILEMMA IN ANCIENT GREECE

- A. **The Spartan empire** feared that its large slave population would help an invader, hence it feared it could easily be conquered if an enemy force penetrated its territory. [Like Austria 1914 and like Hitler's 1941 view of the USSR.]
 - B. **The Athenian empire** depended on its fleet, which required tribute from "allies" (really imperial vassals). So it had to keep its vassals in line and it did so by harsh measures. [Like the world imagined by mercantilists in 1755--empire was a highly cumulative resource.]
- Hence both states believed they were vulnerable to conquest and had to maintain empires for their own safety.

VI. CHRONOLOGY

- A. The Greco-Persian War: Athens acquired an empire as a side-effect of war. [Like the rise of the USSR 1945.]
- B. Round #1: the Sparta-Athens war of 460-445--of which we know little. Thucydides has a sketchy account on pp. 87-103.
- C. Round #2 beginnings:
 - 1. The dispute at Epidamnus, 433 BCE. Epidamnus was a tiny colony of Corcyra, which in turn was a colony of Corinth. Corcyra was now hostile to its progenitor Corinth, and was neutral in the Athens-

Sparta conflict. Corinth was a major Spartan ally.

A civil war erupted in Epidamnus. The losers appealed for aid to Corcyra. It refused aid. The losers then appealed to Corinth.

Corinth agreed and sent settlers to seize Epidamnus, which Corinth saw as a lost possession.

Corcyra objected to Corinth taking a Corcyran colony and asked Athens to help defend it against Corinth. Athens agreed because it feared that Corinth, a major naval power, might conquer Corcyra's substantial fleet and thereby tip the naval balance of power against Athens. Hence Athens offered Corcyra a defensive alliance.

However, offensive and defensive behavior were hard to distinguish at sea. This allowed Corinth to later claim (to Sparta) that Athens had broken the 30-year truce, which had ended the war of 460-445 BCE, by acting offensively. Thus this local dispute was the first trigger to a vast war. [Sarajevo]

2. The dispute at Potidaea, 432 BCE. Athens, fearing war with Corinth and Sparta, tightened control over its colony Potidaea by ordering Potidaea to tear down its city walls and hand over hostages. Potidaea rebelled instead. Corinth--fearing the longterm growth of Athenian power and anxious to contain it--sent help to Potidaea--thereby violating the 30-year truce of 445. [Athens toward Potidaea = G.W. Bush to others: "You are with us or with the terrorists."]

D. Sparta's decision for war, 431 BCE.

1. Sparta noted the rise of Athenian power and feared that a stronger Athens could destroy Sparta. [Germany feared rising Russia, 1914]
2. Corinth lied to Sparta--"Athens is breaking the 30 years truce! They are starting a war!"--and Athens failed to reply to these lies. [Dinwiddie, Shirley and Duquesne, 1754]
3. Sparta's pretexts for war--priests, goddesses, curses. Every reason for war was trotted out except the real one: Sparta's fear of Athens' rising power. [Vietnam, Gulf of Tonkin 1964]

E. Pericles died and the violent Cleon and Alcibiades rose to power in Athens. Archidamus died and Brasidas rose to power in Sparta. [The rise of the Ludendorff/Hindenburg ultra-hawkish "silent dictatorship" in Germany, 1914-1918.]

F. The growth and later contraction of Athenian war aims.

1. Athens won a big victory at Sphacteria but then refused to settle on its original peace terms [Sebastopol 1855] until it was sobered up by the next item ...
2. Athens suffers defeats at Delium and Amphipolis. These defeats finally convinced Athens to make a truce--the Peace of Nicias, 421-415 BCE.

G. Mytilene, an Athenian colony, saw Athens' harsh treatment of other colonies and decided to revolt before the same fate befell it. But Athens believed the revolt had "no reason" and was unprovoked. Hence Athens saw need to further scare its colonies with even harsher treatment. Athens considered killing all Mytilenians but relented.

H. Round #3 beginnings: the truce broke down.

I. Athens destroyed Melos, a rebellious Athenian colony. Athens killed all military-age Melian men and sent the Melian women and children into slavery.

Compare the Mytilene Debate and the Melian Dialogue: the latter was nastier. Ethical concerns disappeared from the discussion. Regarding justice, the Athenians simply declared that "the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept." (Thucydides, p. 402)

(Did Thucydides' think ethics mattered? Yes. "Those who really deserve praise are the people who, while human enough to enjoy power, nevertheless pay more attention to justice than they are compelled to do by their situation." Thucydides, p. 80.)

J. The Athenian expedition to Syracuse [Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare campaign, 1917]

1. Athenians did little research before launching the expedition. They were ignorant of basic facts such as Sicily's size and

- population.
2. Athens' aims were vast; Syracuse's aims soon became vast [Britain and France in 1755, US in 1941, US and China in 1950.]
 3. Athens expected easy victory, believing the expedition was "an absolutely safe thing." This grew from:
 - a. Athenian ignorance of Syracuse's power.
 - b. False expectation that others--Sparta and the Sicilian states-- would bandwagon with Athens, wouldn't balance against it. [Hitler and the Axis Alliance.]
 - c. False expectations of help from Egesta (see below).
 4. Athens expected a fun, cheap war. [1914.] Alcibiades told Athenians:
 - a. The Expedition was an opportunity for "gaining new experience" and to avert the "ruin" that comes with being "idle."
 - b. If things went poorly the Athenian forces could simply "come back again."
 5. Athenian strategy was disintegrated. Athenians said Syracuse was so strong it was a serious threat, and so weak it could be easily conquered.
 6. Egestaeans blue smoke and mirrors--Egesta manipulated Athenian perceptions. Egesta told Athens:
 - a. "Beware the transnational Dorian conspiracy against Athens! Syracuse, being Dorian, is part of it!"
 - b. "If you fight Syracuse others in Sicily will join your side!"
 - c. "We Egesteans have huge financial resources and can help a lot!"
 7. When the Expedition later faced disaster Nicias (the commander) feared making a necessary and prudent peace because he feared being pilloried for it by Athens' hawkish public. So he fought on to ruin.
- K. Catastrophe for Athens. The Syracusan expedition was destroyed in 413 BCE. But Athens survived anyway for nine more years (413-404 BCE)! [Germany 1914-1918.]

VII. POSSIBLE CAUSES OF THE WAR, ITS ESCALATION AND CONTINUATION

- A. Windows:
 1. Preventive war by Sparta, 431 BCE: a window of vulnerability.
 2. Preventive escalation by Sparta, 414 BCE: a window of opportunity.
- B. Offense and Defense:
 1. Security was a major goal on all sides:
 - a. Athens' goal: to maintain the political division of maritime Greece, since a unity of non-Athenian maritime Greece could threaten Athens.
 - b. Sparta's goal: to ease its vulnerability to invaders that arose from its oppressive social structure.
 - c. Sparta's and Corinth's goal: to avert the threat posed by rising Athenian power.
 2. "Chain gang" dynamics in the Spartan and Athenian alliances:
 - a. Corinth could drag Sparta to war because Sparta feared that otherwise Corinth might defect; causing Megara to defect; causing Sparta's downfall.
 - b. Athens was dragged into war by Corcyra for similar reasons. [Serbia and Austria dragged Europe to war in 1914]
 3. Offensive and defensive conduct proved to be indistinguishable. [1914]
 4. Offense was believed easy militarily. Campaign after campaign--by Thebes, Corinth, Sparta, and Athens--was launched amid assurances that "it's a sure thing."
 5. Bandwagon beliefs prevailed on both sides.
- C. Both sides fought to control resources believed cumulative, and to maintain credibility.
- D. Conflict spirals:
 1. Sparta opted for war in 431 partly because it falsely thought Athens had broken the 30 year truce. A clear case of "exaggerate the hostility of others' conduct."

2. Athens vs. Potidaea: Potidaea revolted in response to Athens' efforts to tighten control. These efforts triggered more rebellion, not less.
3. Athens vs. Mytilene: Athens provoked the Mytilene revolt but failed to see this, instead thinking the revolt was unprovoked. Hence it inferred that even harsher policies toward its colonies were called for.
4. Athens vs. Syracuse: Athens exaggerated Syracusan hostility by imagining that Syracuse was part of a false Dorian hostile conspiracy; then it made Syracuse hostile by attacking it.
- E. Lack of clear strategy ---> Forgetting of original aims and purposes in Athens. For example, Athens continued the Syracusan expedition even after the important premises that underlay it (e.g., that Sparta wouldn't enter the fray on Syracuse's side) were disproven.
- F. Poor evaluation of policy ideas, especially in wartime. Thucydides is dismayed by the quality of public discourse. See, for example, above on Athenian mis-estimates of Syracuse's power and below on evaluators being shouted down in wartime and on the destructive actions that Nicias took because he feared the Athenian mob.
- G. Pericles' hubris: "I can handle everything--I needn't train successors." [Like Bismarck?]
- H. Other war causes from this course found in the Peloponnesian war:
 1. False optimism about war outcomes.
 2. Cheap war, fun war expectations.
 3. Chauvinist mythmaking. Athenians indulged in this.
 4. Manipulation by Allies: Corinth manipulated Sparta; Eggesta manipulated Athens.
- I. War ----> War
 1. Reciprocal growth of war aims.
 2. Rise of superhawks in wartime.
 3. The tyranny of sunk costs. Alcibiades: "After having sailed out in such forces [the Athenians] ought not to disgrace themselves by going home with nothing to show for it." (Thuc. p. 440.)
 4. Fear that negotiation will be taken as a sign of weakness. Pericles warned: "Do not send embassies to Sparta: do not give the impression that you are bowed down under your present sufferings!" (Thuc. pp. 162-163.)
 5. McCarthyism: evaluators were shouted down or worse. See Thucydides, pp. 242-243. During the war Greeks came to believe that "anyone who held violent opinions could always be trusted, and anyone who objected to them became suspect." And "fanatical enthusiasm was the mark of a real man." And "to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward; any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character; ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action." Not a climate conducive to calm evaluation of options.
 6. Growing barbarism on both sides as the war proceeds.

VIII. MORAL OF THE STORY: NEVER USE FORCE?

Consider first history's many successful uses of force: the Spanish/French/British/U.S. "Indian Wars" against native Americans--a very cruel but successful land grab; the U.S. war against Mexico, 1846-1848--a most profitable escapade; the U.S. wars on Germany and Japan in World War II; Bismarck's wars of German unification; the 1899 U.S. invasion of Panama; and the British war to recover the Falklands from Argentina, 1982. Some might also list the U.S. Persian Gulf war, 1991; Israel's 1948 and 1967 wars against the Arabs; and the Arabs' 1973 war against Israel. In these cases war aims were achieved without falling into a quagmire. The question is: how can you tell which is which?

Were the recent U.S. wars with Afghanistan (2001-) and Iraq (2003-) a good or a bad use of force?

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