

THUCYDIDES AND THE TEACHING OF STRATEGY

A Review Essay by

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The Landmark Thucydides:
A Comprehensive Guide to the
Peloponnesian War

Edited by Robert B. Strassler

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Few senior government officials leave lasting legacies. Admiral Stansfield Turner, who was Jimmy Carter's director of central intelligence, is a notable exception. But he left his imprint not so much on CIA as on the Naval War College where some still speak of the "Turner revolution." Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, then chief of naval operations, sent Turner to Newport to reform the curriculum in the wake of the Vietnam War. Among the lessons of that unfortunate conflict was the need to fight smarter, and Zumwalt wanted Newport to help the Navy reach this objective.

Although the syllabus that Turner introduced at the Naval War College has been continually refined and modified by many distinguished faculty members over the years, his essential creation and contribution endures. In some ways, a memoir of his experience as the president of the Naval War College would make even more fascinating reading than his published reflections on his years at Langley, since he achieved at Newport what few have managed to accomplish in an otherwise rigid bureaucracy: he re-fashioned an entrenched institution. The story would make an ideal case study for the Kennedy School of Government and the plethora of institutions that have sprung up to teach newly independent states of the former Warsaw Pact how to reform their bureaucracies.

At the heart of the Turner revolution lay rigor, structure, and vision. Like Gaul, the Naval War College curriculum is divided into three parts. Senior officers

and civilians from DOD and other agencies of government are exposed to national security decisionmaking, policy and strategy, and military operations. Turner enormously increased the academic requirements. The 15-week phase devoted to the study of policy and strategy, for example, still inflicts reading loads in excess of six hundred pages per week, and students must write multiple essays that are graded.

Upon crossing the threshold of the Strategy Department, every student receives a copy of *The Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides, a work of intellectually brilliant unfamiliarity. Reactions to this bizarre beginning are varied. Most students are initially bemused, some amused. A Marine colonel related to his classmates and the faculty that he had found the long-lost brother of Thucydides, "Thucydidooh." An Air Force officer concluded an essay by observing that the Athenians might have changed the course of the Western world had they managed to get one F-16. A young infantryman, after informing a professor that his presentation on Thucydides was the best lecture that he had ever heard on any subject, then added with a Cheshire cat grin, "Unfortunately, it didn't teach me squat about how to take that hill." In the "Gaieties," an end-of-term event when students roast the college and their favorite (or least favorite) faculty members, one naval officer did a strikingly faithful imitation of Robin Williams in *Good Morning, Vietnam*. In a mock sports report during his routine he announced that, while there had been no action in the Delian League, "in the Peloponnesian League, Argos defeated Tegea, 7-4; Sparta downed Mantinea, 14-9." There was even a period when students were seen wearing tee-shirts emblazoned with "Cleon Lives."

More to the point, when students finally got the chance to give their ultimate verdicts on the quality of the curriculum, only a few suggested that this ancient case study be replaced with one more modern or "relevant." In part, this was because students who had come home from Vietnam and endured searing rejection felt an affinity with the frustrated blame culture that Thucydides had vividly depicted. Athens had struggled with a crisis of values during an unexpectedly protracted war which, for all its great power as a city-state, it could not successfully conclude. Moreover, the students also yielded to the modernity of Thucydides' brilliant analyses. Events that Herodotus, his predecessor in Greek

history, might have explained with references to the will of the gods, local legend, and rumor, or to the overweening ambition of certain powerful leaders, Thucydides treated in terms indistinguishable from those of the best modern historians.

This constancy in intellectual method derives from an experiment with reason. The finest Greek thinkers came to believe, for complex reasons, that under the apparent chaos of daily life lay a natural order; that this order conformed to immutable principles; and that human beings could understand these principles by observation and contemplation. Whereas the Presocratic philosophers (such as Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes) first applied these assumptions to phenomena in the physical world, the Sophists used them in reflecting on the human condition, and we encounter them above all in Thucydides' great historical work, *The Peloponnesian War*.

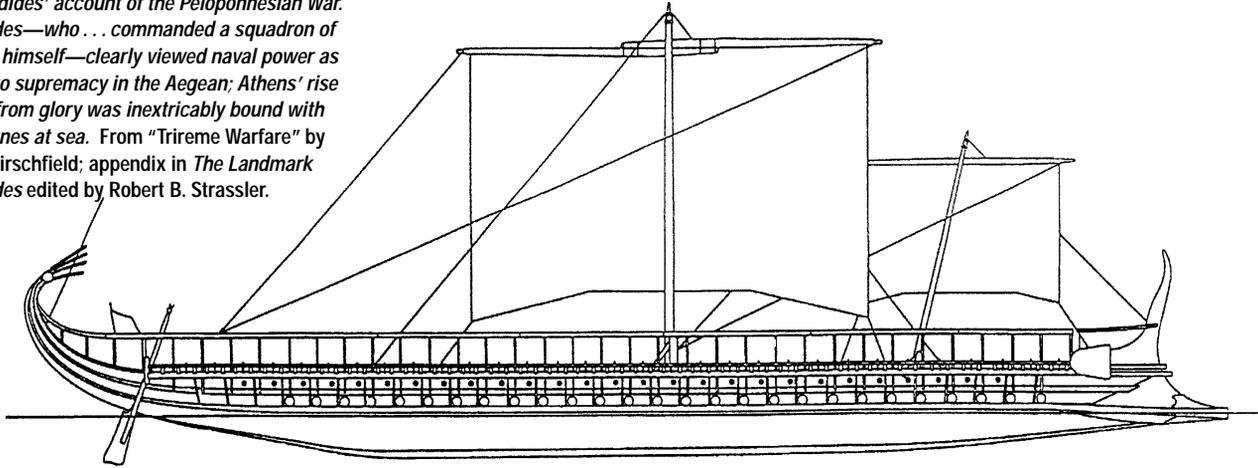
Thucydides claims he is writing "a possession for all time," in that later ages would be able to learn from it because of the constancy of human nature as well as the broad consistency of social and political behavior that constancy yields. That is his reason for studying history. As he says later with regard to the revolution at Corcyra,

The sufferings which revolution entailed upon the cities were many and terrible, such as have occurred and always will occur as long as the nature of mankind remains the same; though in a severer or milder form, and varying in their symptoms, according to the variety of the particular cases.

Accordingly, in the speeches of the Athenian Pericles and the Spartan King Archidamus as their two coalitions contemplate making war against each other, we discover as good an example of net assessment as is found anywhere. We read a startlingly insightful exploration by Thucydides contrasting the need to maintain a reputation for decency, on the one hand, with the requirement in war to instill fear of unrelenting vindictiveness, on the other, as Cleon and Diodotus argue over the fate of the faithless Mytilenians. Then again, it is hard to contemplate a more straightforward, graphic description of *realpolitik* in Western literature than the Melian dialogue. Moreover, events leading to the battle between the Athenian and Sicilian fleets in Syracuse's harbor become in the hands of Thucydides a dramatic and poignant illustration of how clear strategic decision-making can founder on the shoals of operational incompetence. Thucydides

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*Ships, sea battles, and naval policy are key features in Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides—who . . . commanded a squadron of triremes himself—clearly viewed naval power as the key to supremacy in the Aegean; Athens' rise and fall from glory was inextricably bound with her fortunes at sea. From "Trireme Warfare" by Nicolle Hirschfield; appendix in *The Landmark Thucydides* edited by Robert B. Strassler.*



discusses the difficulties of land and sea powers in bringing their main forces to bear on each other, the dubious compatibility of democracy and domination, the effect of democratic process on defense planning and execution, the utility of economic and indirect warfare, and the uses and limitations of fifth column movements. All form the intellectual warp and woof of this splendid work, written almost two and a half millennia ago with an acuity and depth of insight which have rarely been matched and never surpassed.

Although Thucydides consciously tried to write a possession for all time—which explains in part why his work remains intelligible today—he could not

avoid taking some knowledge for granted lest he bore his contemporary readers to tears by telling them *ad nauseam* what they already knew. Serious students of Greek history, with access to other sources and modern analyses, can fill in the gaps created by time. Others who wish to understand Thucydides without taking history courses—be they students of strategy or modern political science—will find help in a new edition of this difficult but rewarding work, *The Landmark Thucydides*, edited by Robert B. Strassler.

In this new edition readers will find not only the most accurate (albeit not necessarily the most readable) translation of

Thucydides, which has been slightly updated by Strassler, but a number of highly readable appendices by some of the foremost scholars in the field as well. The essays cover Athens' government and empire, idiosyncratic domestic institutions in Sparta and the nature of its alliance, land and sea warfare, ancient Greek dialects, religious festivals, monetary systems, and Greek calendars. These appendices are masterpieces of concision and clarity. Together with an insightful and elegant introduction by Victor Davis Hanson, Thucydides is rendered much more intelligible and enjoyable for nonspecialists. What is more, Strassler has included the most useful collection of maps—141 in all—ever assembled in any edition of Thucydides. These allow readers to walk unknown terrain in ancient Greece and become familiar with the names and nature of its battlefields. Finally, the volume includes a complete, user-friendly index that will serve not only students but scholars who want to locate passages quickly when they remember only the subject. Everything that could possibly be done to help readers understand and enjoy *The Peloponnesian War* has been done.

In sum, it is difficult to imagine an edition that could do more to make this great classic by Thucydides accessible to students, amateurs and, not least importantly, officers at senior colleges interested in the essence of strategy. The only remaining service to be performed for the benefit of would-be readers must come from the publisher—The Free Press—which, after a decent interval, should bring out *The Landmark Thucydides* in an affordable paperback. **JFO**

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