

Lessons of the Peloponnesian War

Although the current “war on terror” and the Peloponnesian War in ancient Greece are separated by over 2,400 years, their similarities are striking, instructive, and cautionary.

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Delay not, fellow-allies, but convinced of the necessity of the crisis, and the wisdom of this counsel, vote for the war, undeterred by its immediate terrors, but looking beyond to the lasting peace by which it will be succeeded. Out of war peace gains fresh stability.

— Speech delivered by the Corinthians pleading with the Spartans to renew the war with Athens, as quoted by Thucydides in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*

A free people embroiled in an increasingly unpopular war, a mounting death toll, unilateral pursuit of the “spreading of democracy,” unsuccessful economic sanctions followed by military intervention and “liberation,” politicians promising the eventual establishment of lasting peace through a policy of preemptive strikes, official pronouncements that the lives lost in “defense of freedom” will not be in vain, and false reassurance of the necessity of preventive war. Does this describe America of 2005 and the “war on terror?” Yes, but it also describes Athens of 421 B.C. and the Peloponnesian War. The similarities between these two conflicts are striking and should be cautionary.

Those two wars, separated by a gulf of nearly two and a half millennia, have much in common. As the legatees of a system of ordered liberty greatly influenced by ancient Athens, we can learn a great deal from the record of the Peloponnesian War preserved by the first great historian, Thucydides of Athens, who lived during the time of the war.

History’s Warning Voice

It is from Thucydides that we get our primary record of the world-altering war between Athens (as leader of the confed-



eracy known as the Delian League) and its superpower rival, Sparta (the leader of the Peloponnesian League). There are few statements more axiomatic than “the past is prologue.” The key to inoculating America against the diseases that infected and destroyed the ancient Greek city-states is to become coroners examining the lifeless bodies of the republics of the past in order to discover the causes of their demise and thereby avoid succumbing to the same maladies.

Although it occurred more than two millennia ago, the war between Athens and Sparta is probably studied more than any other war in the history of man. The war lasted so long that grandfathers, fathers, and sons all fought in battles collectively known as the Peloponnesian War. Enmity had long existed between the powerful maritime democracy of Athens and the equally potent land-based city-state

of Sparta. The Peloponnesian War began roughly in 431 B.C. when Athens, under its renowned general Pericles, interfered in a battle between a Spartan ally, Corinth, and Corcyra, preventing Corinth from invading Corcyra. Following closely after this intervention, Athens placed another Spartan ally, Megara, under oppressive economic sanctions, forbidding the small Dorian city-state from trading with Athens or her colonies. Sparta answered by invading the lands surrounding Athens known as Attica. Pericles allowed the inhabitants of these Athenian hinterlands within the walls of Athens, and he ordered Athenian foot soldiers to engage the Spartan forces.

Pericles’ defensive strategy worked for a while, and the Spartan siege of Attica was relatively unsuccessful. However, what Sparta could not do with military might, a physical plague accomplished rather

Exuberance at the beginning of martial ventures is easy. However, just as Pericles could not foresee the physical plague that would cripple Athens, there are undoubtedly plagues, moral and physical, that lay beyond the myopic view of modern American imperialists.

quickly. Just after 430 B.C., a plague (perhaps bubonic) decimated Athens, killing roughly one-quarter of the city's population, including Pericles. Upon recovering from the plague, Athens' new leadership set about taking the war to the Spartans and for the next 26 years (with the exception of a six year cessation of hostilities) Athens and Sparta traded victories.

Finally, in 404 B.C., a debilitated and humiliated Athens surrendered to the Spartan commander, Lysander, and the war came to an end. The war cost Athens her treasure, her prestige, her self-government, and the lives of thousands of her young men. The saddest aspect of this seemingly unnecessary war between Greece's two greatest cities is that in the end, Athens

was not only unsuccessful in its quest to export democracy, but it found itself under the rule of tyrants who brought to an end the Golden Age of Athens.

According to the chronicle of Thucydides, the war's roots can be traced to an attack by the Persians, after which several Greek city-states formed the Delian League, with Athens as the most powerful member. The Delian League used the Persian

attack on their homeland as an excuse to establish a standing navy. As the largest member of this confederacy, Athens exercised de facto control over the purse and by exercising such control, converted the Delian League into nothing more or less than an Athenian empire. In an effort to demonstrate its new imperial might, Athens jealously gazed upon its peninsular rival, Sparta, and decided it was time to assert itself and move out of Sparta's shadow.

War: The Womb of Empire

Athens began flexing its strength by unilaterally intervening in disputes between Sparta's allies around the year 431 B.C. The official Athenian justification was that

such interposition prevented wider war from spreading to the whole of the Peloponnesian peninsula and bringing terror to Athens' citizens. Athens began its policy of preventive war by imposing harsh economic sanctions on the Spartan satellites, and when these smaller communities resisted such Athenian heavy-handedness, Athens imposed her will at the point of a sword.

As Athens began losing battles and suffering numerous casualties as a consequence of its disastrous attempts at establishing its peninsula-wide dominance, the citizens of Athens began doubting the justness of the war, the wisdom of its leaders' headlong march into battles with invented enemies, and the questionable threats those enemies posed to Athenian families and homes. It was at a funeral service for Athenian soldiers who died in war against Sparta and her allies that we get what is widely held to be the most influential and motivational speech delivered during this era of history — the funeral oration of Pericles.

Pericles was an Athenian *strategos*, or general, charged with propounding the Athenian strategy for winning the war against Sparta. His eulogy, delivered in 430 B.C., represented the Athenian administration's best opportunity to reassert the necessity of war against Sparta. Pericles sought to convince the wavering Athenians that their cause was just and that only through taking the war to Sparta could Athens be kept safe from future attack on its home soil.

In this, Pericles' task was similar to that of the Bush administration as it seeks to rally support for the war in Iraq. That war has already sacrificed the lives of over 2,300 American soldiers on the altar of American imperialism. It was a morbid milestone such as this that provided the setting for Pericles' famous oration.

Pericles knew the war was not going the way he and other Athenian leaders had promised and that the death toll was mounting and would only continue to increase. He recognized that the occasion of a funeral for noble veterans would be palpably emotional and that he could use this semi-religious event to remind Athenians of their duty to promote their form of self-government throughout the known world and to prevent bellicose Sparta from



The Athenian fleet, depicted here in battle in the harbor of Syracuse, helped make that city-state the dominant power in the ancient Delian League. It also created the temptation for Athens to intervene needlessly in conflicts abroad.

bringing war home to Athens. In his oration, Pericles stated that it would be far too risky to change policy and leave the job half done. Only by persisting in fighting could Athens be assured of lasting peace. (The war, it should be here noted, lasted another 25 years!)

Commentator Gary North describes the theme of Pericles' speech as "Don't Mess With Athens." In it, Pericles declared that Athens was superior in every way to its neighbors, especially when it came to Athens' form of government, a form of government that should be imposed on all who resisted: "Our constitution does not copy the laws of neighboring states; we are rather a pattern to others than imitators ourselves."

That is to say, Athens' form of government was best and its fallen warriors brought that form of government to other less-enlightened parts of the world, whether they liked it or not. This is a level of hubris that should be familiar to modern Americans.

Pericles reassured the mourning families of the fallen soldiers that the cost to Athens would not be very great (easy to say, perhaps, when it isn't your dead son lying on the funeral pyre). Athens was strong and free, he pointed out, and it would be shameful for Athenians to sit idly by, without using their strength to bring the blessings of freedom to those still wandering about in the darkness of tyranny. This war was Athens' sacred duty, regardless of the cost:

And yet if with habits not of labor but of ease, and courage not of art but of nature, we are still willing to encounter danger, we have the double advantage of escaping the experience of hardships in anticipation and of facing them in the hour of need as fearlessly as those who are never free from them.... But the palm of courage will surely be adjudged most justly to those, who best know the difference between hardship and pleasure and yet are never tempted to shrink from danger.

The next point made by Pericles was that if Athenians trusted in the strategy developed and implemented by their leaders, then the war would be waged successfully,



Democratic demagogue: Pericles used his famous funeral oration to extol the superiority of Athens and to assert the supposed necessity of a generation-long war to export democracy to the known world.

all goals would be accomplished successfully and all intervening difficulties would be forgotten in the uniting and warming afterglow of victory: "Instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling-block in the way of action, we think it an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all. Again, in our enterprises we present the singular spectacle of daring and deliberation, each carried to its highest point, and both united in the same persons; although usually decision is the fruit of ignorance, hesitation of reflexion."

The time for talk is over; it's time to take up arms and let the generals in the field carry out the plans so carefully laid. There is a time for talk and a time for action, and when that time for debate has expired, only cowards question the call to arms. It really doesn't matter if the outcome is desirable as long as the project is acted on quickly and without cowardly hesitancy.

Next, Pericles reminded the congregation that Athens had friends. More importantly, Athens had money (thanks to the fleecing of the weaker members of the Delian League), and it could use that money to buy more friends. The Athenians would not be in this alone, and if they were, they would purchase goodwill and create a coalition through their massive bank account: "In generosity we are equally sin-

gular, acquiring our friends by conferring, not [by] receiving favors. Yet, of course, the doer of the favor is the firmer friend of the two, in order by continued kindness to keep the recipient in his debt."

Unfortunately, Thucydides records that Athens was ultimately unsuccessful at purchasing peace: Sparta and her allies fought for over two decades to resist being subsumed into a greater Athenian empire, regardless of Athens' false philanthropy. Sparta and her allies learned quickly that the Athenian carrots, though succulent, were always dangled on the end of a very big stick.

Finally, Pericles sought to comfort those who had lost loved ones to the cause of spreading democracy. They died defending their country, he assured them, and as such they were heroes and their names would forever be spoken of with reverence. Their countrymen would never forget their sacrifice or their willingness to spill their lifeblood in the quest to share liberty with the less fortunate and to defend their countrymen from the threat of annihilation at the hand of evildoers. That is, you should be proud that your child died protecting his country. Pericles stood solemnly before these families and looked down on their undoubtedly tear-stained faces and declared:

Thucydides recorded the events of the Peloponnesian War because he foresaw a time when the lessons of the war would be needed. We need but to learn from the past.

Thus choosing to die resisting, rather than to live submitting, they fled only from dishonor, but met danger face to face, and after one brief moment, while at the summit of their fortune, escaped not from their fear, but from their glory. So died these men as become Athenians. You, their survivors, must determine to have as unflinching a resolution in the field, though you may pray that it may have a happier issue. And not contented with ideas derived only from words of the advantages which are bound up with the defence of your country.

The Wages of Empire

Having examined Pericles' speech, what can modern Americans — embroiled in our own unpopular, morally and mortally expensive, unilateral, putatively preventive, and preemptive war against an am-

Imperial folly: At the urging of Alcibiades, an ambitious general (who would turn traitor), Athens invaded Sicily, expecting to be greeted as liberators and to seize control of the island's vital grain fields. Owing to faulty intelligence and inept military strategy, the expedition turned into an epic disaster.

biguously defined enemy — learn from this epoch in history?

Perhaps the first and most urgent lesson we must learn is that there are two fundamental shifts that indicate a change from republic to empire: unilateral foreign intervention and the doctrine of preventive war. These are the “hasty and colossal strides to universal empire” that Alexander Hamilton observed in the French Republic in 1798 and that all astute Americans can observe today in the America of 2005. The Athenian leaders dragged a formerly prosperous and peaceful Athens headlong down this road so frequently fraught with peril, and President Bush and his globalist acolytes likewise have placed our own republic on a path from which we can now only be diverted by a Newtonian force in an opposite direction.

While it is beyond debate that our form of government (a republic, not a democracy) is superior to all other forms of government, it is illogical and immoral to seek to impose liberty. Freedom, by its very definition, cannot be forced upon others. The argument at this stage of the war is that there is a sovereign government in Iraq and that government has asked the United States to remain in their country and help rid them of the threat of terrorism. This

ruse is almost too simple to necessitate exposure. President Bush installed an Iraqi government he knew would plead with him to allow the American military to stay. Thus, the decision of whether to leave is left to a “sovereign” Iraqi government and not to Emperor Bush.

More than 2,000 years ago, Pericles and his fellow commanders demonstrated an unreasonable confidence in the eventual success of their preemptive strikes on Sparta and her allies. President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, and their co-conspirators are likewise convinced of the ultimate victory over the “axis of evil.” Such exuberance at the beginning of questionable martial ventures is easy. However, just as Pericles could not foresee the physical plague that would cripple Athens, there are undoubtedly plagues, moral and physical, that lay beyond the myopic view of modern American imperialists.

Finally, we must ask if the Insiders are surprised that their agenda of financing friendship has been fruitless. In April 2004, then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz informed the House Appropriations Committee that foreign aid was not charity, but a form of defense spending: “Regrettably, foreign aid, and security assistance programs in particular, are still viewed by some as charity — unnecessary spending that we can ill afford ... but it has become vitally important in the war on terrorism.... Security assistance spending is in many ways an extension of defense spending.”

Will Paul Wolfowitz (now head of the World Bank) be shocked by Iraq's lack of gratitude for all the American blood and treasure spent on its behalf, just as Pericles was astounded by the dearth of indebtedness felt by Sparta's neighboring city-states? Will any of the nations whose alliance we purchase with blood and burden be truly allies or will they be merely debtors who look upon the creditor not with thanks and humility, but with disdain and envy?

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