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WAR AND LEADERSHIP: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THUCYDIDES' ACCOUNT OF THE ATHENIAN EXPEDITION TO SICILY By Karl Walling

Karl Walling is with the U.S. Naval War College. This essay is based on his address at FPRI's History Institute for Teachers, "Teaching Military History: Why and How," held at the First Division Museum in Wheaton, Illinois and co-sponsored by the Cantigny First Division Foundation. Core support for the History Institute is provided by The Annenberg Foundation; support for this weekend conference was provided by a group of FPRI trustees including W. W. Keen Butcher, Robert L. Freedman, Bruce Hooper, and John Templeton. A conference report, videotapes, and other papers are available at http://www.fpri.org/education/teachingmilitaryhistory/.

Our general subject is why and how to teach military history in high school; my particular assignment is to reflect on ways in which military history might be used to enable students to think more seriously about war and leadership.

Why study military history in high schools? One of many possible answers lies in Alexis de Tocqueville's distinction between aristocratic and democratic historians in his classic work, *Democracy in America*, the book that reveals many of the most common habits of the mind and heart of the peoples of modern democracies. In aristocratic ages, Tocqueville observed, historians tend to ascribe the causes, development, and outcomes of events to extraordinary individuals, like Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar. In democratic ages, like our own, however, they tend to focus more on abstract forces beyond any individual's ability to control, like the economy, society, or as we say today, climate change and globalization.

Aristocratic historians not only reflect the spirit of their age, when individuals matter more as forces of history, but wind up flattering that spirit, since those they write about like to think they are the prime movers. Likewise, democratic historians both reflect and flatter the spirit of their age, especially its fundamental assumption of universal human equality, which is in considerable tension with the "great man" view of history. Examples of democratic history include Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (which debunks Napoleon), Marx's theory of history (in which individuals merely float

on the tidal wave of class struggle), and numerous high school American history textbooks that tell the story of the progressive expansion of human equality through New Deal and the Civil Rights struggles of the 1930s and 1960s, but also in more trendy multi-cultural versions today.

Truth be told, individuals do matter less in democratic ages, but Tocqueville feared the excesses of democratic history might lead to deterministic explanations of events that would make individuals doubt their capacity to shape their immediate present and probable future. This, he feared, would cripple the spirit of liberty by making democratic citizens think little or nothing was within their ability to influence or control. If leaders in a democracy came to share this view, it would lead to statesmen and officers who were creatures rather than creators of events. It might even make free government a practical impossibility because neither citizens nor statesmen believed they were genuinely free.

This is a major reason why Tocqueville believed it was vital to study ancient languages, literature, and history in a modern democracy. We all live under constraints, but the ancient historians, who were mainly military and political historians, revealed what individual citizens and statesmen might do to shape their destinies and those of their peoples. Thus military history, especially when told from the perspective of the commander, helps carve out a sanctuary for freedom spirit and action that a modern democracy might have difficulty sustaining.¹

How might military history be studied in high schools? One source that is likely to capture the imagination of more than a few lies in one of the greatest books ever written about war and leadership; namely, Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*. Writing for students at the Prussian War College who were veterans of the Napoleonic Wars, Clausewitz had a hard time explaining to those who had been through the school of hard knocks why they had to constantly reexamine the past. Like Henry Ford I, many seemed to think the past was

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Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), Vol. II, Part I, chaps. 15 & 20, 475-77, 493-96.

history, by which they meant dead and of no useful value to those who had to think about the future. So Clausewitz invented what modern strategists call "critical analysis" to engage his students' imaginations and discipline their thought.

The reason to study military history, he observed, was not to understand the past for its own sake (though getting what happened before right was an essential part of critical analysis). Rather, it was to compare the strategies chosen by actual leaders with the strategies they might have chosen. After all, one cannot blame a strategy or criticize leaders, even if they fail, without showing a superior alternative. Sometimes we are dealt a bad hand; leadership is then primarily about playing a weak hand as best one can. Nor can one praise a strategy or leader, if he succeeds, without being able to show he was the best available at the timemore than a few battles have been won more through luck than skill.

If you want to teach students how to lead, or simply to teach them how to evaluate their leaders, then the students must engage in "alternative history,"--that is, history as it might have been had different leaders made different kinds of decisions. Just as Clausewitz called for examining wars and battles in light of all the realistic options that might have been chosen, so students would learn to search for strategic options and hone their skills at selecting the best.

But what is best? Provisionally, we might say "an option that achieves its intended goal at the lowest level of cost and risk." By practicing critical analysis again and again, students learn to put themselves in the shoes of commanders and statesmen. They began to learn what it means to lead.² When students get to play the roles of Alexander, Caesar, Lee, Grant, Eisenhower, and Nimitz, their minds are more engaged because they have an opportunity to ask "What if?" questions and their imaginations are free to roam. Indeed, some of the worst students, the dreamers who have difficulty focusing on the past, become the best when history is no longer mere history but a vehicle to escape the drudgery of memorization for the delights of genuinely original thinking.

The trick is to combine analytical discipline with the free play of imagination. One way is to have students engage in debates about some of the most significant military decisions in history. For example, when nations find themselves in quagmires, with no clear or easy way to go forward or to retreat, a common question is whether their plight results from the poor execution of a sound strategy (in which case we might criticize the field commanders) or from just plain bad strategy (in which case we might criticize the highest political and military leaders). The question arises in a surprising number of cases that high school teachers might address in the classroom: Lee's offensive at Gettysburg; Germany's use of the Schlieffen Plan at the beginning of World War I; England's efforts to gain control of the Dardenelles in that same war; the United States'

intervention in Vietnam in the Cold War; and some might say the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. Were these strategic blunders, or did something go wrong in their execution that made strategic success difficult, perhaps even impossible to achieve at an acceptable cost or risk?

Getting students to debate these questions forces them to put themselves in the shoes of those who had to make real strategic situations, thus combining responsibility with imagination. Identifying leadership failures does not suffice to produce better leaders later, but if only because it reveals questions required for success, it is a vital step in the right direction.

Let me now propose something that initially might seem completely unrealistic. Consider Thucydides' account of the Athenian expedition to Sicily as a case in which students might practice critical analysis.³ Yes, motivated high school students can read Thucydides and profit enormously thereby, but you have to budget the time to enable them to succeed. You might need an economy of force in which you summarize earlier parts of this war so that students can read its most dramatic part, Books VI and VII, on the Sicilian Expedition. If Thucydides is right that his account is a "possession for all time" revealing the fundamental problems of war as such (1.22), they might learn more of enduring value about war as well as politics and many other things from his account than from any other source. A unique advantage of Thucvdides is his dramatic style. Students feel as if they were spectators of, perhaps even participants in, the war. No other source is more likely to draw them in to thinking about war and leadership, especially the great debates about strategy in time of war. See the marvelous Strassler edition for an inexpensive but fully useful translation complete with hundreds of maps and other splendid source materials.



Source: Hammond Concise Atlas of World History, 5th edition, ed. Geoffrey Barraclough (Maplewood, NJ: Hammond, 1998).

According to Thucydides, the Peloponnesian War of the end of the fifth century BCE arose when Sparta, a land power that led the Peloponnesian League, became so afraid of the rising power of Athens, a sea power that led the Delian League, that Sparta decided to wage a preventive war to check Athens' power before it was too late. The war became protracted and lasted twenty-seven years, for at least two reasons: (1) the high stakes for Athens and Sparta, neither

³ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley, ed. Robert B. Strassler (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton University Press, 1976), Bk. II, chap. 5, 156-69.

of which could afford to accept the hegemony of the other; and (2) the radical asymmetry of the conflict, with the Spartan elephant unable to attack the Athenian whale directly and vice versa. Success with some indirect strategies at Pylos and Amphipolis gave each side bargaining chips for what looked like peace, but because the original cause of the war remained, Thucydides saw the "Peace of Nicias" as nothing more than an unstable truce. After all, the largest land battle of the war, at Mantinea, occurred when both sides were technically at peace. Even while it had much to fear from Sparta and its allies, Athens launched the largest maritime expedition in Greek history to attack Sicily in the seventeenth year of the war. The expedition ended in total failure with Athens losing the cream of its navy and army, over 40,000 soldiers and sailors, in Sicily. Athens survived another ten years, but arguably never recovered from this self-inflicted wound.

The question for class discussion would be, was the failure of this expedition the result more of poor execution of a sound strategy or of just plain bad strategy? How could we know (that is, how can we distinguish good strategy and leadership from bad)? The class can be divided into opposing teams. Students can be asked to help you fill out on the blackboard the charts below, with special reference to actual debates within Athens about the goals, strategy, and execution of the campaign. The objective is not for them to memorize the pros and cons, but rather to get them to think about the pros and cons as they arise in the debates in Athens and later in the field in such a manner that they begin to think about the fundamental questions of leadership--goals, strategies, and execution. Note too that the categories are framed in simple black and white distinctions in order to get the students to react against the categories, that is, to begin to think about the gray, and above all, the contingent nature of their own answers. Finally, bear in mind that this is only an example of critical analysis. If you feel uncomfortable with a war from 2,500 years ago, the same technique can work on wars and battles with which you are much more familiar.

Athenian Political Objectives (Need Ends to Evaluate Ways and Means)

Clear and Rational?

- Alternative grain SLOC; deny grain to Peloponnese; prevent rise of Syracuse as competitor to Athens (6.82-87)
- Maintain credibility by aiding ally (6.18)
- Sicily today; Carthage tomorrow; Sparta and all Greece later. (6.15, 90)

Neither Clear nor Rational?

- Grain not discussed in debate prior to expedition
- Fear of peer competitor smells of propaganda (6.81-87)
- Athenians unmoved by Egestaeans until deceived by them about low cost (6.6,46)
- Greed (6.24)
- Glory (6.16-32)
- Poor intelligence and assessment (6.1)
- Irrational exhuberance
- Vague mission statement (6.26)

Athenian Strategy

Good?

- Without secure grain SLOC, Athens vulnerable to Persia and Sparta
- Athens could not accept naval challenger
- Athens' allies had to believe its word
- Beat Sparta indirectly after acquiring resources from Sicily (6.90)
- Alcibiades' original plan minimized risk; Nicias's plan increased risk (6.8, 24)

Bad²

- -Pericles: Don't expand empire while still at war with Sparta avoid a two-front war. (1.144)
- -Nicias: secure empire first (6.10)
- -Critical analysis: alternatives existed!
- Retake Amphipolis
- Seize Megara
- Argos and Epidaurus
- Pylos and helots
- All of the above: total effort
- None of the above: give peace a chance.
- -Alcibiades' planned force too small to succeed; Nicias's too big to lose.
- -Divided command with no agreement on objectives or strategy: Nicias (show of force); Alcibiades (gather allies; move on Syracuse); Lamachus (shock and awe v. Syracuse). (6.47-49)
- -Even if Athens succeeded at Syracuse, Carthage was likely to intervene.
- -Athens simply lacked enough troops to hold whatever it gained.

Execution

Good as Circumstances Allowed?

- -Should have brought cavalry (but could they have done so?) (2.65, 6.70)
- -Recall of Alcibiades (domestic politics) denied Athenians their most brilliant leader(6.15, 61)
- -Death of Lamachus took away boldest Athenian commander.
- -Syracuse adapted brilliantly; Peloponessian intervention saved it from defeat.
- More bad luck: Syracuse was about to surrender and then Spartan aid arrived; plus Demosthenes' night attack to relieve Nicias almost succeeded
- -Entire story might have been different had Demosthenes been in charge or arrived earlier. (7.42)

Of course, it is essential for students to think about the consequences of the Athenians' decisions both within Athens and at Syracuse. Unable to evacuate by sea, the Athenians retreated by land. Cut off and harassed on all sides, they were forced to surrender. The Athenians were "beaten at all points and altogether; all that they suffered was great; they were destroyed, as the saying is, with a total destruction, their fleet, their army – everything was destroyed, and few out of many returned home". (7.87) There are clear overtones of Greek tragedy here that might get the English department's support for your endeavors.

Finally, you might ask what might future leaders learn from this debacle? (Let students figure it out, and maybe even write a paper.) Some food for thought (possible paper theses):

- You cannot lead or evaluate leaders or their plans without critical analysis of the practical alternatives.
- War is always a gamble; distinguish the reasonable from the unreasonable ones.
- Before you can have a coherent strategy, you need clear objectives.
- Look before you leap: poor intelligence based on wishful thinking (best case scenarios) led the Athenians to bring the wrong force and overextend themselves.
- Don't reinforce failure unless the stakes are so high you have no better choice.

Really Poor?

- -Indecision of Nicias primarily to blame
- -Failed to pursue initial victories
- -Wasted time in Catana and with siege walls (6.71)
- -Failed to use navy to prevent intervention. (6.104, 7.7)
- -Lost initiative (7.3, 8-15)
- -Lost control of sea and failed to order timely evacuation
- -But why was he indecisive? Athenian civil-military relations (7.48)
 - Don't forget interaction: enemy always has a vote; outsiders may intervene.
 - Even the best plans are useless without able commanders to execute them, but then again, no amount of tactical or operational brilliance can make up for strategic folly.
 - Best to be strategically cautious but tactically and operationally daring; the Athenians were just the opposite in Sicily.
 - Don't forget domestic politics: religious madness and culture wars in Athens may have had as much to do with Athens' defeat as decisions and events in the field.
 - Democracies may be especially prone to strategies based on excessive hope; modern checks and balances may help limit the excesses of popular passion seen in the suicide of Athens, but they will not suffice. To be effective, the checks require both citizens and leaders able to distinguish good strategies from bad.
 - And just about anything else an intelligent student might come up with. The point, after all, is not to make them read, but to make them think. To whatever extent studying military history promotes critical analysis, it is a vital support to any high school.

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