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THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR, 460-404 BCE

NOTE: 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. Some see an anti-war book, warning that force is hard to use and its results are uncertain; hence force is the worst and least reliable way to accomplish any goal.

II. PHASES OF THE WAR

A. 480 BCE: Greece v. Persia
B. 460-445 BCE: Athens v. Sparta Round #1
C. 431-421 BCE: " " Round #2 (the "Archidamean War")
D. 415-404 BCE: " " Round #3

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. It would send its navy to torch Spartan coastal cities if Sparta attacked over land.

IV. THE SECURITY DILEMMA IN ANCIENT GREECE

A. The Spartan empire was an oppressive "human volcano," hence easily conquered--its slaves would help an invader. [Like Austria 1914 and like Hitler's 1941 view of the USSR.]
B. The Athenian empire was dependent on its fleet, which required tribute from allies. [Like the world imagined by mercantilists in 1755--empire was a highly cumulative resource.]

V. CHRONOLOGY

A. The Greco-Persian War: Athens acquires an empire. [Like the rise of 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, a neutral state in the Athens-Sparta conflict. Corcyra was a colony of Corinth, a major Spartan ally, but was now hostile to Corinth. A civil war erupts in Epidamnus. The losers appeal for aid first to Corcyra, then to Corinth after Corcyra refuses aid. Corinth offers aid and sends settlers to seize Epidamnus, which Corinth sees as a lost possession. Corcyra asks Athens for help against Corinth. Athens agrees because it fears that Corinth, a major naval power, may conquer Corcyra's substantial fleet, and may thereby tip the naval balance-of-power against Athens. Athens therefore offers Corcyra a defensive alliance. However, offensive and defensive behavior are hard to distinguish at sea; this allows Corinth to later claim (to Sparta) that Athens has broken the 30-year truce (which ended the war of 460-445 BCE) by acting offensively. Thus this local dispute is the first trigger to a vast war. [Sarajevo?]
    2. The dispute at Potidaea, 432 BCE. Athens, fearing war with Corinth & Sparta, tightens control over its colony, Potidaea, by ordering Potidaea

to tear down its city walls and hand over hostages. Potidaea revolts. Corinth--fearing the longterm growth of Athenian power, and anxious to contain it--sends help to Potidaea (thereby violating the 30-year truce of 445). [Athens toward Potidaea = J.F. Dulles toward Third World: "the U.S. won't tolerate neutralism..."]

D. Sparta's decision for war, 431 BCE.
   1. Sparta noted the rise of Athenian power [Germany fears rising Russia, 1914?]; and feared that a stronger Athens could destroy Sparta.
   2. Corinth lies to Sparta: "Athens is breaking the 30 years truce! They are starting a war!"--and Athens fails to reply to these lies. [Dinwiddie, Shirley, & Duquesne, 1754...]
   3. Sparta's pretexts for war--priests, goddesses, curses. Every reason for war is trotted out except the real one: Sparta's fear of Athens' rising power. [Gulf of Tonkin 1964 ...]

E. The death of Pericles and the rise of the hawkish Cleon and Alcibiades in Athens; the death of Archidamus and the rise of Brasidas in Sparta. [The rise of the Ludendorff/Hindenburg "silent dictatorship" in Germany, 1914-1918...]

F. The growth and later contraction of Athenian war aims.
   1. Athens wins a big victory at Sphacteria, but then refuses to settle on its original peace terms [Sebastopol 1855...] until it is sobered up by --->
   2. The Athenian defeats at Delium and Amphipolis; these finally convince Athens to make a truce--the Peace of Nicias, 421-415 BCE.

G. Mytilene, an Athenian colony, sees Athens' harsh treatment of other colonies and decides to revolt before the same fate befalls it. But Athens believes the revolt has "no reason" and is unprovoked; hence it sees need to further scare its colonies with even harsher treatment. Athens considers killing all Mytilenians, but relents.

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

I. Athens destroys Melos, a rebellious Athenian colony. Athens kills all military-age Melian men; Melian women and children are enslaved. Note: compare the Mytilene Debate and the Melian Dialogue ... the latter was nastier. Ethical concerns disappear from the discussion. Regarding justice, the Athenians simply declare that "the strong do what the have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept." (Thuc. p. 402)

J. The Athenian expedition to Syracuse [German unrestricted submarine campaign, 1917 ...]
   1. Athenians did little research before launching the Expedition. They were largely ignorant of basic facts, such as Sicily's size and population.
   2. Athens' aims were vast, Syracuse's aims soon became vast [GB & Fr in 1755, US in 1941, US & China 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 Sicilian states--would bandwagon with Athens, wouldn't balance against it. [Hitler & 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. Egestaean blue smoke & mirrors--Egesta manipulates Athenian perceptions. Egesta tells 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 faces disaster, Nicias (the commander) fears making a necessary and prudent peace because he fears being pilloried for it by Athens' hawkish public.

K. Catastrophe for Athens. The Syracusan expedition is destroyed (413 BCE). But Athens survives anyway for nine more years (413-404 BCE)! [Germany 1914-1918.]

VI. POSSIBLE CAUSES OF THE WAR, ITS ESCALATION & 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 & Defense:
1. Security is 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 the vulnerability to invaders that arose from its oppressive social structure.
c. Sparta & Corinth's goal: to avert the threat posed by rising Athenian power.
2. "Chain gang" dynamics in the Spartan and Athenian alliances:
a. Corinth can drag Sparta to war because Sparta fears that otherwise Corinth might defect; causing Megara to defect; causing Sparta's downfall.
b. Athens is dragged into war by Corcyra for similar reasons. [Serbia & Austria drag Europe to war in 1914...]
3. Offensive and defensive conduct prove to be indistinguishable. [1914]
4. Offense is believed easy militarily; campaign after campaign--by Thebes, Corinth, Sparta, and Athens--is launched amid assurances that "it's a sure thing."
5. Bandwagon beliefs prevail on both sides.

C. Both sides fight to control resources believed cumulative, and to maintain credibility.

D. False optimism about war outcomes.

E. Cheap war, fun war expectations.

F. Conflict spirals:
1. Sparta opts 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 v. Potidaea: Potidaea revolts in response to Athens' efforts to tighten control. These trigger more rebellion, not less.
3. Athens v. Mytilene: Athens provokes the Mytilene revolt but fails to see this, instead thinking the revolt is unprovoked; hence it infers that even harsher policies toward its colonies are called for.
4. Athens v. Syracuse: Athens exaggerates Syracusan hostility (by imagining a false Dorian hostile conspiracy), then makes Syracuse hostile by attacking it.

G. Lack of clear strategy ---> Forgetting of original aims & purposes in Athens. For example, Athens continues the Syracusan expedition even after the important premises that underlay it (e.g., that Sparta wouldn't enter the fray on Syracuse's side) are disproven.

H. Chauvinist mythmaking.

I. Poor evaluation of policy ideas, especially in wartime.

J. Pericles' hubris: "I can handle everything--I needn't train successors." [Like Bismarck?]

K. Manipulation by Allies (Corinth manipulates Sparta; Egesta manipulates Athens).

L. War ----> War
1. Reciprocal growth of war aims.
2. Rise of the 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 warns: "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 are 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.

VII. 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; the U.S. war against Mexico, 1846-1848, a most profitable escapade; the U.S. Persian Gulf war, 1991; Israel's 1967 war against the Arabs; the Arabs' 1973 war against Israel; the U.S. invasion of Haiti, 1994; the British war to recover the Falklands from Argentina, 1982; etc. All wars are not quagmires. The question is: how can you tell which is which?