
Elites and Imperial Ambitions: A Symposium

The Real Thucydides Trap

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But he that desires to look into the truth of things done, and which (according to the condition of humanity) may be done again, or at least their like, he shall find enough herein to make him think it profitable. And it is compiled rather for an everlasting possession, than to be rehearsed for a prize.

Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*,
book I, chapter 22 (Hobbes' translation.)

The study of intellectual history is desirable for its own sake. Asking what ancient authors meant and how we should understand them today is important, partly because we need to consider how they might help us better deal with our pressing current problems. In this article, we consider a current problem of politics and how an ancient author helps us approach it. What does a book written 2,500 years ago have to offer us today? Is the condition of humanity indeed similar enough to think that what happened in an extraordinarily different time and condition could happen in some similar way? No doubt Thucydides would have been amazed by computers, airplanes, and all that distinguishes our age from his. But he may well have felt rather at home in many of the political relationships that characterize the human condition.

Study of ancient authors may help with current problems.

Many since Thucydides' time have found in his writing

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instruction for how to better understand their own time. Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540) found in Thucydides useful ideas for his own age about balance of power and equilibrium, the influence of character on international relations, alliances, diplomacy, and war.¹ Machiavelli commented on Thucydides and shared his secular attitude towards politics, his desire to learn through historical example rather than abstract principle, regard for calculated self-interest, preference for the combination of virtue with greatness and honor rather than meekness, and estimations of the role of fortune or chance in politics.

Thomas Hobbes is famous for his reading and translation in 1629 of *The Peloponnesian War*, which taught him about the regularities in society, the problems of democracy, and the need for overwhelming power to maintain order and security.

Gregory Crane finds that William Tecumseh Sherman's "attitude toward the use of power and the practice of warfare owes much to the tradition that Thucydides inaugurated." Crane traces "a line from Melos, where the Athenians annihilated the entire population of a small island, to Sherman's devastating march through the heart of the Confederacy to the firestorms caused by the Allied bombing in Dresden and Tokyo that incinerated tens of thousands of children, women, and non-combatants . . ." ² In the nineteenth century, Thucydides could be used to compare the democratic sea powers of Britain and Athens with the more despotic land powers of Napoleonic France and Sparta.

In 1929, Charles Norris Cochrane saw in Thucydides not the ceaseless struggle for power, but the genesis of the scientific analysis of international relations. He wrote that the "truth is that Thucydides had the assured faith of a scientist because he was a scientist . . ." ³ He continues that, unlike Herodotus, Thucydides did not appeal to religious or metaphysical principles to explain human behavior. Unlike Homer, he wrote scientific analysis rather than imaginative literature. After World

¹ Francesco Guicciardini, *Maxims and Reflections of a Renaissance Statesman*, translated by Mario Domandi (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) and *The History of Italy* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1969).

² Gregory Crane, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity: The Limits of Political Realism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 23.

³ Charles Norris Cochrane, *Thucydides and the Science of History* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965), 3, 14, 25, 33.

War Two, the ability of the democratic America to project its power by sea and air could be compared to the democratic sea power of Athens. The despotic land powers of the Soviet Union and Sparta could be compared as well.

Authors in our own time follow in this tradition of centuries of using Thucydides to better understand our own era. A recent example of this is Graham Allison's *Destined for War: Can America and China escape Thucydides's Trap?* This is important as the short American Century after World War II may now be shifting to a Chinese twenty-first century. A return to American greatness under Trump seems to mean the end of a commitment to liberal democratic market capitalism. Xi Jinping, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, talks about the Chinese Dream of restoring his nation's lost greatness.

Greatness

. . . believing that it would be a great war and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it. This belief was not without its grounds Indeed this was the greatest movement yet known in history, not only of the Hellenes, but of a large part of the barbarian world—I had almost said of mankind. For though the events of remote antiquity, and even those that more immediately preceded the war, could not from lapse of time be clearly ascertained, yet the evidences which an inquiry carried as far back as was practicable leads me to trust, all point to the conclusion that there was nothing on a great scale, either in war or in other matters.

Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*,
Book I Chapter 1

The word great or greatness appears 339 times in Richard Crawley's English translation of *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Thucydides would have no problem with a desire for greatness by itself. How he views it remains instructive for those who desire it. It may be that the relations among those who seek it would receive a warning from Thucydides. In our own time, the world's greatest power and its most prominent rising power both desire greatness. What might that mean for the future of world order? What warning does he have?

*A warning
for those who
desire great-
ness.*

Trump and Xi Making Nations Great

President Donald Trump was born just more than eight months after the surrender of Japan, ending WWII. Most of the victors and the vanquished were devastated by the war. Not the U.S. In 1939, when the war had begun, the GDP of the US was \$ 93,500 M. It grew steadily during WWII so that by 1946 it had reached \$227,800 M. The next year it stood at \$249,900 M.⁴ The U.S. held a nuclear monopoly; its power had just been demonstrated with ferocious effect. As awful as US casualties had been in WWII, its losses of fewer than 420,000 hardly compared to the Soviet Union's and Chinese casualties of over 20 million each. The world that Donald Trump's generation inherited and grew up in was one in which the U.S. was indeed a great power; indeed, its greatest power.

Perception of U.S. as world's single greatest power was short-lived.

The perception of the US as the single greatest power having emerged from WWII was short-lived. The Soviet Union's testing of atomic weapons in 1949 broke the US nuclear monopoly, and the launch of Sputnik in 1957 threatened to give it superiority in delivering a nuclear warhead. The Cold War was fought out, though not directly with nuclear weapons, in proxy wars often with unconventional tactics.

As Donald Trump concentrated on constructing buildings, casinos, and golf courses and on TV reality shows, the bi-polar world of the Cold War collapsed along with the Soviet Union from 1989 to 1991. In its place, some saw the development of a unipolar world in which the U.S. was again the world's single greatest military and economic power.

Americans could go on talking about the US president as the strongest leader in the world. Our nation's military budget exceeded those of the next ten countries combined. We could outshoot anybody. Our gross domestic product was greater than that of any other single nation. Triumphalism led some to see an End of History not in the German state, but in American global hegemony and global consensus on democratic capitalism. Fascism had been defeated at terrible cost. Communism had collapsed of its own weight. Personal liberty, the rule of law, and free trade were ubiquitous principles.

Like others who do not study history and become familiar

⁴ "United States (USA) GDP-Gross Domestic Product" <https://countryeconomy.com/gdp/usa?year=1946>

with its many vicissitudes, Trump may well have come to assume that what he experienced as a child and then again as an adult was the norm. Twice in his lifetime, the U.S. was seen as the world's single greatest power. It was Great. Changes represented deviations from the way things were and ought to be.

Also twice during his lifetime, conditions changed remarkably. A world in which the U.S. was the single great power was the anomaly, not the norm. After WWII, the Soviet Union developed its military and economic power. Europe had exceeded its prewar economic output in fewer than fifteen years. From being warring neighbors, European nations developed from a steel and coal community to a much more fully fledged European one. After the Cold War, China has transformed itself from being a subject of European and Japanese imperialism to a great military and economic power. Brazil, India, and other nations developed impressively as well.

If anything, the growing multi-polarity was the historical norm. The nineteenth century Concert of Europe had a number of discordant notes, to be sure. The Crimean War was just one of the its disharmonies, giving renewed visibility to the balance of power and *raison d'état*. But it remained a concert of a type with many players. The twenty-first century has seen an emerging Concert of Humanity, no less discordant but again with many important players.

Growing multi-polarity after Cold War the historical norm.

Making China Great Again

In 2012, Robert Kuhn of the *New York Times* reported that "Just after becoming [Chinese Communist] party chief in late 2012, Xi announced what would become the hallmark of his administration. 'The Chinese Dream,' Xi said, is 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.'"⁵ A broad consensus has developed that China is indeed becoming great again. Even in 1998, Andre Gunder Frank argued that China, and other Asian powers were returning to the hegemonic position that they

⁵ Robert Lawrence Kuhn (4 June 2013). "Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream," *The New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/05/opinion/global/xi-jinpings-chinese-dream.html>, accessed September 20, 2018. Also see Kuhn, *How China's Leaders Think: The Inside Story of China's Past, Current and Future Leaders* (New York: Wiley, 2011).

had enjoyed during the period of the Silk Road.⁶ Twenty years later, Robert S. Ross writes that “the rise of China presents the United States with an unprecedented foreign policy challenge. For the first time since World War II, the United States faces a great power competitor that possesses both economic and military capabilities that may soon rival U.S. capabilities.”⁷

For thirty years before 2015, China’s economy was growing at an average of ten percent per year. It now boasts the most manufacturing output and amount of exports of goods in the world. China’s gross domestic product at purchasing power parity in 2016 was \$2.8 trillion higher than that of the U.S.⁸

The nation has its own real problems, and, as its economy matures, it will not maintain equally high growth rates for another thirty years. But what it has achieved so far has permitted it to pursue its Belt and Road Initiative, a trillion dollar infrastructure investment plan to rejuvenate and extend the old Silk Road.⁹ When Donald Trump, on his first day in office pulled out of the Trans Pacific Partnership, a trade deal between the U.S. and Asian nations, he left the Pacific rim trading field to Chinese leadership.

China’s ambitious international economic strategy is being pursued along with an equally ambitious military one. In April of 2018, China’s first domestically built aircraft carrier was completed.¹⁰ Jim Talent, a former U.S. senator for Missouri and

⁶ Andre Gunder Frank, *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

⁷ Robert S. Ross, “What Does the Rise of China Mean for the United States?” in Jennifer Rudolph, *The China Questions: Critical Insights into a Rising Power* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 81.

⁸ Noah Smith, “Who Has the World’s No. 1 Economy? Not the U.S.: By most measures, China has passed the U.S. and is pulling away,” Bloomberg Opinion, October 18, 2017: <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-10-18/who-has-the-world-s-no-1-economy-not-the-u-s>, accessed, September 25, 2018.

⁹ The State Council, The People’s Republic of China, “The Belt and Road Initiative,” <http://english.gov.cn/beltAndRoad/>, accessed Septemebr 25, 2018.

¹⁰ Steven Lee Myers, “With Ships and Missiles, China Is Ready to Challenge U.S. Navy in Pacific.” A version of this article appears in print on Aug. 29, 2018, Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline, “China, Shoring Up Its Navy, Muscles Into Pacific”: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/29/world/asia/china-navy-aircraft-carrier-pacific.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article®ion=Footer>, accessed, October 2, 2018.

a senior fellow at the Bipartisan Policy Center, observes that “since the accession of Xi Jinping to leadership in Beijing five years ago, China has stepped up its drive to expand the reach of its armed forces and leap ahead of the United States in technologies crucial to 21st-century warfare.”¹¹

China expanding reach of its armed forces.

China has been building islands in the South China Sea, the naval chokepoint through which much of the region’s maritime trade sails. Ignoring other nations’ claims to territory there, China says that these islands give it sovereign rights to these waters. U.S. Admiral Philip S. Davidson says that “China is now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the United States.”¹²

How Beijing relates to its neighbors in the South China Sea could be a harbinger of its interactions elsewhere in the world. President Xi Jinping of China has held up the island-building effort as a prime example of “China moving closer to center stage” and standing “tall and firm in the East.” A similar example of what may be to come more generally may have been indicated in China’s recent takeover of a port in Sri Lanka.¹³

“China moving closer to center stage.”

What should we make of these two great nations explicitly seeking greatness? What should we make of the rise of China?

Seeking Greatness and World Order

Realists routinely look at relative power, not absolute power in isolation. What are the changes in relative power between the great powers? Is China rising while America is declining? Will the future world order be dominated by China, or will there be a multipolar world order? How should a return

¹¹ Jim Talanet, “Getting Ready for China,” *National Review*, August 13, 2018: <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/08/chinese-military-buildup-dangerous/>, accessed September 25, 2018.

¹² Hannah Beech, “China’s Sea Control Is a Done Deal, ‘Short of War With the U.S.’” *New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/20/world/asia/south-china-sea-navy.html>: accessed, September 25, 2018. Also published on Sept. 21, 2018, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: “As Beijing Flexes Muscles, Waves of Risk Churn South China Sea.”

¹³ Maria Abi-Habib, “How China Got Sri Lanka to Cough Up a Port.” *New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/25/world/asia/china-sri-lanka-port.html?rref=collection%2Fspotlightcollection%2Fchina-reach>, accessed, September 25, 2018, in print on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: In Hock to China, Sri Lanka Gave Up Territory,” June 26, 2018,

to multi-polarity be managed? Trying to restore Greatness understood as American unipolarity is a non-starter. America will not be a unipolar great power as it was twice in Trump's lifetime. His appeal to popular resentment of the loss of the special status of America in a unipolar world just after WWII or just after the Cold War is not a strategy for the future.

President Trump's attempt to make America great again is in some ways a throwback to the mercantilism that Adam Smith sought to overcome. He sometimes appears to see a zero sum game in international trade and want to be able to tax balance-of-trade surpluses to help fund the growth of military power. The balance-of-trade deficit with China rightly alarms him. That deficit in U.S. trade in goods with China was \$6 billion in 1985, \$3 billion in 1995, \$202 billion in 2005, \$346 billion in 2016, \$375 billion in 2017, and \$222 billion for the first seven months of 2018.¹⁴ Overall, U.S. deficits in trade in goods stood at \$101 billion in 1990, \$436 billion in 2000, \$635 billion in 2010, and \$795 billion in 2017. Trump rightly worries that the US is financing its buying spree of goods from abroad by selling off assets and borrowing money.

Rear End Collisions

What could be the effects of a rising China and a declining but still predominant America?¹⁵ In 2017, a highly respected Harvard professor, Graham Allison, published a book whose central theme was repeated by Trump administration officials and Congressional representatives. In *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap*, Allison argues that the central theme of the book of hundreds of pages is encapsulated in one sentence: "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable." The cause of the generation-long Peloponnesian War was a rear-end collision of an up-and-coming Athens running into a dominant Sparta. Thucydides himself wrote that his book was not merely a description of a particular war, but an analysis of human nature that would be valuable for future generations

¹⁴ US Census Bureau, "Trade in Goods with China," <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5700.html>, accessed September 25, 2018.

¹⁵ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), xiv.

to consider. Allison agrees, and examines what he takes to be Thucydides' main point in sixteen case studies from over the past five hundred years in which a hegemonic power was threatened by a rising power. Twelve of these resulted in war. For example, the major cause of the First World War was not just an assassination, but yet another reenactment of the trap in which this time the Anglo world led by Britain was threatened by Germany. America's replacement of British hegemony, however, did not result in war. So the four peaceful outcomes makes Thucydides' theory a warning, not a prediction of future conflict between a rising China and a hegemonic America. The onus of our time is to study how a rising China could upset a world order formed by a ruling America.

*A warning,
not a prediction
of future
conflict.*

The basic problem with Allison's thesis is that it equates America with Sparta as the ruling power and China with Athens as the rising power. The established reality is American hegemony; the problem is China's rising power. The focus is on what to do with China. He has Thucydides' point as backwards as Trump does with America's condition.

Allison's message fits well with President Trump's populist message; it also has often been repeated by political leaders. Allison's web page video includes Trump's campaign statement in which the presidential candidate says that "We can't continue to allow China to rape our country, and that's what they are doing."¹⁶ Another Trump campaign trail statement was: "I have never been happy about the fact that the ties and shirts are made in China," he added, "because of what they've done in terms of devaluing their currency, it is very hard for other companies to compete and make such apparel in the United States. These are the kinds of issues I am committed to addressing. Securing our border, negotiating trade deals that benefit the United States and bringing jobs back to America is my top priority."¹⁷ Immediately pulling out of the Trans Pacific Partnership and initiating a renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement were two ways that Trump planned

¹⁶ Quoted at <https://www.belfercenter.org/thucydides-trap/overview-thucydides-trap>

¹⁷ Jake Miller, Is Donald Trump's presidential campaign bad for his business? CBS NEWS July 2, 2015: <https://www.cbsnews.com/media/is-donald-trumps-2016-presidential-campaign-election-bad-for-business/>

to make America great again. Trump's regular denunciations of "Jina" became a staple so humorously skewered by Alec Baldwin on Saturday Night Live.¹⁸

Although Baldwin mocked Trump, much of the US foreign policy establishment has adopted Allison's thesis. General (ret.) David Petraeus said it was "one of the most insightful and thought provoking books I have *ever* read on the most important relationship in the world: the U.S. and China." Senator Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska) repeated the book's central point. Henry Kissinger weighed in with an approving statement that "Thucydides' Trap identifies a cardinal challenge to world order." Senator Angus King and former national security advisor Tom Donilon repeated the repetitions. The then chair of President Trump's Strategic and Policy Forum, Stephen Scharzman, weighed in as well with more repetition. The U.S. Army Chief of Staff General Mark Milley, Senator Roger Wicker, and William Cohen, Secretary of Defense from 1997–2001, all repeated the thesis of the prestigious Harvard professor. Trump's Secretary of Defense, General James Mattis not only repeated Allison, but gave out copies of his book to office visitors.

These prominent leaders all found great value in making all these statements. Important people could portray themselves as intellectually profound by discussing the work of a renowned Harvard professor and a famous author of antiquity, and only had to remember one sentence about war erupting between ruling, fearful Sparta and rising Athens. Seldom has the ability to project erudition come so easily.

Thucydidean Greatness

Using this one sentence from Thucydides' long book made it possible to equate China with Athens and to focus on the threat from a rising power. The problem with this is that somebody needed to read Thucydides' entire book and then think through the implications of that kind of reading for current U.S.–China relations. Thucydides was concerned about Athens' rising power, no doubt, but he was even more worried about his home city's change of regime, how it was using its

¹⁸ "Donald Trump vs. Hillary Clinton Debate Cold Open - SNL": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nQGBZQrtT0>

power, and how it had become corrupted. His hope by the time he died was that perhaps his own city was returning to its earlier virtues and was becoming great again rather than being enamored with unlimited power.

Thucydides' ideas were much more complex than the single mentioned sentence might suggest. Recognizing that complexity could have prepared contemporary U.S. elite academics and political leaders to think more adequately about greatness and about what more fully concerned Thucydides. They needed to think about the purposes for which America used its power and the nature of its own regime, not just the threat from China. A contemporary Thucydides would think about how the U.S. used its power in WWII and what happened to the U.S. after having become a global power.

Discerning Thucydides' meaning requires reading the whole book with care. He was indeed concerned with greatness. He used the word great 339 times (in Crawley's translation of the text).¹⁹ He referred to Corinth's great financial resources and great naval and military strength. Athenian representatives called attention to the "great power of Athens" in speeches. But only by placing the subject in its larger context is it possible to understand what Thucydides means by greatness.

One of the attributes which Thucydides considers necessary for sustained greatness is an accurate understanding of the distributed power that comes from a realization and cultivation of pluralism. Thucydides is not a one-dimensional realist who advocates unchecked self-interest and the struggle for domination. He is not prescribing politics as an arena in which self-interested actors struggle for domination. To the contrary, Thucydides is observing that when politics does become characterized by unchecked self-interest and the struggle for unlimited power, it is a sign that behavior and thought are deteriorating. To maintain or restore a polity, he contends, pluralism must be valued.

*Thucydides
advocates
cultivation of
pluralism.*

Why should individuals check their desire to impose unity under their own control? It may be that Thucydides does not

¹⁹ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, translated by Richard Crawley, The Internet Classics Archive: <http://classics.mit.edu/Thucydides/pelopwar.html>

Pluralism, not domination, the proper end of power politics.

believe that the human desire to rule can be restrained solely by devotion to the ancestral or by piety.²⁰ It may be that great powers do indeed desire to rule, but they learn to restrain themselves by accurate calculation of their own power and that of others. They do not engage in wishful thinking and grandiosity. Pluralism, not domination, is the proper end of power politics, since power is always distributed to some degree. The trap that Thucydides worries about is not rear-end collision, but that a great power deludes itself into seeking domination of all others.

Pluralism is the acceptance by political actors of the need for freedom of individuals, various groups in society, cities, and nations. Actors are most rational when they desire their own freedom and accept that of others because they have accurately calculated distributed power. Excessive love of personal power, feelings of vengeance, greed, excessive ambition, wishful thinking, a loss of a sense of limits, or other factors often cause irrational estimates of relative power in one's own favor. Irrationality or inaccurate calculation lead to overreaching, which can cause one's own destruction as well as that of an entire political system.

Rational calculation of power is not precise and certain, but can be roughly accurate when based on wisdom and prudence. Sound, balanced judgment is crucially important for Thucydides.²¹ This is so because chance and fortune place limits on calculation. Not everything can be known and factored in; not everything can be predicted and controlled. There can be no such thing as unchecked intellectual or political power.

Morality and religion work well when based on sense of limits.

Morality and religion serve society well when they are based on a sense of limits. Religion is in part a sense that there are forces beyond humanity's control which influence our destiny and conditions. Morality is a concern for how persons or groups treat each other. Genuine morality assumes an expectation on the part of others that they be treated in a way that does not harm them. When morality casts off this kind of

²⁰ Jack Riley, "Freedom and Empire: The Politics of Athenian Imperialism," in Lowell Gustafson, ed., *Thucydides' Theory of International Relations: A Lasting Possession* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 117-150.

²¹ Laurie M. Johnson Bagby, "Fathers of International Relations? Thucydides as a Model for the Twenty-First Century," in Gustafson ed., *Thucydides' Theory of International Relations*, 17-41.

restraint and ignores the realities of power, it can be as destructive as an unbridled lust for power. When religion becomes an attempt to know the unknowable, to predict chance and fortune, it too leads to irrational and destructive behavior.

Thucydides as a Realist

Thucydides has often been said to be the founder of realism.²² Hans Morgenthau, in *Politics among Nations*, argues that “realism assumes that its key concept of interest defined as power is an objective category which is universally valid.” To develop this view, he quotes Thucydides’ observation that “identity of interests is the surest bonds whether between the states or individuals.” Power, Morgenthau writes, “may compromise anything that establishes and maintains the control of man over man.”²³ Morgenthau also quotes the Athenian’s argument in the Melian Dialogue that “of the gods we know and of men we believe, that it is a necessary law of their nature that they rule wherever they can.”²⁴ Morgenthau’s purpose here is to help demonstrate that “the tendency to dominate, in particular, is an element of all human associations, from the family through fraternal and professional associations and local political organizations, to the state.”²⁵ Morgenthau, the proponent of realism, the natural interest, and dominations, claims Thucydides as one of his own.

Morgenthau was not the first to argue that Thucydides

²² For example, see David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 11; Barry B. Hughes, *Community and Change in World Politics: The Clash of Perspectives* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1991), 56; Richard W. Mansbach and John A. Vasquez, *In Search of Theory: A New Paradigm for Global Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), xiii; Joel H. Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists: Political Reform, Responsible Power, and American Culture in the Nuclear Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), I.

²³ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed., revised (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 8, 9.

²⁴ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), book 5, chapter 105. All subsequent references in this chapter are to this edition and are by conventional book and chapter. The passage cited here is also quoted in Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth W. Thompson, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th ed. (New York: Alfred E. Knopf, 1985), 38.

²⁵ Morgenthau and Thompson, *Politics among Nations*, 37.

was primarily concerned with power. Werner Jaeger wrote in 1939 that “Thucydides . . . thinks only of power.”²⁶ Many since Morgenthau have discussed his view of Thucydides and realism. Robert Keohane accepts Morgenthau’s interpretation.²⁷ Thucydides and Morgenthau “both assume that states will act to protect their power positions, perhaps even to the point of seeking to maximize their power.” Another author writes that “Thucydides’ History as a whole corroborates the Athenian argument concerning justice and power in international politics. The Athenians’ assertion that the strong universally dominate the weak is supported by examples from the most ancient period (1.1-18) to contemporary communities such as Syracuse (4.61, 64; 6.33) and even the Spartans themselves.”²⁸ Mansbach and Vazquez write that “weak states that stand in the path of the strong tend to be swept aside or confronted with demands for capitulation, such as those made to the island of Melos by the Athenians as recorded by Thucydides.” In the section on realism in his collected-readings book about international relations, Vazquez includes only the Melian Dialogue from the Peloponnesian War, presumably because the Athenian position expressed in that dialogue is the essence of Thucydides’ teaching.²⁹ Baldwin notes that “E. H. Carr, another realist, . . . echoes Thucydides’ Melian dialogue: “The majority rules because it is stronger, the minority submits because it is weaker.”³⁰ When Mansbach and Ferguson refer to Thucydides, they mention only the Melian Dialogue.³¹ Donelan does the same.³² When Mans-

²⁶ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, trans. Gilbert Highet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 383.

²⁷ Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 7, 164.

²⁸ Steven Forde, “Classical Realism,” in *Traditions of International Ethics*, ed. Terry Nardin and David R. Mapel (Cambridge: Cambridge Studies in International Relations, 1992), 72.

²⁹ Mansbach and Vazquez, *In Search of Theory*, 318; John A. Vasquez, ed. *Classics of International Relations*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990), 16-20.

³⁰ David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 159.

³¹ Richard W. Mansbach and Yale H. Ferguson, “Values and Paradigm Change: The Elusive Quest for International Relations Theory,” in *Persistent Patterns and Emergent Structures in a Waning Century*, ed. Margaret P. Karnes (New York: Praeger Special Studies, 1986), 14.

³² Michael Donelan, *Elements of International Political Theory* (Oxford:

bach and Vazquez mention something other than the Melian Dialogue, it is about Cleon, who wanted all the rebel Mytilenians put to death.³³ In all of this, Thucydides is often said to argue for the amoral nature of interstate relations, the quest for power by each state, each state's primary focus on security, interstate relations as anarchy out of which order can be established only through domination, human behavior as rational, the motivations in interstate relations as constant across time, culture and place, and the city-state or largest political unit as the basic unit of analysis and action. As Gregory Crane argues, "The compulsive and unbounded quest for power and profit that Solon had described at the opening of the sixth century and of Athenian recorded history becomes in Thucydides, almost two centuries later, a unifying force that drives the weak and the mighty alike."³⁴ A critic of realism assumes that this view is "the eternal return of the ghost of Thucydides."³⁵

This oft-repeated reading of Thucydides comes from equating Thucydides' own position with that expressed by the Athenians throughout much of the book, but most famously in the Melian Dialogue. It is in that dialogue that the Athenians make their famous claim that the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they must (5.89). Some distinguished scholars have contended that Thucydides uses the Athenian spokesman as his own mouthpiece. For example, Jaeger wrote that an "Athenian ambassador's speech on the historical necessity which compelled Athens to develop her power is a justification of that power, on the grand scale of which Thucydides alone is capable. They are Thucydides' own ideas."³⁶

Clarendon Press, 1990), 27.

³³ Mansbach and Vazquez, *In Search of Theory*, 111.

³⁴ Gregory Crane, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity: The limits of Political Realism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 297.

³⁵ James Der Derian, "A Reinterpretation of Realism," in *International Theory*, ed. J. D. Derian (New York: Macmillan, 1995), 382.

³⁶ Jaeger, *Paideia*, 393.

A Process of Dialogue and Events

The human condition is one of ongoing communication.

Yet the Athenians are not Thucydides' mouthpiece, with everyone else acting as foils. No city's representatives are mouthpieces for Thucydides. The process of dialogue, debate, negotiations, alternating between speech and action, and even fighting reveals Thucydides' advocacy of pluralism. Thucydides' history is an account of the debates between groups within cities and representatives from different cities, of the allied congress at Sparta, the Mytilenian Debate, negotiations with Argos, the Melian Dialogue, the debate at Syracuse, the debate at Camarina, and so on. His focus on debate and negotiations shows his view of the human condition as one of frequent and ongoing communication. Political reality is plural, not single, Thucydides observes, and to be rational, anyone must be aware of this. When this communication is successful, it makes possible an accurate calculation of power and interests. Because of various factors, to be discussed later, communication is very often unsuccessful, which has tragic consequences.

There are debates throughout the book, but there is also a constant interplay between speech and action. The book is not a monologue by Athenians, nor is it merely a parliamentary or diplomatic record. After sections of speeches and debates, there are sections of minutely described battles and military campaigns, revolts, and a plague. What fascinates Thucydides is the dialogue between people on the one hand, and the interaction between communication and action on the other.

Constant interplay between communication and action; rationality not external to history.

There is constant communication between people and constant interplay between communication and action. Reason is not reified; rationality is not external to history. Thucydides is a historian more than he is a philosopher. He seeks to report events factually and impartially. However, to do so, he has made it a "principle not to write down the first story that comes my way" (1.22). A principle is necessary for an accurate understanding of events. The father of history is no passive describer of facts. If communication between people is to be successful, it must rationally arrive at an understanding of the logic between speech and action. Negotiations and debates must incorporate the results of debates and speeches. And finally, a historian must comment, discuss, and analyze as well

as describe.

It is the description of and commentary on the process of communication and the interplay between speech and action, not any one speaker, that express the views of Thucydides. This is a book of over six hundred pages and is poorly represented by the eight or so pages that are so often reprinted in various anthologies. One cannot point to only a couple of debates, or only one set of speakers, and claim that Thucydides is advocating that position. To consider the entire book is to recognize that Thucydides can be read as advocating pluralism.

No one speaker or group expresses views of Thucydides.

Pluralism and Freedom

The father of political history observes that pluralism has characterized Peloponnesian politics at many levels: ethnic, party, city, and national. Thucydides begins his account of the Peloponnesians with an observation of ethnic pluralism. In ancient times, there had been a series of tribal migrations (1.2). Attica was unique in that it was inhabited by only one race of people (1.3). In most of Hellas, there was tribal or racial pluralism. There were also many cities in the peninsula that were racially pluralist.

The first joint action of these cities appears to have been the expedition against Troy. Thucydides, ever the non-romantic, says this joint action was not organized because Helen's pursuers were bound by oath, but because of Agamemnon, the most powerful ruler of Hellas in his time. Many cities of the time were fortified bases for seafaring pirates, who saw no dishonor in their profession. The distinction between commerce and plunder was not always clear. Still, while Agamemnon was powerful enough to organize an expedition against Troy, he did not rule a Hellenic empire. There were no alliances of small states under the leadership of great cities. There were many independent and semi-independent tribes and cities in Hellas, which often fought among themselves in local wars. Even if one concedes the point that Greece made material progress only after Sparta and Athens began to build their empires, there was even then more than one empire and no total unity.

The first threat to the independence of the Hellenic cities as a group came from King Cyrus and the Persians. The Per-

sians came with a vast armada to conquer Hellas. "It was by a common effort that the foreign invasion was repelled" (1.8). The discussion about the Persians shows that Hellas is but one country in a world of many countries.

Thucydides then discusses the unrest in Epidamnus caused by the struggle between the established people and foreign inhabitants of the city as well as between the democratic and oligarchic parties. The presence of these two parties in many cities in Hellas is frequently noted by Thucydides. Epidamnus is but the first city which is said to begin with tribal and political pluralism, but which is said to suffer when one party attempts to exclude the other from sharing power. The immediate cause of the Peloponnesian War is found in the democratic party driving the oligarchic one out of power in Epidamnus. This action replaces pluralism with political unity. The excluded party goes to other cities asking for their support. This initiates a complex series of events, due to the increasingly tense relations among Hellenic cities. The bid for unity in Epidamnus was so serious because it took place after Athens had been increasing its power, leading Sparta and other cities to fear that Athens planned to bring unity to Hellas. In this and other accounts of the rudimentary two-party system of this time, Thucydides shows that he "prefers a mixture of oligarchy and democracy to either of the pure forms."³⁷

There is pluralism at different levels. There are many tribes and often two political parties within the cities of Hellas. There are many cities within Hellas. Some are completely independent; some are semi-independent; some are dependent. Hellas is but one political entity, sharing a common language and culture, within a world of other larger entities, such as Persia, which could loosely be called nations. Pluralism is the order of the day. A city at rest *de facto* accepts this situation. Only an ambitious, innovative, restless city seeking empire would try to replace pluralism with unity under its direction.

The principal value of pluralism is freedom. The freedom of individuals, tribes, parties, cities, and nations is the primary value in Thucydides' writing. By definition, pluralism can be maintained only if each entity maintains its freedom, no one entity gaining complete power over all of the others. As

³⁷ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), 238.

Pericles says in his funeral oration, “happiness depends on being free” (2.43). With freedom, there can be unfettered debate and discussion, the greatest number of individuals realizing rationality and community.

A principal fear is the fear of losing freedom and becoming a slave. Feeling this fear, it is necessary to be courageous enough to fight to maintain one’s own freedom and that of others. Fear of losing their freedom to Persia was the Athenians’ chief motive for fighting that foreign state fifty years before the Peloponnesian War (1.75). At this point, Athens was acting honorably and rationally. After that war, which united Hellenic cities not wanting to lose their freedom to Persia, Athens changed from leading a fight against foreign domination to building its own empire and becoming a threat to the freedom of other Hellenic cities. The fear of losing Hellas’s freedom to Persian domination changed to fear within Hellas about Athenian domination.

The cause of the Peloponnesian War is found in this basic change of purpose and the corruption of Athens in the period just after the war against Persia. The Corinthians warned the Spartans that “Athens has deprived some states of their freedom and is scheming to do the same things for others, especially among our allies, and that she herself has for a long time been preparing for the eventuality of war” (1.68). The Mytilenians said that “so long as the Athenians in their leadership respected our independence, we followed them with enthusiasm. But when we saw that they were becoming less and less antagonistic to Persia and more and more interested in enslaving their own allies, and then they became more interested in enslaving their own allies, then we became frightened”(3.10). Pagondas, one of the two Boeotian commanders from Thebes, told his fellow Boeotians that “in all relations with one’s neighbors, freedom is the result of being able to hold one’s own, and as for these neighbors, who, not content with those close to them, are trying to spread their domination far and wide, with them we must simply fight it out to the last.” He continues that “the Athenians are the most dangerous of all people to have living next door to one.” He concludes that “we make it a point of honor always to fight for the freedom of our country and never unjustly to enslave the country of others, and from

A “point of honor” to fight for one’s country’s freedom and not unjustly to enslave others’ country.

us they will not get away without having to fight for it" (4.91, 4.92). Thucydides' own analysis is that "what made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta" (1.23.6) Athens had been a leader of Hellenic states when they all feared that Persia would enslave Hellas; now the growth of Athenian power caused fear in many of the cities of Hellas that their freedom was threatened.

Unlimited Power

The use of power for the sake of maintaining one's own freedom and, if possible, that of others is laudable and rational. Using power in an unlimited search for domination over others ultimately leads to self-destruction because the goal is unattainable. Too many others, all of whom have at least some power, value their freedom enough to resist enslavement. The search for unlimited domination caused fear in Hellas and finally the destruction of Athenians. After one Athenian victory, Sparta thought that Athens would be willing to make peace. "The Athenians, however, aimed at winning still more" (4.210). This was the crux of the problem with Athens; the Athenians always wanted more. Even the Athenian who told the Spartans that Athens had not gained its empire by force also said that considerations of right and wrong had "never yet turned people aside from the opportunities of aggrandizement offered by superior strength . . . It has always been a rule that the weak should be subject to the strong" (1.76).

The loss of a sense of limits is related to a love of power for its own sake. An example of this is the civil war in Corcyra, during which politics became wholly perverted. Some Corcyraeans accused others of conspiring to overthrow democracy when their real motive in killing the others was personal hatred or unpaid debt. "There was death in every shape and form. And, as usually happens in such situations, people went to every extreme and beyond it" (3.81) The process became "savage"; what had been called aggression was now called courage. "Any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character. . . . Revenge became more important than self-preservation. . . . Love of power, operating through greed and through personal ambition, was the cause

*Loss of sense
of limits
related to love
of power for its
own sake.*

of all these evils" (3.82). Unlimited power and greed, the unlimited love of wealth, had caused Corcyraeans to devalue the most basic need: self-preservation.

The classic statement of a love of power unlimited by morality is that of the Athenians in the Melian Dialogue. The Melians ask what the Athenian subjects believe to be fair play. In a case of what may be projection, the Athenians respond that, "So far as right and wrong are concerned they think that there is no difference between the two" (5.97). The Melians place great emphasis on justice. When they lose the fight, the Athenians "put to death all the men of military age whom they took, and sold the women and children as slaves. Melos itself they took over for themselves" (5.116).

Calculating Power

Careful and accurate calculation is essential to maintaining freedom in a world where power is so important. The failure to calculate relative power carefully can occur because of excessive love of power, anger, wishful thinking, unrealistic hope, haste, hatred, overconfidence, or other reasons. It is exemplified by both the Melians and Athenians, and it leads to the destruction of them both. The Melians hardly take relative power into account at all. They see fairness as an independent and superior category, not as intimately related to calculating relative power. The Athenians are no less guilty; while they love power, they do not carefully calculate relative power. They demonstrate this both in the chapter before and after the Melian Dialogue. In book 4, Thucydides notes of their allies what might also have been said of the Athenians: their "judgment was based more on usual thinking than on a sound calculation of probabilities; for the usual thing among men is that when they want something they will, without any reflection, leave that to hope, while they will employ the full use of reason in rejecting what they find unpalatable" (4.108). The "pleasurable excitement of the moment" made them "undertake all kinds of risks."

It is often thought that, because the Melians are utterly destroyed, Thucydides is saying that their concern for justice in international affairs is shown to be a dangerous chimera and that the Athenians' single-minded concern for power is

vindicated. The very next section on launching the Sicilian Expedition shows something quite different. In the paragraph immediately after the Melian Dialogue, Thucydides writes that in the same winter that they defeated Melos the Athenians decided to sail against Sicily to conquer it. "They were for the most part ignorant of the size of the island and of the numbers of its inhabitants, both Hellenic and native, and they did not realize that they were taking on a war of almost the same magnitude as their war against the Peloponnesians." The Athenians unlimited love of power, fueled by their victory over Melos, led them to violate the crucially important rule of carefully calculating their own relative power.

*Success
"comes from
foresight" and
is not granted
"simply by
wishing for
it."*

One of the Athenian generals, Nicias, argues that the goal of conquering all of Sicily is a mistake. He says that the decision is being made hastily, that the undertaking will be very difficult, and that a second war is being initiated when many enemies are still there. He says that "this is no time for running risks or for grasping at a new empire before we have secured the one we have already" (6.10). He argues that even if the many Sicilians could be conquered, they could not be controlled. He reminds his fellow Athenians that "success comes from foresight" and is not granted "simply by wishing for it" (6.13).

*Spirit and
habits of
"lawlessness"
lead to
recklessness.*

Nicias is ignored; the Athenians prefer the advice of Alcibiades, who, Thucydides chooses to tell us, hoped to command the forces in Sicily and Carthage. This command would, Alcibiades hopes, bring him wealth and honor. Thucydides tells us that Alcibiades showed "enthusiasm for horse-breeding and other extravagances [that] went beyond what his fortune could supply. This personality trait, in fact, later had much to do with the downfall of the city of Athens" (6.15). His private life, spirit, and habits showed "lawlessness." Alcibiades does not analyze Athens' power relative to that of Sicily. He tells the Athenians that he is worthy of leading the expedition against Sicily because he entered seven chariots at the Olympic Games and took first, second, and fourth place. One can almost see Thucydides throwing up his hands in despair when this seems to persuade the Athenians.³⁸

³⁸ As Riley argues in chapter 5, it was not Alcibiades' ambition, not even the cities' imperial expansion, that made inevitable the disaster, but the failure

Nicias again warns his fellow Athenians about the Sicilians' numbers of hoplites, javelin throwers, triremes, and horses and about their economic and agricultural resources. Hoping to dissuade them from deciding to do so, he says that if Athens chooses to go to war against Sicily, they will have to make extensive preparations. But they miss Nicias's point and get excited about the preparations: "The Athenians, however, far from losing their appetite for the voyage because of the difficulties in preparing for it," became more enthusiastic about it than ever, and "just the opposite of what Nicias had imagined took place. His advice was regarded as excellent, and it was now thought that the expedition was an absolutely safe thing. There was a passion for the enterprise which affected everyone alike" (6.24). The expedition the Athenians sent out was the "most costly and the finest-looking force of Hellenic troops that up to that time had ever come from a single city." Athenians were "full of hope" and "thinking of the conquests that might be made" (6.30, 6.31). Although Nicias had opposed the expedition, once his city decided to conduct it, he loyally served his city as well as he could. The invasion started off well, but ultimately failed. Nicias was killed. Thucydides says that "of all the Hellenes in my time, [he] least deserved to come to so miserable an end, since the whole of his life had been devoted to the study and the practice of virtue" (7.86). Thucydides concludes that "this was the greatest Hellenic action that took place during this war, and in my opinion, the greatest action that we know of in Hellenic history—to the victors the most brilliant of successes, to the vanquished the most calamitous of defeats; for they were utterly and entirely defeated; their sufferings were on an enormous scale; their losses were, as they say, total; army, navy, everything was destroyed, and, out of many, only a few returned. So ended the events in Sicily" (7.87). The Melian Dialogue finds its culmination not in the Athenian destruction of Melos, but in the Sicilian destruction of the Athenian forces. The love of power unchecked by careful calculation and moral considerations led to the most calamitous defeat of the greatest of expeditions.

to calculate what was needed for the campaign. Jack Riley, "Freedom and Empire: The Politics of Athenian Imperialism."

Prudent Calculations

Thucydides' call for careful calculations is not for something precise or certain. He is asking for grounded wisdom and prudence rather than a mathematically derived prediction of political events. After the Mytilenians' unsuccessful revolt against Athens, the mother city decided to react harshly. Diodotus supports a second debate to reconsider this Athenian policy. He disagrees with Cleon, who, Thucydides tells us, had a violent character. Cleon says it is a bad thing to have frequent discussions on matters of importance. Diodotus responds that "haste and anger are, to my mind, the two greatest obstacles to wise counsel—haste, that usually goes with folly, anger, that is the mark of primitive and narrow minds" (3.42). Athens turns out to be still virtuous enough to reconsider its decision and follow Diodotus's advice.

The Melians argue not only for fair play in the relationship with the Athenians. They also make the point that arguments that fall short of mathematical certitude should be accepted (5.90), which is a sensible position. The problem is that the Athenians consider only power and the Melians only fairness. Neither wisely considers all the major relevant factors—and both pay a high price for the failure to do so.

*Wisdom
requires
consideration
of both power
and fairness.*

Fortune

Although careful and prudent calculation is necessary for a free people to remain so, there can be no comprehensive and perfect calculation that accounts for everything. There is always an element of the unknown and the unknowable that bedevils the best calculation. To believe that one can consider everything is as foolish as believing that one can have unlimited power in any respect. Wise calculation combines a love of knowledge and understanding with an appreciation of the role of chance and fortune. Early in the book, in the Spartan debate about aiding Corinth in its fight against Athens, the Athenian representative wisely states, "Take time, then, over your decision, which is an important one. . . . Think, too, of the great part that is played by the unpredictable in war; think of it now before you are actually committed to war. The longer a war lasts, the more things tend to depend on accidents. Neither

you nor we can see into them: we have to abide their outcome in the dark" (1.78).

The Athenian representative was right. Brasidias, a Spartan general, in book 4 explains to the Acanthians why Sparta has come late to their city: "It is because the war at home has taken an unexpected course" (4.85). The Athenian representative was wrong only in that he directed his comment to the Spartans rather than to his own countrymen. Athens, too, suffered because of the unpredictable. When it invaded Syracuse, the campaign started off well enough for Athens, but events changed when Syracuse enjoyed "an unexpected piece of good fortune" (7.46). These and other examples show Thucydides' emphasis on chance, fortune, and the unpredictable in the development of events in the Peloponnesian War.

Freedom and War

To prevent falling under the dominance of others, or to maintain freedom, it is necessary to calculate one's power relative to that of others and consider the role of fortune in future events. If others are acting or speaking in a way that may lead them to enslave one, it may be necessary to fight. In book 1, the Corinthians tell the Spartans that

They should not shrink from the prospect of choosing war instead of peace. Wise men certainly choose a quiet life, so long as they are not being attacked; but brave men, when an attack is made on them, will reject peace and go to war, though they will be perfectly ready to come to terms in the course of the war. In fact they will neither become over-confident because of their successes in war, nor because of the charms and blessings of peace, will they put up with acts of aggression. (1.120)

In the hierarchy of goods, freedom trumps peace.

Similarly, Pericles says in book 2 that, "If one has a free choice and can live undisturbed, it is sheer folly to go to war. But suppose the choice was forced upon one—submission and immediate slavery or danger with the hope of survival; then I prefer the man who stands up to danger rather than one who runs away from it" (2.61). The decision to go to war is made correctly only when it is forced by the threats of others, because, as a Sicilian speaker said, "war is an evil . . . , and it would be pointless to go on cataloging all the disadvantages

*Thucydides
advocates de-
fensive wars,
condemns
wars of con-
quest.*

involved in it" (4-59). We have already noted the many harmful effects that prolonged war had on Corcyra. In spite of the danger that war itself will harm a polity, it is considered necessary by Thucydides to fight if freedom and pluralism are endangered by a drive to power by an imperial city. However, war for the sake of gaining unlimited power leads to utter destruction.

Collapse and Pluralist Redemption

Following the destruction of the Athenian forces in Sicily, Athens' fortunes first turned from bad to worse. Athens had once helped lead Peloponnesus to defend its freedom against Persia. It then had built an empire. It then sought to control all of Peloponnesus and beyond. Each step paralleled the deterioration of Athens' polity. A democratic city in a pluralist city-state system had sought first to establish an integrated, centralized system. It then became a centralized city itself. In its domestic and inter-city relations, it rejected pluralism. This led to its utter defeat in Sicily. It then led to instability in its own government.

In the wake of the Sicilian defeat, "The whole of Hellas . . . turned against Athens" (8.2). All of its subjects were ready to revolt. The Persians again prepared to intervene in Hellenic affairs. Alcibiades, who had betrayed Athens and fled to Sparta, conspired with the most powerful class of Athenians, who had lost the most in the war, to carry out an oligarchic coup in Athens. Democracy was destroyed and oligarchy imposed upon Athens' remaining subjects. Few dared to oppose this rule, and for anyone who did, "some appropriate way was found for having him killed. . . . The people kept quiet, and were in such a state of terror that they thought themselves lucky enough to be left unmolested even if they had said nothing at all" (8.06). However, democrats from the Athenian subject city of Samos conspired to restore democracy in Athens. A period of confusion and panic ensued.

To make matters worse, Athenian forces then lost a battle in Euboea.

When the news of what had happened in Euboea came to Athens, it caused the very greatest panic that had ever been known there. Not the disaster in Sicily, though it had seemed

great enough at the time, nor any other had ever had so terrifying an effect. And indeed there was every reason for despondency: the army at Samos was in revolt; they had no more ships, and no more crews for ships; there was civil disturbance among themselves, and no one could tell when it might come to actual fighting. (8.06)

*Athenian bid
for unchecked
power brought
disaster.*

Athenian fortunes had never been so low. The great imperial city had virtually no armed forces left. Its polity was in shambles. It had been dealt the full blow of its bid for unchecked power.

There was no place to go but up. The Five Thousand democrats deposed the Four Hundred oligarchs. A constitution was drawn up and “the Athenians appear to have had a better government than ever before, at least in my time. There was a reasonable and moderate blending of the few and the many, and it was this, in the first place, that made it possible for the city to recover from the bad state into which her affairs had fallen” (8.97). This is a crucially important point. Athens had restored a pluralist government at home, with a role for both the few and the many. The event which immediately led to the Peloponnesian War was the civil war in Epidamnus, in which one party excluded the other from sharing power. A signal event at the end of Thucydides’s book is the restoration of plural government in Athens. There follows an account of the Athenian victory at Cynossema. This success is in stark contrast to the failure immediately following the Melian Dialogue. The book ends at this point.

Morality and Religion

Leo Strauss argues that Thucydides may be offering a silent teaching about natural or divine law. That the plague follows Pericles’ speech, which mentions nothing about the gods, and that the Sicilian disaster follows the Melian Dialogue, to Strauss shows that there are heavy costs to violating the divine law. Jaeger, on the other hand, writes about Thucydides that “it is absolutely wrong to imagine that he thought the Sicilian disaster was God’s punishment for Athenian aggrandisement, for he was very far from believing that power is a bad thing in itself.”³⁹

³⁹ Strauss, *The City and Man*, 153; Jaeger, *Paideia*, 401.

Strauss also discusses the role of the good in Thucydides. Strauss notes that Thucydides speaks of three causes of the war: the Spartans' fear of growing Athenian power, the breach of the treaty, and the pollution contracted at the time of Cylon. Thucydides, Strauss continues, "does not speak there with equal emphasis of a fourth cause or justification which would seem to be the most notable: the liberation of the Greek cities from Athens' tyranny. This case is based on the premise that, as of right every city is independent or is an equal member of the whole comprising all Greek cities, regardless of whether it is large or small, strong or weak, rich or poor. Accordingly there is a good common to all Greek cities which should limit the ambitions of each."⁴⁰

Strauss is right: Thucydides does not speak of a common good that should limit ambition. Thucydides does not start by asking cities to be good; he begins by asking them to use their intelligence to calculate as accurately as possible the relative power of all cities and not to overreach. The large, strong, and rich cities need to remember that even the partially free small, weak, and poor cities have some power and the desire to maintain what freedom they possess.

However, Thucydides also shows respect for virtue, justice, and religion; not when they are used to ignore or dominate reality, but when they indicate a sense that the self is limited by things beyond itself. Could Thucydides be like Diodotus, who argues in terms of interest that his (corrupted) audience can understand so that he can encourage the practice of virtue?

Thucydides' Conclusion

The point of the *History of the Peloponnesian War* is not that the strong do what they will and the weak suffer what they must. It is not merely a description of power and self-interest. The Athenians say and do much to this effect, but they are not Thucydides' mouthpiece. He uses the constant dialogue and debate among many individuals and groups and the interplay between discussion and events as a way of furthering his substantive point: power is always limited. Because power is always limited and because others always have a degree of

⁴⁰ Strauss, *City and Man*, 238-39.

power, pluralism is the natural condition.

Wise people in a city accept this limitation, and it is reflected in their ideas and actions. They accept that fortune and religion are beyond their control and that hence knowledge is always imperfect. They know that they cannot control all people. They value their own preservation and freedom, calculate their own relative power, and fight if necessary to prevent enslavement. If they fail to recognize this limitation and strive for domination and centralization of power under their leadership, they are doomed to failure. If they recover their original appreciation of limitation, they can regain their balance and reestablish a pluralist polity. They can do so in accordance with an accurate understanding of power politics and perhaps even virtue.

Lessons of Thucydides for America and China

What we might learn from Thucydides today does not relate only to worries about the rise of China in its new role as Athens. The main lesson comes from Thucydides as an Athenian who reflects on his own city. Graham Allison and American policy makers need to be as self-reflective about America as they are about the rise of China. Thucydides' history is about Athens starting as the leader of a coalition of free Hellenic cities seeking continued independence from a Persian empire. Maybe an analogy would be the U.S. leadership in WWII of states opposing the Nazis. Thucydides then gives us an account of how Athens changed from being a leader of free cities into a hegemonic power. A possible analogy here is the rise of the imperial presidency and the growth of an American empire after WWII. Did we move from a policy of leadership of a free world to an unrestrained, imperial policy with endless wars and enormous budget deficits to pay for the largest military in the world?

The lesson to be learned is that American greatness cannot be found in the unipolarity we briefly enjoyed after WWII and the Cold War. Aspiring to that type of greatness generates animosity against us and perpetual war. It brings with it hundreds of military bases all around the world and threatens to bankrupt us. If there is to be real American greatness it needs to be drawn from a vision of an international system of free,

Wilsonian idealism indistinguishable from self-praise and imperial ambition.

independent nations who peacefully trade with each other, learn from each other's cultures, and show restraint. This is very different from Wilsonian idealism, whose moralism is indistinguishable from self-praise and imperial ambition. Thucydides advises a healthy, realistic attention to national power. The Melians made a great mistake in failing to do so. The Athenians made an equally devastating mistake in trying to achieve unlimited power.

Perhaps Chinese leaders, too, would benefit from a careful reading of Thucydides. China deserves its dream, its own greatness. Memories of the humiliations the nation suffered at the hands of Europeans and the Japanese in past centuries understandably motivate its desire to continue the advances of the past three decades. America should welcome China to a multipolar, pluralistic world in which the distribution of power is recognized and a world of mutually respectful free nations can flourish.

If making America great means an attempt to restore two brief periods of American hegemony after WWII and after the Cold War, it is not advisable. But neither can American greatness be achieved by pulling out of an international system and living in isolation. It is different with sharing a vision of the rule of law, limited government, property rights, and self-restraint even while maintaining military and economic power. If China were to succumb to the idea that greatness comes from domination, it will have fallen into Thucydides's trap. Making America and China great again would involve fostering a system of nations that value liberty and in which they exchange goods and ideas with each other.

Idea that greatness comes from domination the real Thucydides trap.