



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

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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

¹ 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.

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 exuberance
- 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)

Bad?

- 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; Peloponnesian 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)

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)

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.

- 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.