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ABSTRACT
Scholars from numerous disciplines continue to study, debate, and value Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War*. This review essay first explores and elaborates many of the enduring and vital contributions of Thucydides for IR theory. It then assesses and engages three new books, including a major, wide-ranging collection of new essays and a very influential (and deeply flawed) attempt to apply the lessons of that work—one that warns of a "Thucydides Trap" that might unwittingly ensnare the United States and China, resulting in an unwanted and catastrophic war between the two. This review essay argues that, as illustrated by the books under consideration here, contemporary IR scholars would be very well served by taking Thucydides seriously and would benefit from reading and considering his *History* with great care; at the same time, there are enormous, perilous analytical dangers inherent in attempting to draw conclusions from a superficial reading of *The Peloponnesian War*.

Ryan K. Balot, Sara Forsdyke, and Edith Foster, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Thucydides* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

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

S. N. Jaffe, *Thucydides on the Outbreak of War: Character and Contest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Why should contemporary scholars of international politics take Thucydides seriously? His *History* describes a war that took place millennia ago, an epic confrontation between two slave-holding city-states, filled with battles between spear-wielding hoplites and oar-driven triremes; it includes passages of contested provenance and ends abruptly midsentence. Nevertheless, modern IR scholars would be well served to study with care *The Peloponnesian War*, which, to

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borrow a literary phrase, is a heartbreaking work of staggering genius.[1] The Athenian general, in exile for most of the war, had the time, resources, and, most important, the disposition to observe the war—and engage in a thorough inquest into its causes and course—so that future generations might profit from his exposition and insights. In these efforts he was astonishingly successful. And despite classicists' reporting the prose to be often very challenging, countless passages (in translation) are visionary, viewed in whole cloth the book is masterfully crafted, and Thucydides' commitment to accurately reporting the facts exemplary.

Of course, no historical account can pretend to be simply a recitation of "just the facts." But this is where Thucydides' genius lies—and why his treatise remains so rewarding, even as the events he recounts recede ever further into ancient (and ultimately unknowable) history. As Jacqueline de Romilly observed, Thucydides "strives so impressively for prefect scholarly objectivity," but at the same time, "the author's intervention is profound. Everything in it is the product of his construction and his will. Every word and phrase, every silence and remark, serves to present a meaning made distinctive and imposed by him." Centuries earlier, Thomas Hobbes, one of the first to translate *The Peloponnesian War* into English, shared a similar revelation: although Thucydides never digresses "to read a lecture, moral or political, upon his own text," nevertheless, "the narration itself doth secretly instruct the reader and more effectually than can possibly be done by precept."[2]

Even assuming that every word reported by Thucydides was precisely accurate—an unrealistic standard for any work of history, and an impossible one for Thucydides, who often adjudicated between multiple oral accounts of events he did not witness, and by his own explicit acknowledgement at times recounted versions of speeches as he thought they would likely have been given—there would still inevitably remain the weighty consequences of editorial choice. What to include, what to elide; what to dwell upon at length, what to summarize perfunctorily; what to juxtapose, what to hold apart—ultimately, implicit judgments about what

[1] For the text, I have followed Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Touchstone, 1998), which is a modest refinement of the translation by Richard Crawley first published in 1874. It has been helpful to read and cross-reference some difficult or controversial passages with a new translation, Jeremy Mynott, ed., *Thucydides: The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). The magisterial three-volume Simon Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, 1996, 2008) has been an invaluable resource. The secondary literature is, of course, enormous. I have been especially influenced by five well-known contributions: John H. Finley, Jr., *Thucydides* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963 [1942]); Jacqueline de Romilly, *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism*, trans. Philip Thody (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963 [1947]); Hunter R. Rawlings, *The Structure of Thucydides'* History (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); W. Robert Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); Jeffrey S. Rusten, ed., *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Thucydides* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[2] Jacqueline de Romilly, *The Mind of Thucydides*, trans. Elizabeth Rawlings, eds., Hunter R. Rawlings III and Jeffrey Rusten (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012 [1967]), 3. See also 2, 4, 47–48; Thomas Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes,* vol. 8, ed. Sir William Molesworth, (London: John Born, 1843), vii, xii.

events mattered and which did not—none of these choices are a function of the facts. They are the essential craft of narrative nonfiction.[3]

Both explicit authorial judgment (relatively rare in *The Peloponnesian War*), and, more to the point, the power of narrative choices, are apparent in Thucydides' treatment of Pericles. Thucydides' overt praise is clear: he considered Pericles among the Athenians the "ablest alike in counsel and action" (1.139.4) and offers a long, laudatory assessment of his life, calling him "the best man for all the needs of the state" (2.65.4), one whose passing contributed directly to Athens's ultimate defeat (2.65.7). More subtle, and more rhetorically powerful, is the way Thucydides presents Pericles' three major speeches in the *History*—his advocacy for the war, the famous funeral oration, and a final, brilliant rallying of the citizenry during a difficult moment of public despair in the plague's aftermath near the end of the war's second year. Each time, Pericles speaks alone, as Thucydides withholds any other voices—what would often have been sharply dissenting voices. This is most obvious with Pericles' initial call for war. Thucydides tells us "there were many speakers who came forth to give support to one side or the other" (1.139.4), but he shares only the words of Pericles, who thus appears to stand alone and unchallenged on the stage. This inevitably privileges his perspective in a speech that one prominent Thucydides scholar argues "could stand as a summary of Thucydides' thought in the whole first book."[4] It certainly includes a crucial passage representative of Thucydidean prudence, in which Pericles assures his listeners of victory in the coming struggle, "if you can consent not to combine schemes of fresh conquest with the conduct of the war," adding a phrase that would haunt innumerable military disasters over the following centuries: "Indeed, I am more afraid of our own blunders than of the enemy's devices" (1.144.1).

Thucydidean Legacies

Thucydides, of course, made his share of errors, and his accounts are necessarily filtered through the lens of his own distinct perspective.[5] Nevertheless, a careful reading of *The Peloponnesian War* reveals countless

[3] On the central role of such Thucydidean choices, see, for example, Tim Rood, *Thucydides: Narrative and Explanation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1998); David Gribble, "Narrator Interventions in Thucydides," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 118 (November 1998): 41–67; and Rawlings, *Structure of Thucydides'* History, 50–51. The relative omniscience of the narrator cannot but inform the way in which events are described in retrospect; not surprisingly, "Thucydides draws on hindsight, his knowledge of the outcome, to interpret and shape the history that produced this outcome." Kurt A. Raaflaub, "*Ktēma es aiei*: Thucydides' Concept of 'Learning through History' and Its Realization in His Work," in *Thucydides Between History and Literature*, ed. Antonis Tsakmakis and Melina Tamiolaki (Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2013), 12; see also Jonas Grethelein, "The Presence of the Past in Thucydides," in Tsakmakis and Tamiolaki, *Thucydides Between History and Literature*, 91.

[4] Finley, Jr., *Thucydides*, 139, 142 (quote).

[5] These issues are raised and engaged in *The Oxford Handbook* and *Thucydides on the Outbreak of War* and noted below in the discussions of those books; see also footnotes 17 and 34.

lessons still of value to students of international relations. From start to finish, Thucydides reminds his readers of the stark consequences of anarchy: behaviors may be restrained, norms may be respected, and actors might behave in a civilized fashion. But they might not—and nothing guarantees that the very worst will not come to pass. In one early episode, the Corinthians, after routing one adversary in battle, "butchered as they sailed through, not caring so much to take prisoners" (1.50.1). A military commander in the Athenian empire, Thucydides did not shrink from the prospect of war nor the bloodshed that combat would necessarily entail. But his revulsion at the wanton exercise of gratuitous violence is palpable—as is his awareness that such episodes are often the bitter harvest of anarchy. Thucydides pauses to observe how, "in the fury of the moment," the citizens of Athens voted to put to death "the whole adult male population of Mytilene, and to make slaves of the women and children" before having a change of heart after a second day of debate, in which the decision was narrowly overturned (3.36.2). But before the reader can exhale, the narrative shifts to Plataea, where the Spartans deliver the brutal fate that Mytilene avoided for no other reason than Sparta's desire "to please the Thebans, who were thought to be useful in the war" (3.68.4). Other such episodes abound, such as the annihilation of Scione, as the Athenians "put the adult males to death … making slaves of the women and children" (5.32.1), and Sparta "killing all the freemen that fell into their hands" after capturing the Argive city Hysiac (5.83.2) before marching on to plunder Phlius.[6]

Thucydides also had much to teach about the imperatives of power and the exigencies of politics, with passages that have not aged a day since he first articulated them. Everywhere, the balance of power primordially shapes decisions. Consider the peripheral conflict that emerges as the proximate cause of the war, the confrontation between Corinth and Corcyra. Should Athens allow itself to be drawn into the conflict, in defense of neutral Corcyra against Sparta's ally? Much talk ensues, but ultimately Thucydides shares the compelling logic: Athenian power rested on its naval dominance; Corcyra, the weaker power, possessed a formidable navy. And "no one was willing to see a naval power of such magnitude as Corcyra sacrificed to Corinth" (1.44.2).[7]

[6] As Mynott notes, the massacre at Hysiac is "one of the many brief references to acts of brutality in war." *The War of the Peloponnesians*, 377.

[7] Throughout the work, balance-of-power concerns routinely tip the decision-making scales: one reason Sparta agreed to the peace of Nicias was an awareness that their peace treaty with long-time Peloponnesian rival city Argos was about to expire. Faced with a common threat from Athens, the feuding cities of Sicily set aside their differences. Late in the war, Persia modulated its support for Sparta with an eye toward playing one rival against the other.

Attentiveness to power dynamics—that is, that changes to the balance of power are much more consequential than its distribution at any moment in time—is Thucydides' most visible influence on contemporary IR theory. Robert Gilpin's *War and Change in World Politics* is the most prominent among many modern studies that have been imprinted by the fundamental claim: "The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable" (1.23.6).[8] It is eminently reasonable to quibble with the word "inevitable" (especially given Thucydides' general and steadfast rejection of determinism); moreover, he could certainly have been wrong. But that Thucydides saw this as the true cause of the war is hard to dispute, and as if to make sure the point is clear he offers a reprise of the argument ("the Spartans out of fear of you want war" (1.33.3)) and then doubles down explicitly on the claim (the Spartans chose war "because they feared the growth of the power of the Athenians" (1.88.1)).[9]

In his exposition of seemingly endless political jockeying between rivals (and often erstwhile allies), Thucydides also illustrates the open-ended nature of international politics. Conflicts are not misunderstandings to be resolved but the result of inevitable conflicts of interest—and the resolution of one contest simply reveals the next waiting in the wings. This is most apparent in Books V and VIII, often criticized for their relative raggedness but to some extent reflecting periods where such political tumult was most salient, first after the Peace of Nicias and later in the wake of the Sicilian catastrophe. Many of Sparta's allies opposed the Peace of Nicias, and the most intriguing development of an alliance between Corinth and Argos followed. Similar shifts fill the narrative of Book VIII, which anticipate Palmerston's nineteenth-century adage that Britain did not have permanent allies or enemies, only interests.[10]

In addition to his prescient mastery of the tenets of power politics, Thucydides offers savvy insights that have fallen out of favor with many prominent schools of thought. Most notably, Thucydides repeatedly roots actions taken in world politics in three principal motivations: fear, honor, and interest. Today it is more common to limit the analysis to interest (in particular the pursuit of individualist-egoistic, exclusively material interest). But Thucydides' anonymous Athenians speaking before a Spartan assembly (surely one of the passages he reconstructed, at best) attribute the

[8] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); see also G. John Ikenberry, ed., *Power, Order and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) and the literature cited in footnote 39.

[9] Hornblower argues that the "clear echo" at 1.33.3 is "decisive against attempts" to dispute this conclusion. *Commentary*, vol. 1, 78; see also 65, 133.

[10] On shifting alliances and endless political combinations, especially as described in Books V and VII, see Geoffrey Hawthorn, *Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) and Robin Seager, "After the Peace of Nicias: Diplomacy and Policy, 421–416 B.C." *Classical Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (1976): 249–69.

factors that drive foreign policy: "fear being our principal motive, though honor and interest afterwards came in" (1.75.3). Interest certainly matters, but fear comes first; yet another reminder that all pursuits take place under the shadow of anarchy. And interest is formatively shaped by honor—what actors want, and how they pursue it, is influenced by a sense of what is honorable. This more than opens the door for—it demands attention to—the distinct social-cultural context of political action.

This should come as no surprise to careful readers of Thucydides. Although he does indeed attribute the origins of the war to systemic pressures, his explication of the conflict is saturated with attention to variables at the first and second levels of analysis—it is impossible to imagine he would leave home without them. Regime type is a crucial explanatory variable in *The Peloponnesian War*; one modest example among many is when two of Sparta's allies hedge their bets about joining an emerging coalition, "thinking Argive democracy would not agree so well with their aristocratic forms of government as the Spartan constitution" (5.31.5). Domestic politics are also at the root of Sparta's eventual disenchantment with the Peace of Nicias, for "the ephors under whom the treaty had been made were no longer in office, and some of their successors were directly opposed to it" (5.36.1).

Thucydides also expected democracies to behave differently than nondemocracies and not necessarily in a good way. Another common thread that winds its way through the narrative is his concern that democracies will be carried away by the malevolent schemes of charismatic demagogues. Such passages can be especially dispiriting to read today, but the point is more general: leadership and domestic politics and practices matter—not to fill in details but to explain outcomes. In one passage Thucydides (2.65.11–13) kills these two birds with one stone, when, as Jeffrey Rusten argues, he "seems to trace Athenian defeat to a single cause, a lack of unity which began after Pericles's death."[11] And even Thucydides' account of the consequences of the changing balance of power can only be properly understood when filtered through his elaborate elucidations about the national characters of Athens and Sparta, the distinction between which is arguably the overarching theme of his entire *History*.

The Peloponnesian War also instructs with its emphasis on the central role of uncertainty and contingency in explaining outcomes.[12] Thucydides goes to great lengths to show that things need not have occurred as they

[11] J. S. Rusten, ed., *Thucydides: The Peloponnesian War, Book II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 212.

[12] The distinction between risk and uncertainty is receiving increasing attention among scholars of international relations. For entrees into this burgeoning literature, see Stephen C. Nelson and Peter J. Katzenstein, "Uncertainty, Risk, and the Financial Crisis of 2008," *International Organization* 68, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 361–92; and Jonathan Kirshner, "The Economic Sins of Modern IR Theory and the Classical Realist Alternative," *World Politics* 67, no. 1 (January 2015): 155–83. For an important illustration of some of the analytical stakes in play with this distinction, see Frank H. Knight, "'What is Truth' in Economics?" *Journal of Political Economy* 48, no. 1 (February 1940): 1–32.

did. On numerous occasions votes on momentous issues are very close—and at times decisions reached are reversed (which certainly suggests that either result was plausible)—and the outcome of crucial battles often determined not by the calculable correlation of forces but by the unforeseeable interventions of chance and blind luck: an earthquake here, a storm there, an unplanned detour that proved decisive. Both of these elements were present in the Mytilene affair, which featured two close votes, the second of which overturned the brutal sentence of the first; Thucydides then provides a breathless account of how a second Athenian ship was "at once set off in haste" and overtook the first, tasked with "so horrid an errand," in the nick of time (3.48.2–4).[13] The Spartan king Archidamus, whom Thucydides praises as "a wise and moderate man," advises against rushing into war with Athens, warning that "the course of war cannot be foreseen" (1.72.2, 2.11.4)—an adage illustrated by the narrative time and time again.

Finally, Thucydides offers two profound lessons—really more warnings than lessons—about the fragility of civilization and danger of hubris. If only two takeaways from *The Peloponnesian War* were permitted, these would be the most important, and, I would argue, they most plainly fulfill Thucydides' ambition to offer, with his *History*, "a possession for all time" (1.22.4). Thucydides' concern for the fragility of civilized order is illustrated by the extent to which he lingers on the consequences of the plague that ravaged Athens in the second year of the war. With the tumult of the plague, "men now did just what they pleased, coolly venturing on what they had formerly done only in a corner" (2.53.1). Similarly, during the Corcyrean revolution, men took to "butchering those of their fellow citizens whom they regarded as their enemies" and "death raged in every shape; and, as usually happens in such times, there was no length to which the violence did not go" (3.82.2). As Simon Hornblower argues persuasively, "The importance of this section for the student of [Thucydides'] own opinions cannot be exaggerated."[14]

And then there is the greatest lesson of them all—Thucydides' exposition of how, as Pericles had feared, it was not the power and designs of adversaries that led to Athenian defeat and ruin but rather hubris in the form of reckless overambition. Athens fell not because it was overtaken by rivals

[13] Even the initial decision that led to the war—coming to the aid of Corcyra—was a close call in which sentiments shifted over the course of two assemblies. "In the first there was a manifest disposition to listen to the representations of Corinth; in the second, public feeling had changed" (1.44.1).

[14] Hornblower, *Commentary*, vol. 1, 478; see also Rusten, *Peloponnesian War*, 191; and Gregory Crane, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity: The Limits of Political Realism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 53. Thucydides also recounts a harrowing episode of mob rule in Athens, complete with coerced confessions—suspects were rounded up and thrown in prison, with one advised that "he would be surer of safety if he confessed after promise of impunity than if he denied and were brought to trial" (6.60.3). His subsequent confession did secure his freedom but led to mass executions, even though it was "not clear whether the sufferers had been punished unjustly" (6.60.5).

but because it became intoxicated with the idea of its own greatness and could not recognize the limits of its own power. There are two crucial moments in the text where Thucydides drives home this essential argument. First, in year seven of the war, Sparta suffers a disastrous setback at Pylos and offers terms to Athens, which they describe as "satisfactory to your interests, and as consistent with our dignity in our misfortune as circumstances permit" (4.17.1). The Spartans urge Athens to recognize that good fortune, not final victory, had contributed to their advantageous present circumstances—the underlying balance of power had not much changed, if, admittedly, Sparta had suffered a terrible setback. "Indeed, sensible men are prudent enough to treat their gains as precarious, just as they would keep a clear head in adversity" (4.18.3). Unfortunately, Thucydides reports, "The Athenians, however … grasped at something further" (4.21.2), and rejected the offer—though soon enough "they began to repent rejecting the treaty" (4.27.2).[15]

Grasping for more at Pylos is, of course, just a preview of the central episode of Thucydides' entire narrative—the disastrous decision to try to conquer Sicily. The Athenians "were now bent upon invading; being ambitious in real truth of conquering the whole" (6.5.1). Nicias—and it is very hard to argue that Thucydides does not fully endorse his perspective—urged against the enterprise in public debate, with compelling (and all too accurate) admonitions. "You leave many enemies behind you here to go there far away and bring back more with you," he warned. Athens "should not be grasping at another empire before we have secured the one we have already" (6.10.1–5). Although Nicias was (rightly) concerned that Sparta remained the principal danger to Athens, he also noted, wisely, that the Sicilians, "even if conquered, are too far off and too numerous to be ruled without difficulty" (6.11.1) and urged the Athenians to reject this "mad dream of conquest" (6.13.1).[16] His advice, of course, was rejected. How did it go for the Athenians? In Thucydides' words: "They 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 of many returned home. Such were the events in Sicily" (7.87.6).

[15] This was a mistake they would make more than once. The tide at Pylos turned again in Athens's favor, and Sparta sent emissaries to negotiate, but again the Athenians "kept grasping at more, and dismissed envoy after envoy" (4.41.4). On the importance of this episode, and Thucydides' emphasis on this point, see de Romily, *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism*, 172–76, 322, 327; Rawlings, *Structure*, 229–30.

[16] The reader "quickly realizes that Thucydides himself favors the views of Nicias." Hans-Peter Stahl, "Speeches and the Course of Events in Books Six and Seven of Thucydides," in Rusten, *Oxford Readings*, 346 (quote), 352; see also John H. Finley, Jr., *Three Essays on Thucydides* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 147.

The State of the Art

Given all that Thucydides has to offer, it is with eager anticipation that one cracks the formidable covers of *The Oxford Handbook of Thucydides*, which brings together forty new essays from an accomplished group of experts. Editors Ryan K. Balot, Sara Forsdyke, and Edith Foster are, appropriately, trained as classicists (as are the large majority of the contributors to the volume); they currently hold positions at the Universities of Toronto, Michigan, and Strasbourg, respectively.

Students of international politics need to be cognizant of the disciplinary roots of this enterprise. Scholars from numerous fields of study pore over Thucydides, inspired by the myriad contributions to many intellectual endeavors to be found in *The Peloponnesian War*. Many of these, of course, are not of central concern to IR. Most notably, classicists and historians of ancient Greece have, understandably, devoted extensive attention to assessing, with laudable care and spirited contestation, the accuracy of some of Thucydides' claims. The allure of following the thread of these tantalizing debates is considerable, so much so that it becomes necessary to keep in mind what most matters for IR. In particular, for the game to be worth the candle—that is, if Thucydides is worth taking seriously—then two plausible assumptions must hold: that Thucydides was a prodigious thinker and that he was committed to an honest exposition of the facts as he understood them. This means, for IR theory, it does not matter if he made some factual errors or whether or not his arguments regarding the causes of the war or his interpretation of events during its course are "correct" or not. What matters for IR is not the exact details of an ancient war but the wisdom to be found in what Thucydides had to say.[17]

Fortunately, *The Oxford Handbook* has much to offer on that score. Section I, the book-within-a-book "Thucydides as Historian," should be required reading for any serious student of international politics. Co-editor Forsdyke sets a high standard with the volume's first chapter, walking through both Thucydides' arduous effort to gather the facts of the matter and the way in which his narrative choices nevertheless are "shaping his presentation" to "induce readers to accept his version of the past" (20).[18]

[17] Consider the flood of books that were published on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of the start of World War I. Most of these were written by accomplished historians marshalling facts and formulating arguments. Each of these accounts is contested by others. Which is definitively correct? That remains an open debate. In contrast, Thucydides' account of his war remains the only substantive history we have. Had ten other accounts been written at the time of the war, with each author making good-faith efforts to objectively present the evidence, Thucydides' arguments and interpretations would have no doubt been contested—he surely made errors and certainly had a point of view. But we don't have access to that debate; moreover, tidying up various factual errors and omissions in *The Peloponnesian War* would not change what Thucydides has to offer IR theory—the lessons that he would have us draw from his account of the war.

[18] For a recent study of the power of narrative choices, see Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Peter Hunt also emphasizes this theme in his contribution, which focuses on the first ten years of the war. Hunt is very much in the business of assessing the accuracy of Thucydides' claims (and notes that available evidence, such as surviving inscriptions, is generally consistent with his accounts), but he too concludes that more consequential are the types of choices that any work of history must make, such as which events to emphasize at the expense of others. Similarly, Lisa Kallet, in her review of the Pentecontaetia (Thucydides' overview of the roughly fifty-year period between the end of the Persian Wars and the start of the Peloponnesian War), argues that the common critique of these passages—that they omit much—misses his purpose. Thucydides did not aim to provide a comprehensive survey of those decades but rather was presenting "an argument supporting a theory of causation" (63), in this case regarding the rise of Athenian power.[19]

Along the way, Kallet's observation that Athens and Corinth were close allies before 460 BCE, after which their relations soured over a number of issues, provides an illustration of the fluidity of alliances and the contestations that are the stuffing of international politics; this is a central theme of Cinzia Bearzot's chapter on the machinations that took place in the interwar years (the unstable Peace of Nicias that was an interregnum between two periods of more active fighting between the principal antagonists). Also among the fine contributions in this part of the *Handbook* is Emily Greenwood's chapter on the Sicilian campaign. Greenwood effectively showcases Thucydides' emphasis on chance and contingency—how throughout his entire narrative Thucydides suggests that various episodes could have turned out quite differently than they actually did—while still understanding his clear position regarding Sicily: the way to avoid that "colossal disaster" was "not to invade in the first place" (168).

Section II, "Thucydidean Historiography," boasts a particularly impressive roster of contributors, including W. Robert Connor, Hunter R. Rawlings III, and Jeffrey Rusten. Connor's chapter, "Compression, Expansion, and Vividness in Thucydides," returns to the theme of narrative power and how Thucydides' decisions about on what to linger, and what to quickly summarize, powerfully shape his purpose. For example, as Connor notes, "Since Melos was not of great strategic significance, something else must account for the attention it receives" (213). And, along with several other contributors to the handbook, Connor notes the extent to which Thucydides dwells on peripheral events and atrocities, such as one that took place in "a small town of no strategic significance" (219), the

[19] It should be reemphasized here, as noted above and in footnote 12, that Thucydides, with his emphasis on uncertainty and contingency, does not embrace "causation" in the manner of most contemporary social scientists.

murderous rampage of the Thracians at Mycalessus.[20] Here and elsewhere, Thucydides slows the narrative with passages that make clear how easily war can lead to the crumbling of the thin layer of civilization.

A third section, "Thucydides and Political Theory," casts a wide net to catch what might fall into that general category, and as a result many of the contributions here speak directly to questions of international politics. Arlene W. Saxonhouse notes Thucydides' engagement with a perennial question in IR: the optimal management of imperial expansion (or, more generally, of great power influence and ambition). The "optimal" extent of expansion ultimately proves slippery, for at the frontiers of power and influence new threats will inevitably appear, and fresh opportunities beckon. Once again, *The Peloponnesian War* illustrates how international political questions are never settled; they are simply recast. As Saxonhouse describes, "There is no release from the constant search for more power" (346), an argument put forth most crudely (and ultimately, tragically) by the notorious Alcibiades, advocating in favor of the Sicilian campaign: "We cannot fix the exact point at which our empire shall stop; we have reached a position in which we must not be content with retaining what we have but must scheme to extend it for, if we cease to rule others, we shall be in danger of being ruled ourselves" (6.18.3).

Other chapters in this part of the *Handbook* elucidate other Thucydidean tenets. Mark Fisher and Kinch Hoekstra remind readers how the theme of national character weaves its way throughout the entire narrative and how these differences across communities "influenced how their members interpreted and pursued their interests" (378).[21] Victoria Wohl highlights the role of emotions—especially fear and passion—in motivating key decisions in the text; Mary Nichols reviews Thucydides' emphasis on the importance of leaders and leadership.

A final section of the *Handbook* offers something of a potpourri under the broad heading of "Contexts and Ancient Reception"; the contributions here are clear and accessible, though they tend to drift further from the core concerns of IR scholarship. An engaging chapter cross-references Thucydides' treatment of some major players with how they appeared in the stage productions of the day (Aristophanes certainly shared Thucydides' harshly negative assessment of the demagogue Cleon). Tobias

[20] The Thracians "sacked the houses and the temples and butchered the inhabitants, sparing neither youth nor age but killing all they fell in with, one after the other, children and women, and even beasts of burden, and whatever living creatures they saw" (7.29.4). "Everywhere confusion reigned and death in all its shapes; and in particular they attacked a boys' school, the largest that there was in the place, into which the children had just gone, and massacred them all" (7.29.5).

[21] The contrast of character of Sparta and Athens is stressed at length by the Corinthians (1.69–1.71) and forcefully in Thucydides' own voice, appealing to "the wide difference between the two characters" in explaining how events unfolded. Thucydides also attributes the success of Syracuse to the fact that they "were most like the Athenians in character" (8.96.5).

Joho's contribution reprises some major themes of interest, including Thucydides' attentiveness to gratuitous suffering, his effective use of "extreme narrative deceleration" (591) to dwell on moments he wishes to invest with meaning, and the powerful role of contingency and chance in shaping outcomes.

Getting Thucydides Wrong

Not surprisingly, for centuries scholars have drawn on Thucydides to gain insights into international politics; in recent decades there have been many exemplary efforts along these lines.[22] Graham Allison's *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* is not one of them. An attempt to apply the lessons of *The Peloponnesian War* to current tensions between China and the United States, *Destined for War* is sloppy, superficial, oversimplified, overconfident, and repetitive.[23] It leans on previously published efforts (a book of interviews with Lee Kuan Yew[24]) and often rests arguments on rank name-dropping (Henry Kissinger, for example, is invoked more than thirty times, with the implicit infallible authority one might attribute to an American Confucius).

There are two fundamental problems with this enterprise more generally, regarding its treatment of Thucydides, and, distinctly, regarding the lessons that it aspires to glean from his *History*. Ultimately, *Destined for War* is an exemplar of exactly the kind of work of which Paul Schroeder so keenly warned. The book illustrates "an attitude toward history not uncommon among scholars of many kinds: an unconscious disdain for it, a disregard of its complexity and subtleties and the problems of doing it well or using it wisely; an unexamined assumption that its lessons and insights lie on the surface for anyone to pick up, so that one can go at history like a looter at an archeological site, indifferent to

[22] Exceptional treatments include Michael W. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism, and Socialism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), chap. 1, "Complex Realism: Thucydides"; Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), chap. 3, "Thucydides and War"; Paul A. Rahe, "Thucydides' Critique of Realpolitik," *Security Studies* 5, no. 2 (1995): 105–41; and Mark V. Kauppi, "Thucydides: Character and Capabilities," *Security Studies* 5, no. 2 (1995): 142–68. Other noteworthy contributions include Daniel Garst, "Thucydides and Neorealism," *International Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (March 1989): 3–27; Laurie M. Johnson Bagby, "The Use and Abuse of Thucydides in International Relations," *International Organization* 48, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 131–53; Steven Forde, "International Realism and the Science of Politics: Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Neorealism" *International Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (June 1995): 141–60; David Boucher, *Political Theories of International Relations: From Thucydides to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 47–86; David Welch, "Why International Relations Theorists Should Stop Reading Thucydides," *Review of International Studies* 29, no. 3 (July 2003): 301–19; and William Desmond, "Lessons of Fear: A Reading of Thucydides," *Classical Philology* 101, no. 4 (October 2006): 359–79.

[23] On page 37, the reader is presented with the rise/fear construction for a fifth time.

[24] Graham Allison and Robert D. Blackwell with Ali Wyne, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

context and deeper meaning, concerned only with taking what can be immediately used or sold."[25]

Allison certainly falls into this "Schroeder Trap": his core concern that "China and the United States are currently on a collision course for war—unless both parties take difficult and painful actions to avert it" is intended as application of Thucydides' "true cause" of the Peloponnesian War (vii), Athens's rise, and Sparta's resulting fears. This is an uneasy fit for many reasons—to start, there is an awkwardness in the analogy: if anything, the United States more resembles Athens and China Sparta, which, given Thucydides' emphasis on the importance of national character in explaining state behavior, is no small thing. But the Thucydidean problems with *Destined for War* are much more profound. It is not simply that Allison misuses Thucydides, forcefully attempting to shoehorn selections of *The Peloponnesian War* into the service of an ill-fitting argument; astonishingly, *Destined for War* also repeatedly gets Thucydides wrong—fundamentally and consequentially wrong. Routine errors abound, as when Allison announces that Thucydides "did not live to see" the end of the war (xv). This contrasts with Thucydides' recollection: "I lived through the whole of it, being of an age to comprehend events, and giving my attention to them" (5.25.5); moreover, and crucially, his awareness of the war's conclusion shaped the choices Thucydides made in crafting his narrative.[26]

The Peloponnesian War does break off midsentence, years before the war's conclusion, so this misstep could be forgiven—were it not the tip of a massive iceberg of error. And those mistakes are central to the claims that Allison wants to make, that he might drive home his analogy. *Destined for War* insists on framing the Peloponnesian War as a tragedy that neither side wanted to fight (as almost certainly would be the case in a future war between the United States and China). Allison speaks of "their repeated attempts to avoid it" (30) and "their best efforts to prevent conflict" (40); he asserts that Pericles did not want war but ultimately "bent to popular pressure and reluctantly drew up plans for war" (37).

This is wrong. Neither side made their best effort for peace. Pericles was a strong advocate for the war. Rejecting compromise and proposals for a negotiated solution, he rallied the public with a rousing speech, the central point of which was "it must be thoroughly understood that war is a necessity" (1.144.3). And the public did not sway Pericles—in open debate, with both sides represented, Thucydides reports the opposite: the public voted for war because they were "persuaded of the wisdom of his advice"

[25] Paul Schroeder, "Historical Reality vs. Neo-Realist Theory," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (Summer 1994): 148.
[26] Jeffrey S. Rusten, "Thucydides and His Readers," in Rusten, *Oxford Readings*, 3; Hobbes, *English Works*, xvi; Raaflaub, "Thucydides Concept of 'Learning through History,'" 9.

(1.114.5).[27] Nor did the Spartans search eagerly for a peaceful solution. In contrast, they refused the offer of arbitration (a measure that would have been in accord with the terms of the existing thirty-year peace). And they came to regret doing so, acknowledging explicitly that they were in the wrong. According to Thucydides, on the precipice of the war's resumption after the Peace of Nicias, the Spartans were keen not to make the same mistake twice: "In the former war, they considered that the offense had been more on their own side" for several reasons, including "their own refusal to listen to the Athenian offer of arbitration, in spite of the clause in the former treaty that where arbitration should be offered there should be no appeal to arms" (7.18.2).[28]

Allison's litany of errors regarding *The Peloponnesian War* is vast.[29] An egregious whopper is when he declares, "Every one of the six hundred pages in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* offers compelling details about the twists and turns along the path" to the war (29). This is of course gobsmackingly wrong; the overwhelming majority of the book details events that take place after the war has started.[30] More troubling still (for Allison's analytical claims, at least) is that the errors more commonly (but not exclusively) root in the larger problem of a presentist fallacy that fundamentally undermines his argument. *Destined for War* begins with ominous analogies to World War I and the Cuban Missile Crisis to warn of the real danger that the United States and China might stumble into a war that neither side wants. And it is certainly true that a version of the "Guns of

[27] On Pericles' war advocacy and his efforts to persuade the public of its necessity, see, for example, Mark Fisher and Kinch Hoekstra, "Thucydides and the Politics of Necessity," 373; and Mary P. Nichols, "Leaders and Leadership in Thucydides' History," 461, in Balot, Forsdyke, and Foster, *Oxford Handbook*.

[28] On the Spartan acknowledgement of their culpability, see Hornblower, *Commentary*, vol. 3, 574; Mynot, *War of the Peloponnesians*, 462. Also contra a "best efforts to avoid" claim, Lisa Kallet argues that Thucydides "true cause" argument was at odds with "popular views" at the time that attributed the war either to "Pericles' belligerence" or Spartan intransigence ("The Pentecontaetia," in Balot, Forsdyke, and Foster, *Oxford Handbook*, 64).

[29] Representative problematic passages relating to the war's origin: According to Allison, "like so many others, Athens believed its advance to be benign." Contrast this with Pericles, speaking to his fellow citizens: "For what you hold is, to speak plainly, a tyranny; to take it perhaps was wrong, but to let go is unsafe" (2.63.2). Allison describes Sparta as reacting to the Athenian challenge with "insecurity, fear, and a determination to defend the status quo," but actually Sparta was for a long time passive in response to the rise of Athenian power, only roused to (cautious) action when confronted by angry allies like the Corinthians who complained of Spartan passivity—and even then Sparta's leadership was divided on the issue. Allison argues that Sparta feared that the rise of Athens "would eventually jeopardize Spartan hegemony" (33), but it is not at all clear that Sparta enjoyed "hegemony" even within the Peloponnese, given its long-standing rivalry with the formidable Argos (Mynott, *War of the Peloponnesians*, 338). And Allison mischaracterizes the nature of Athens's original support for Corcyra; what he describes as the "compromise solution" or a "small, symbolic fleet" (35) was actually the result of a thoughtful, nuanced strategy to only agree to a defensive alliance with Corcyra. Moreover, the appearance of the Athenian ships was consequential for the outcome of that conflict (and one of the many things that made the Corinthians so angry with Athens and thus their rushing off to rouse Sparta).

[30] *Destined for War* very discreetly acknowledges this blunder in a buried afterthought. Some final reader of the manuscript noticed this egregious error and added the following endnote at the last minute: "Book 1 of History of the Peloponnesian War analyzes the path to war. The remaining seven books chronicle the war itself."

August" scenario is all too plausible today. An international crisis that implicates the interests of the United States and China, especially one mismanaged by incompetent elites and stoked by nationalist fever, might slip out of control and lead to a ruinous, unwanted war. But his central analogy does not hold—neither Athens nor Sparta were sleepwalkers, unaware of the nature of the emerging conflict. Both sides preferred war to peace. As Arthur M. Eckstein recounts in his chapter for the *Oxford Handbook*, in ancient Greece, war was a common, normal, and legitimate course of action.[31] Between advanced societies today, it is approached with greater caution and a clear sensitivity to the enormous costs (and opportunity costs) that such a conflict would entail, and naked aggression is not understood to be a legitimate method of adjudicating disputes.[32]

Thucydides, a great admirer of war-advocate Pericles, did not situate the Athenian tragedy in the decision for war (and, again, it would be a mistake to impose contemporary sensibilities about the resort to war on these ancient generals)—but in hubris. The tragedy was not that the war took place; rather, it was that Pericles' wise strategy was abandoned after he left the stage. The Athenians did indeed fall victim to a terrible trap, one that has undiminished contemporary relevance and application, but it was the trap of hubris. Twice, catastrophically, Athens "grasped for more" and caused its own undoing. That is the great lesson of *The Peloponnesian War*.

Revisiting the Origins of the War

Those seeking to better understand the origins of the war—and the possibility of drawing lessons from that experience—would be much better served by reading Eric W. Robinson's very fine chapter in the *Oxford Handbook*, "Thucydides on the Causes and Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War," or, for still more, *Thucydides on the Outbreak of War: Character and Contest*, by S. N. Jaffe, a political theorist currently at John Cabot University.

Jaffe is also featured in the *Oxford Handbook*, with a chapter that emphasizes the importance of regime type and domestic politics more generally in *The Peloponnesian War*; he also makes fine observations there about Thucydides' concern that war will aggravate tensions within societies (threatening the emergence of tyranny) and Thucydides' obvious admiration for wise, prudent leaders. In *Outbreak of War*, Jaffe engages in a close

[31] Arthur M. Eckstein, "Thucydides, International Law and International Anarchy," in Balot, Forsdyke, and Foster, *Oxford Handbook*, esp. 498–99, 502.

[32] None of this is to suggest that such wars could not occur or that actors will necessarily refrain from behaviors that violate generally shared norms. Nevertheless, the difference between the two settings is enormous, and that matters.

reading of Book I in order to consider Thucydides' political thought in general and to explore what lessons might be drawn from his presentation of the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War.

Jaffe's central claim, hammered home time and again, is that "the national characters of Athens and Sparta are essential for understanding the war's outbreak" (11). Thus, although Thucydides is unambiguous in his basic claim regarding Athens's rise and Sparta's fear, "his famous line cannot be interpreted in isolation." Rather, it is a point of departure from which it is then necessary to see "the *History's entire* first book" as contextualizing that argument (5). *Outbreak of War* also participates in continuing debates about which side bears responsibility for the conflict; despite observing the crucial role of Pericles and his articulation of "a distinctly Athenian necessity for war" (19), Jaffe's conclusion is evenhanded.

The first two chapters are the strongest of the book. "The Manifest Quarrels" nicely illustrates how changes in a local balance of power threatened to upset the regional balance of power, which in turn exacerbated tensions between great powers Athens and Sparta. Jaffe also shows how, despite his dispassionate exposition of the facts, Thucydides leads the reader to share his own conclusion: Athens had little choice but to come to the aid of Corcyra. Jaffe further elucidates the nuance of Athenian strategy: that the defensive alliance, "while provocative to Corinth," was "crafted to avoid forcing a confrontation with Sparta" (52). Nevertheless, Corinth, as a result of this and other maddening clashes detailed by Thucydides, grew increasingly angry with Athens and frustrated with Spartan passivity. In "The Spartan Congress," Jaffe reviews the four great speeches of the Corinthians, the Athenians, and the Spartan leaders Archidamus and Stenelaidas. This crucial juncture on the road to war is widely understood as exemplary of the "national character" argument, and so it is not surprising to find *Outbreak of War* on especially firm ground here.[33] (Jaffe takes admirable care to acknowledge as well the role that both political imperatives and ubiquitous uncertainty play in explaining the outcome. Sparta could not afford to lose Corinth as an ally (this was threatened), just as Athens could not allow the Corcyraean navy to fall under adversarial control. In each case, of course, "could not" is too strong; Thucydides shows that the votes on both issues were close and could have turned out differently.)

Subsequent chapters in *Outbreak of War* continue to follow and review Thucydides' narrative, hewing close to this theme of distinct national

[33] See, for example, Ellen G. Millender, "Sparta and the Crisis of the Peloponnesian League in Thucydides' *History*," in Balot, Forsdyke, and Foster, *Oxford Handbook*: "Through the four speeches delivered at the meetings of the Spartan Assembly and the Peloponnesian League, Thucydides explores the national character of Athens and Sparta" illustrating the clash between "two vastly different types of society," 81.

characters and their consequences. Some interesting puzzles are raised along the way, such as why the brilliant (and very Thucydidean) speech of the Spartan king Archidamus fails to carry the day. And although Jaffe is not at his best when discussing Pericles, he does put his finger on the paradox that Pericles' patient, largely defensive, even conservative war strategy (endorsed by Thucydides) is very much un-Athenian in character. Ruminating over these and so many other fascinating complexities is one reason why *The Peloponnesian War* rewards repeated, careful reading.

At no point in this book are we ever far from the central refrain: "Thucydides' Peloponnesian War is ultimately a contest between the rival characters of Athens and Sparta" (159). But Jaffe is also participating in an active debate among classicists regarding the origins of the war, including some contestation of Thucydides' arguments. As emphasized previously, IR scholars have little stake in Thucydides' accuracy, but an awareness of these contestations can be helpful when studying *The Peloponnesian War*.[34]

In *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*, Donald Kagan—whose scholarship is often eager to contest Thucydides' accounts—contra Thucydides, blames Athens for the conflict.[35] And not so much as a result of its rising power but due to its increasingly sharp elbows in a variety of international political disputes. For Kagan, Athens's serial troublemaking eventually "put the Spartan war party into power," and even then, a sluggish Sparta had to be roused into action by the Corinthians and other allies that had suffered at the hands of Athenian aggression.[36] In contrast, G. E. M de Ste. Croix, in *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War*, reaches the opposite conclusion. Engaging Kagan explicitly as a foil, de Ste. Croix rejects the view "that Athens was the aggressive party in 433–1" and reports that he has "no doubt that the real aggressors were Sparta and her allies." Both scholars, if with somewhat different shadings, highlight the role of the Corinthians in considering the origins of the war.[37]

In this debate Jaffe notes the affinity of his perspective with that of de Ste. Croix. But for students of IR, a larger point is more crucial—Thucydides' rich account of the origins of the war can't be reduced to click-baiting slogans.

[34] Once again, for IR scholars, Thucydides' argument and presentation are what matters, not the details of this ancient conflict or dissenting perspectives from his position. For example, we can't know with certainty the trajectory of Athenian power in the mid-to-late 5th century BC, but we do know for sure that Thucydides believed it was on the rise and the underlying cause of the war.

[35] Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969).

[36] Ibid., 269 (quote), 285, 287, 306–7.

[37] G. E. M de Ste. Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), 65 (quote), 67–68, 70, 101, 290. The Corinthians do seem essential to the origins of the war. As Hans Van Wees notes in his contribution to the *Oxford Handbook*, "Thucydides on Early Greek History," from 460 BC, Athens's principal enemy was Corinth, not Sparta (53).

Avoiding the Allison Trap

Thucydides on the Outbreak of War plainly exposes Allison's oversimplified reading of Book I of Thucydides. Unfortunately, as noted earlier, the problems with *Destined for War* go far beyond its unsatisfactory treatment of the origins of the war. They run deep, and they are dangerous.[38] The ambition of the book is to provide a comprehensive historical analysis of all cases where "The Thucydides Trap" might apply—that is, episodes where a predominant power confronted the prospect of a rising challenger. *Destined for War*, as its subtitle relates, wants to apply the lessons of the Peloponnesian War and these other episodes to the contemporary case of rising China and superpower America. The news is grim. History shows that war is a routinely common (though not inevitable) consequence of this phenomenon, and "we can be certain … that the dynamic Thucydides identified will intensify in the years ahead." (ix).

Allison introduces "The Thucydides Trap" as if he has revealed an undiscovered country. Yet the challenge of integrating new great powers into the international system is one of the most vexing—and most studied—problems in IR theory.[39] Rising powers tend to be arrogant, feeling their oats and chafing under the constraints of a system and status hierarchy they had little or no part in forging; established powers are generally content with the status quo, skeptical of the motives of untutored upstarts, and, eventually, afraid to make any concessions, fearing (not unreasonably) that they will only whet appetites for further demands. That this can lead to catastrophic war is well-known. A fine paper by Mark Kauppi does what Allison is unwilling to do—note the obvious influence of Thucydides on the enormous power transition theory literature—and also to note that when such theories operate solely at the systemic level they are "theoretically useful but incomplete." This criticism, of course (as Kauppi also notes), does not apply to Thucydides, whose analysis is steeped in first- and second-image-level variables.[40]

[38] Several astute readers and referees have questioned why I "circle back" to a new set of critiques to Allison here. This is understandable, but I retain this approach to distinguish between the two basic problems of *Destined for War*, as noted above. The first regards its reading of Thucydides; the second relates to its efforts to speak to contemporary politics—and the book has been enormously influential in the latter regard. High-level officials from the United States and China—including President Xi Jinping—now routinely speak of the "Thucydides Trap."

[39] Representative prominent examples include Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*; Edward Hallet Carr, *The Twenty Year's Crisis, 1919–1939* (London: Macmillan, 1939); A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1968); Charles F. Doran and Wes Parsons, "War and the Cycle of Relative Power," *American Political Science Review* 74, no. 4 (December 1980): 947–65; Charles A. Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); and T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *Status in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); none of which are acknowledged in *Destined for War*.

[40] Kauppi, "Thucydides: Character and Capabilities," 142; see also Richard Ned Lebow and Barry S. Strauss, eds., *Hegemonic Rivalry: From Thucydides to the Nuclear Age* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991).

In reinventing the wheel, Allison and his team of research assistants have identified sixteen cases in which an "ascending power challenged an established power"; twelve of these resulted in war (41). These historical cases are poorly presented. After squeezing in summaries of five episodes drawn from three centuries in the space of twelve pages, *Destined for War* makes the curious and unfortunate decision to devote thirty pages—the book's longest chapter—to a review of "Britain vs. Germany," perhaps the most overtilled rivalry in international political studies. The chapter rehearses this familiar story by drawing heavily on accomplished, well-established works, such as those by Paul Kennedy and Aaron L. Friedberg, never pausing to question the (considerable) limits to analogies between World War I and the Peloponnesian War.[41]

The three-page treatment of Japan vs. the United States before World War II could hardly be less satisfactory—and this brief passage serves as a microcosm for many of the problems that plague *Destined for War*. First, there is the issue of whether the case is a proper referent for the phenomenon of concern. Certainly Germany's challenge of Britain fits the general mold (as does the case of China and the contemporary United States). But the United States was also a rising power before World War II; it was more formidable than Japan was and could ever be. There is also Allison's questionable-at-best emphasis on the role of US sanctions against Japan, which he compares to Athenian economic sanctions against Megara (the Megarian Decree). But the analogy is incoherent. In the US–Japan case, by Allison's estimation, we are witnessing sanctions imposed by the established power against the rising power; but the Megarian Decree was imposed by the rising power (Athens) against an affiliate (Megara) of the status-quo power (Sparta). Additionally problematic, by focusing his attention on the role of US economic sanctions in exacerbating the conflict between the United States and Japan, Allison ignores the basic and underlying political roots of the Pacific War. This is ironic, since Allison lauds Thucydides for focusing on underlying rather than proximate causes of war; compounding this misstep is that his account of the US–Japan conflict also misleads. Readers unfamiliar with the case will have no sense of the role of the Great Depression in facilitating the rise of the expansionist, ambitious Japanese militants who set the country veering onto its path to world war.[42]

[41] Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860–1914* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1980); Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895–1905* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

[42] On these issues see, for example, Mark Metzler, *Lever of Empire: The International Gold Standard and the Crisis of Liberalism in Prewar Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), Richard J. Smethurst, *From Foot Soldier to Finance Minister: Takahashi Korekiyo, Japan's Keynes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), Jonathan Kirshner, *Appeasing Bankers: Financial Caution on the Road to War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

Finally, *Destined for War* again fundamentally misreads Thucydides. In placing the emphasis on American sanctions, Allison suggests that US diplomats were shocked by the reaction in Japan and "had no one to blame but themselves." If only, he laments, they had "taken an afternoon to read the consequences of Athens's Megarian Decree … they could have better anticipated Japan's initiative." (46) This is exactly wrong. Reading Thucydides is indeed good advice, but it is widely understood that Thucydides downplayed the significance of the decree. As W. Robert Connor explains, Thucydides "never gives a full account of the matter; instead he introduces the decree obliquely"; Jaffe in *Outbreak of War* provides the requisite "Thucydides himself does not attribute much weight to the Megarian decree/s in causing the Peloponnesian War." And although Kagan and de Ste. Croix disagree on most things, on this they agree: Thucydides downplayed the issue (Kagan, characteristically, sees this an opportunity to criticize Thucydides' account; de Ste. Croix, also true to form, argues that the choice to marginalize the decree was proper because it wasn't all that important).[43]

Allison's treatment of prominent cases like US–Japan raise serious doubts about the utility of conclusions he might reach on the basis of these episodes. And the more-distant historical sections of the book inevitably raise the question of the extent to which general conclusions for contemporary application can be confidently drawn from those experiences. The aspiration to make generalizable claims is certainly the appropriate ambition of much IR theory; nevertheless, caution is always in order. Are the factors that caused war between the kingdoms of Europe in the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries (roughly half of the cases in the "Thucydides Trap Case File") the same that would cause war between the United States and China today? Even Allison seems skeptical, noting that nuclear weapons are game changers and "*have no precedent*" (206, italics in original). They don't make armed conflict impossible, but the causal pathways that might lead to war between two great powers with robust nuclear deterrents are likely different than those between conventionally armed rivals in the distant past.

[43] W. Robert Connor, "Scale Matters: Compression, Expansion, and Vividness in Thucydides," in Balot, Forsdyke, and Foster, *Oxford Handbook*, 215; Jaffe, *Outbreak of War*, 8; Kagan, *Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*, 251, 267, 269, 374; de Ste. Croix, *Origins of the Peloponnesian War*, 213–14, 251–52, 256. See also Eric W. Robinson, "Thucydides on the Causes and Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War," in Balot, Forsdyke, and Foster, *Oxford Handbook*, 119. Thucydides tended to downplay the role of economic factors in general (see, for example, De Romily, *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism*, 72–73). Lisa Kallet-Marx argues against this conventional wisdom in studies that attempt to draw out the sinews of finance latent in the work, but of course she nevertheless shares the hard-to-refute consensus that Thucydides marginalized the Megarian Decree. Lisa Kallet-Marx, *Money, Expense and Naval Power in Thucydides' History 1–5.24* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Lisa Kallet, *Money and the Corrosion of Power in Thucydides: The Sicilian Expedition and Its Aftermath* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

Most of *Destined for War* is devoted to the present—"A Gathering Storm" that threatens to overwhelm the United States and China. This part of the book opens with a solid, productive chapter on America's rise to great-power status and can serve as a valuable tonic for naively patriotic, ill-informed American readers: a reminder that all rising powers, even "us," tend to be unbearable arrogant troublemakers on the world stage when on the rise. Why should China be any different? Unfortunately, the two China-focused chapters that follow are undistinguished and boil down to two conclusions: Chinese elites are really smart, and authoritarianism works. Allison first lavishes praise on President Xi Jinping in an account overstuffed with personal anecdotes and purple prose (Xi's vision is "iron willed" (118)) in a chapter filled with sweeping claims, vague platitudes, and tired clichés. The following chapter shifts from praising Xi to assessing China's civilization in contrast to that of the United States—and the deck is stacked as Allison makes overconfident and superficial generalizations about both nations, invoking, as always, pearls of wisdom from Lee Kwan Yew, Henry Kissinger, and assorted TED Talks.[44]

Chapter 8, "From Here to War," is satisfactory and constructive, walking through scenarios that might lead to an unwanted war between the two giants.[45] But the last section of the book, intended to present practical suggestions that might help the United States and China avoid war, offers little but obvious homilies such as "timing is crucial" (199), "understand what China is trying to do" (235), and at times devolves into condescending claptrap: "Even seasoned State Department officials too often mistakenly assume China's vital interests mirror America's own. They would be wise to read Sun Tzu" (235–36).[46]

Back to Thucydides

Many of the shortcomings of *Destined for War* derive from a common source: its superficial treatment of Thucydides, whose vast, nuanced, masterpiece is irreducible to slogans that could fit on a bumper sticker. Allison visits *The Peloponnesian War* as a tourist, returning with the

[44] Chinese leaders "see themselves as trustees of a sacred inheritance" (145). Chinese elites are "rational and pragmatic," and, unlike their short-sighted American counterparts, are "are careful to distinguish the acute from the chronic, the urgent from the important" (148). In a trope that should have been long since retired, Allison intones that while Westerners clumsily envision international politics as a game of chess, Chinese leaders are masters at the more subtle and profound game of *go*. ("If the chess master sees five or six moves ahead, the *weiqi* master sees twenty or thirty." (149))

[45] Though even here, some passages raise eyebrows, as when Allison offers what can only be called an idiosyncratic take on the Gulf of Tonkin incident (162).

[46] In a stunning combination of naiveté and arrogance, *Destined for War* urges the White House to heed the advice Allison and Niall Ferguson proffered in their "Applied History Manifesto," which calls for the establishment of a "Council of Historical Advisers," the first assignment of which "would be to answer three key questions about the rise of China" (218).

scattered souvenirs of misguided analogies. On undergraduate IR syllabi, it is common (and given the pressures of space and time, understandable), to present students with two snippets of the work: the passages around the "true cause" of the war and the Melian Dialogue. But no serious engagement of Thucydides should take such a decontextualized leap across fifteen years of war and hundreds of pages of text, as Allison does in one paragraph, and summarize that "the Athenian ambassador[47] captured the essence of realpolitik" with the admonition that "the strong do what they will and the weak suffer what they must" (38).

Thucydides certainly does dwell on these negotiations, even introducing a new rhetorical device with the dialogue form and reporting extensively on conversations held out of the public eye to which he was not directly privy. Obviously, Thucydides thought the encounter important—he stops the narrative of the war in its tracks for this digression. But any thoughtful reading of *The Peloponnesian War* must reckon with the question of why. Melos was a trivial backwater whose fate was of no military significance. Nor was it necessary to dwell on the episode to illustrate the perils of anarchy—by this point in his *History*, Thucydides had provided numerous examples of polities that were similarly annihilated, too weak to resist their heartless, marauding conquerors; others would follow. Nor is the extensive Melian Dialogue needed to teach about the stark implications of what centuries later would be called realpolitik. The Athenians lectured on this point in Book I, defending their behavior before the Spartan assembly: "It has always been the law that the weaker should be subject to the stronger" (1.76.2). As Jeremy Mynott notes in his commentary, this would be "a recurring theme in the work."[48]

Scholars have offered several complementary perspectives on Thucydides' purpose here. One suggests that the rehearsal of the fate of the Melians anticipates the debate between Sparta and its allies regarding whether to similarly annihilate the defeated Athenians. As W. Liebeschuetz argues, "No man who lived through the last years of the war could fail to see an allusion to the events of 404."[49] Of greater relevance for IR theory are the ways in which the dialogue engages central and enduring Thucydidean legacies: the consequences of war on society and the most important lesson of *The Peloponnesian War*—the mortal danger of hubris.

When contrasted with the debate over Mytilene in the fourth year of the war, the Melian Dialogue illustrates how years of war have hardened and hollowed a once-admired Athenian society. Mytilene was a relatively

[47] Actually, one of the envoys dispatched by the generals leading the Athenian force that had surrounded the city.
[48] Mynott, *War of the Peloponnesians*, 47.
[49] W. Liebescheutz, "The Structure and Function of the Melian Dialogue," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 88 (1968): 76; Rawlings, *The Structure of Thucydides'* History, 243.

well-privileged and capable ally; its rebellion was, from an Athenian perspective, treacherous, dangerous, and potentially precedent setting. Melos, in contrast, was a small settlement on the periphery of the action, whose crime was that it sought to avoid subjugation. Yet over Mytilene the Athenians deliberated and then modulated their (still punitive) response; at Melos they were unreflectively barbaric, which, as Bearzot in the *Oxford Handbook* describes, "conveys a bitter reflection on the outcomes of Athenian imperialism, which at this point was utterly indifferent to any values."[50]

More than anything, the Melian Dialogue is a consummate illustration of how Thucydides' narrative craftsmanship imparts the lessons he is eager to instill in his readers, without, as Hobbes noted, pausing to lecture.[51] And so with one final sentence Thucydides describes the annihilation of Melos; with the very next, he writes, "The same winter the Athenians resolved to sail again to Sicily … if possible to conquer the island" (6.1.1). As Felix Martin Wasserman argued, "It is particularly important to keep in mind that the Melian Dialogue was written by an author and for a public who could read it as a prelude to the Sicilian Expedition, and, indirectly, to the final catastrophe." In their despair amid the ruins of a blood-soaked, shattering retreat at the end of the Sicilian campaign, the Athenians even come to echo the ill-fated Melians, appealing to the gods for salvation. Ultimately, Athens was destroyed, not by its adversaries, but by its own hubris.[52]

In his contribution to the *Oxford Handbook*, Rawlings argues persuasively that "Thucydides clearly regards the Athenian adventure in Sicily as the greatest event of his war, and its conclusion as the greatest event in Greek history."[53] This central, essential episode, however, to which Thucydides lavished such care and elaborate attention, and which was the final manifestation of Athens's tragic tendency to "grasp for more," passes unnoticed in *Destined for War*. But if there is a "Thucydides Trap," it is that the greatest threat to the security, integrity, and civilization of a great

[50] Bearzot, "Mantinea, Decelea, and the Interwar Years," 155; Liebescheutz, "Function of the Melian Dialogue," 73, 74. For Hornblower, "it is important that the Melians, unlike the Mytilenians, are not reprieved," *Commentary*, vol. 3, 225.

[51] Thus Hornblower's observation that Thucydides of course "did not invent the fact that 416 comes before 415, and 'Melos' before 'Sicily' … [but the] juxtapositions and emphases are his own contribution," *Commentary*, vol. 3, 225.

[52] Felix Martin Wasserman, "The Melian Dialogue," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 78 (1947), 30, 35 (quote); Rawlings, *The Structure of Thucydides'* History, 245–46; Tobias Joho, "Thucydides, Epic, and Tragedy," in Balot, Forsdyke, and Foster, *Oxford Handbook*, 595, 596; Hornblower, *Commentary*, vol. 3, 217. As Liebeschuetz notes, at Melos, the Athenians were "bullying and arrogant . . . boundlessly self-confident, lacking humility even towards the gods." The parallels are inescapable: "An Athenian reader could hardly fail to diagnose a case of *hybris* and therefore to recognize in the following account of the Sicilian expedition and of subsequent events, the unfolding of inevitable retribution." ("Structure of the Melian Dialogue," 76).

[53] Hunter R. Rawlings III, "Writing History Implicitly Through Refined Structuring," 206.

power comes from within. Athenian arrogance and hubris turned one-time allies into unhappy, hostile vassals (just as the Melians predicted such behavior would); and at two critical junctures, from a position of relative strength and security, Athens foolishly and voluntarily embarked on adventures that led to its own destruction.

Destined for War is well-motivated: the danger that the United States and China could sleepwalk into a disastrous war that neither side wants, and which would wound both grievously, is much greater than many would like to think. And Allison is right that scholars of international relations should read *The Peloponnesian War* and learn from the insights that Thucydides has to offer. He should have heeded his own advice with much greater care.

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