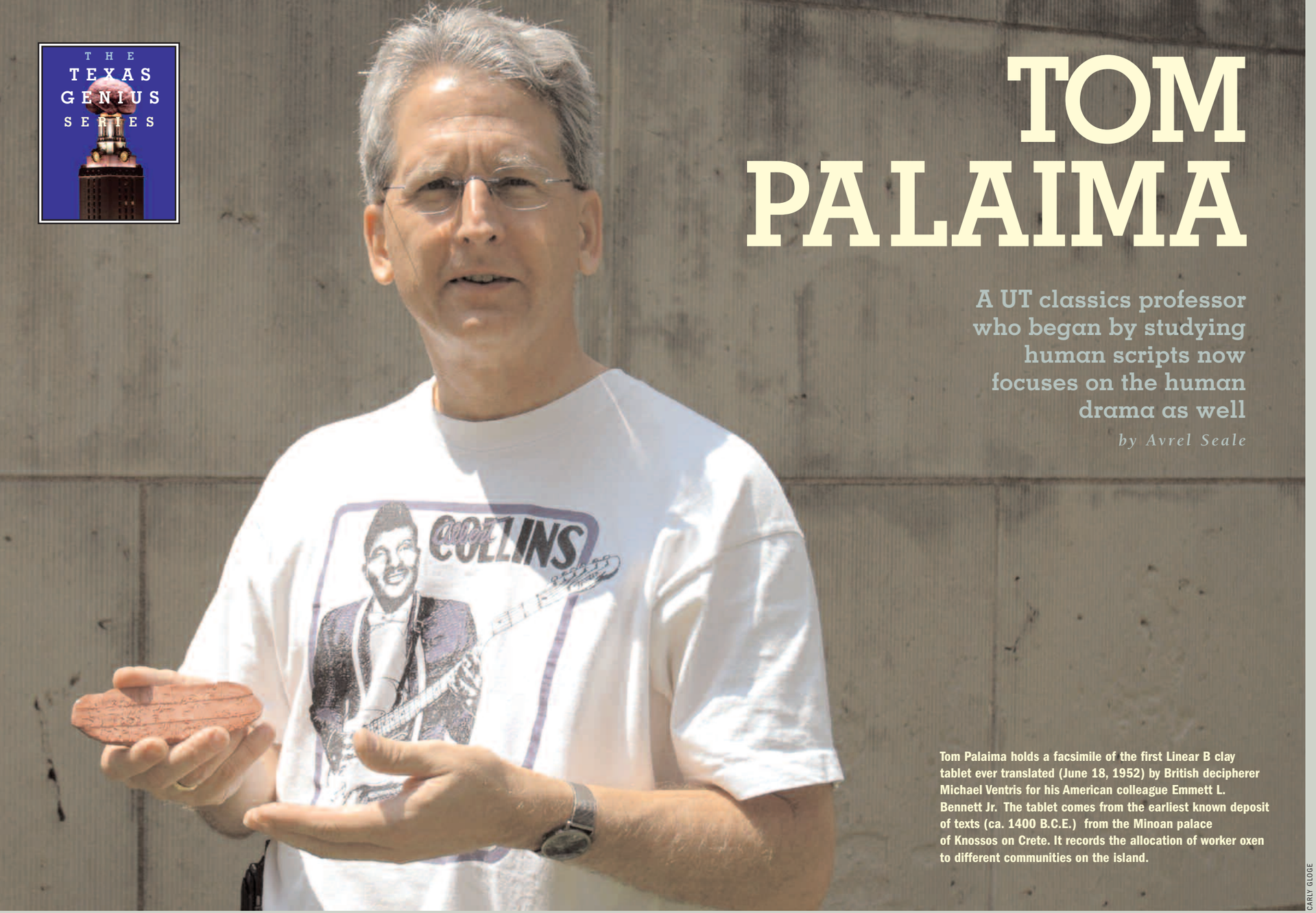
THE TEXAS GENIUS SERIES

TOM PALAIMA

A UT classics professor who began by studying human scripts now focuses on the human drama as well

by Avrel Seale



Tom Palaima holds a facsimile of the first Linear B clay tablet ever translated (June 18, 1952) by British decipherer Michael Ventris for his American colleague Emmett L. Bennett Jr. The tablet comes from the earliest known deposit of texts (ca. 1400 B.C.E.) from the Minoan palace of Knossos on Crete. It records the allocation of worker oxen to different communities on the island.

CARLY GLOGE

Discussed: Tom Palaima ▮ The History of Writing ▮ Winning a MacArthur Fellowship ▮ Bronze Age Aegean Scripts ▮ Bob Dylan ▮ Mycenaean Scribes ▮ What's Wrong with Education ▮ The Iliad and Vietnam ▮ Hiroshima and Robert McNamara ▮ Thucydides and the Cold War ▮ Picking up Roadkill ▮ Overkill ▮ How Good Teaching Is Like Jazz Improv ▮ What War Really Is

TOM PALAIMA WAS A MATH WHIZ. As a sophomore at Boston College, he was already taking graduate math courses. But he was also in an honors program that had a great books freshman seminar. By chance, the professor Palaima drew was the chair of the classics department and taught ancient history. Palaima chose to take Roman history and liked it. In his junior year, he started Greek history and an already sharp young mind began to catch fire because of a single book.

As outside reading, his teacher commended to him the first great history of Greece in English, a multivolume work by George Grote in 1846. Palaima started reading it, but all of the footnotes were in Greek. Returning to his teacher in frustration, he was told he ought to take Greek, which he did. "I met with this old Jesuit six days a week, 8-10 in the morning, 4-6 in the afternoon, the whole summer."

Finally he realized that, while he was good at math, he didn't feel the passion for it that he did for Greek. "If somebody said tomorrow, 'You're not going to look at a math book the rest of your life,' would I really be sad? No, but I *would* be sad if I weren't able to look at a Greek text again, or read a historian."

Today, Palaima, the Dickson Centennial Professor of Classics at UT, is one of six MacArthur Fellows on the University of Texas faculty. (See p. 12.) He won the "genius grant" in 1985 for his work in Aegean prehistory and early Greek language and culture. He has lectured, written, and taught extensively on ancient writing systems, the reconstruction of ancient culture, decipherment theory, and Greek language, but more recently has delved into the study and teaching of war and violence and the stories that spring from them. He also has become a regular op-ed writer for the *Austin American-Statesman* and a regular reviewer for the *Times Higher Education Supplement*. But his acclaim as a scholar has not led to a diminished emphasis on teaching. To the contrary, Palaima has won one of the Texas Exes' highest honors for faculty members, the Jean Holloway Award for Excellence in Teaching, in 2004.

Palaima began life in the old Lithuanian area of Cleveland. "It was very much like *The Deer Hunter*," he remembers. "Every area had its church, its several bars, its bakery, its butcher shop." His family moved out to the post-war suburbs in 1956 when he was 5. His father was a postal worker; his mother, mainly a homemaker, also worked part-time in a grocery store and then a school cafeteria. "I was a typical third-generation American," says Palaima, whose grandparents immigrated from Lithuania and Ukraine. He explains that the third generation becomes highly Americanized and takes advantage of the educational system. He was the first person in his extended family to go to college. His one brother "took a totally different path. You know how Springsteen says in 'Born in the USA,' 'I got in a little hometown jam, and so they put a rifle in my hands...'? He was one of those kids."

Palaima is just as at ease quoting pop stars and folkies as he is Homer, perhaps one reason he's a favorite with students. Today, he's wearing a T-shirt with a vintage Stevie Ray Vaughan photo. In a side bedroom in his North Campus 1920s house, he reveals the full extent of his Bob Dylan fixation: 500 CDs, most of them bootlegged recordings of concerts, are filed neatly in a cabinet. The house has other remnants of a restless mind. In the front room is a spinet Palaima acquired four years ago when he took up the piano at age 50.

In late August, we spoke in his living room, appointed by his wife, Carolyn, with Spanish artifacts and photos of their 10-year-old son ...

Does the history of writing — its evolution — reflect anything profound about the history of civilization itself?

There are all sorts of takes on this, depending on what stage in the development of scripts one is examining and what world culture. In Egypt, China, Mesopotamia, writing was developed and used from the late 4th into the 2nd millennium for economic, religious, and political-propagandistic purposes. In Crete at the start of the 2nd millennium B.C.E. the great Minoan culture invented its own writing system. They used it for religious and economic purposes. The Mycenaean Greeks, so far as we know, used it at the end of the 2nd millennium B.C.E. exclusively for economically focused administrative purposes. Something like our alphabet was first developed in the Levant and spread by the Phoenicians and then adapted and further spread by the Greeks. Even serious scholars generally exaggerate the wonders of the alphabet and the deficiencies of earlier scripts, mainly because they are used to our simple alphabet and lack the imagination to consider a world without it. In my view, scripts were as good as they had to be for their current purposes. Even scripts like cuneiform and Mycenaean Linear B had ingenious features that boggle the mind. How did anyone ever think to do it that way?

The Greeks certainly talk about writing as a great invention. And it is for them. They use it in pursuit of all the arts and sciences they invented. They use it to codify law, to memorialize the dead, to identify figures on pottery, to speak out in graffiti, "Hey, I was here." A recent article argues, in fact, that language and writing were the two most prominent features of Greek ethnic self-identity.

And writing also has the features some other human inventions have. It is like human beings, terrific or terrible. The same writing that preserves the law code of Hammurabi, the Torah, and our Constitution, and keeps them unalterable, the same writing that captures forever the great thoughts of Shakespeare or Homer, also preserves records of historical horrors and atrocities and makes possible the literal promulgation of hateful thought and directives for inhuman action.

In the end, I think about writing what Shane said to young Joey about a gun. It's just a tool, as good or bad as the person who uses it. But I would add that the greatest threat to our own society comes from those who would make writing meaningless as a way of communicating sound communal values or as a way of preserving a record of our own past, good or bad. Orwell saw the danger of the latter when those in control of government keep records secret or alter them. But right now messages in writing are so easy to generate and spread that most of us are overwhelmed by sheer volume. How then can the rare truly great things that are written be identified?

One thing that I do know about writing, when I pick up Homer or my colleague Rolando Hinojosa-Smith's *Korean Love Songs* and read from them, I think of the printed word as something even better than the music of Bob Dylan.

As a boy, what did you want to do when you grew up?

Nothing. I'm serious. It startles me to think about it. My parents never placed any expectations on me.

I was a mathematics whiz, and if you were bright and scientifically inclined in any way, shape, or form in the late '50s, because of *Sputnik*, you were tapped. On my GREs to go into classics, I got a 780 in math and 680 in English! But I never listened to that. I never had any pressure placed upon me from the homefront. I had several friends in college who did have that pressure and were very unhappy, and in two cases turned to alcohol to blunt that.

So I just went from one thing to the next. The kind of jobs I had in the summers were working-class jobs in Cleveland. I worked on garbage trucks, road repair crews, during which we had Friday roadkill pickup. That was a fascinating thing.

High point of your career!

Yeah! I was a janitor in a high school for several years and worked in a brakeshoe factory. So I have that kind of experience, and, in many ways, I wouldn't trade it for anything because now I know what it's like to work at a really difficult job, and also I'm more sensitive to people who don't have wealth.

This alternative area of mine is war stories. I'm interested in how you capture the experience of war, how people respond to war and violence. Early on I realized what I'm interested in really is the human experience. The questions I want to ask is what made these human beings think. How was it to stand inside the Megaron at Pylos? What were you thinking? I've talked to psychiatrists and historians about this. What happens is that people get so caught up in technicalities of research that they leave the fundamental questions out of the picture. I did that myself for a long time. I was studying the scribes but never thinking what it was like to be an actual Mycenaean scribe.

That was the work that got me the MacArthur Fellowship — analyzing these linear texts that were all anonymous. There were no signatures, so you had to do handwriting analysis and use secondary characteristics like spelling, formatting, text pragmatics, subject matter, and so forth. What I did was totally reconstruct the administrative system of this palace based on identifying scribes and the area in which they were working, if they interacted with other scribes, if there was a hierarchy of subjects they dealt with, and so forth. Even as I was doing that in the early '80s, I can say that I didn't relate to these people as human beings. I related to them as Hand One and Hand Two. It was only really in the '90s that I started looking at that, for a variety of factors. I went through a very hard, second divorce and thought to myself, what's going on here? You've got to find out something about yourself and what's going on with your inner relations with other people. It's life roughing you up a bit, instead of you just floating through it.

You asked the question, what did I want to be? What I want to be *now* is just someone who explores the human experience. Many people read my op-eds and come at me because most people see what they want to see — a lot of Freudian projection going on. I'll write an 800-word piece, and people will latch on to five words and write very inflammatory comments. But a lot of people recognize that what I'm trying to do is explore issues that nobody else wants to explore — talk about what is going on with UT education, with politics, with violence, with cultural things that interest me.

There are just wars, but there is injustice within just wars.

What is your general take on education today?

I think most of the trouble with education in general, even at the college level, is that you don't give people enough time to pursue intellectual passions. The same thing happened when I was in college. There were those professors who said just pursuing intellectual matters is a joy in itself. I feel blessed to be doing what I'm doing.

There's not enough foreign language requirement in this age. We're in an international culture and the best access to any foreign culture is the language. The language is the repository of the whole cultural tradition. If we have things that are fossilized in our language from Shakespeare, it tells us what was going on in Shakespeare's time. If you know the etymologies of words, it tells you what the whole rich tradition of the culture is. What are the key terms in a culture? If you understand *timé*, honor, you know so much about what motivates a Greek who is sitting opposite you.

What I'm getting at is that in the business school and the school of education, there's so much done with pre-job training that people don't have the opportunity to explore for four years what being human is, and what might be best suited for them.

When I was a graduate student in Wisconsin, to be a math teacher in a high school, you had to have taken three mathematics courses. What kind of passion can three mathematics courses over four years, even if you have this whole battery of educational psychology courses, possibly give you? It takes exceptional grade school and high school teachers, people who have a real love for what they're doing in the one or two areas. This is what I had with math, classics, economics, and history in college, but that was 30 years ago.

People are not being given opportunities to develop passions. If we just route them into being pre-processed products, how can they teach well? How can they make decisions in business that are predicated on what impact those decisions have on society? How's it going to affect me as a human being? How's it going to affect global society?

You're saying that we route them, but don't they really route themselves? They *could* be "liberal arts undecided" if they wanted.

They could be, but the pressures are so enormous. A couple of years back Mort Meyerson, who was Ross Perot's CEO, came to speak to liberal arts students. He said when he came to UT in the early '60s, he browsed like a head of cattle grazing. He did a little of this, a little bit of that. When he got to his senior year, he said, "Woah, what's this major I should put together?" He settled on philosophy and economics.

Then he got involved with Perot's company and moved up through it. When it came time to pick a CEO, there were computer engineers and business people who knew vastly more. But what Ross knew that he needed was somebody who understood *humans* and could see everything in a broad way.

In 1999, *The New York Times* said that universities had become "career credentialing stations." That's not what they should be. If they are, they need to have a much bigger component of exploration. This spills over into all areas of our lives, this problem of, for want of a better term, manufacturing who human beings are. It starts very early. Like these tests that we're giving in k-12. I've talked to a lot of teachers, and I've not run into one yet who says, "Thank God for these tests. They're wonderful for my students." Not one! I don't think it's laziness or anxiety. It's just, "I have a 15-week semester, and I spend five weeks in rote, mechanical, fact stuff."

How do you think we should measure success, or should we?

What was wrong with the old system? I have no idea what was wrong with old system! I didn't have standardized tests forced down me. I think the great god of quantification and standardization is really problematical. The defenses all come from bureaucrats and legislators.

What brought you to Texas?

The University of Texas. The classics program has always been in the top 10 nationally. It's the largest in the world practically. Given that my research specialty was Mycenaean studies, and I wanted set up a research center, this was really the best place in the United States to do it. We have 3,000 faculty! The English faculty is the size of the faculty of a small liberal arts college. And the classics library here is just amazing. Right in our own department, there's 24-hour access to books and research materials. There are five people in my department that I can talk specialized Turkey with.

Are there areas you work in where you see your mathematical aptitudes coming through?

I have a Belgian colleague, and we often disagree on interpretations of Mycenaean matters. He says, "I hate to read your pieces because your logic is always so compelling, but I'm afraid that you're not right." What that means is that I have a long-cultivated appreciation for mathematical proof. When I look at any kind of issue, that underlies my writing.

What is Linear A and Linear B?

Cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs had both been going, for practical purposes, 3300-3000 B.C.E. Cuneiform is clay tablet writing with wedge-shaped strokes that are really from pressing with this triangular instrument, and each sign is a combination of six or so punches at different angles. That was the dominant writing system of the whole Near East. The Minoans came along and developed their own writing system, probably with some of what's called idea diffusion, from Egypt. They used clay of a different shape. Cuneiform tablets are kind of pillow-shaped. Linear A and Linear B use page-shaped tablets and leaf-shaped tablets that are long and tapering, like a palm leaf. The Minoan was the high culture in the Eastern Mediterranean/Aegean area from about 1900-1450 B.C.E., when something happens with Mycenaean Greeks, who are a low culture until around 1700, when they

burst out and start having shaft grave burials and eventually develop a palatial culture of their own, but never, ever on the level of Minoans. So they're always sort of barbarians in relation to the Minoans. But they modify Linear A, which was developed for a Minoan language. We think it was a three-vowel language. It was an open-syllabic language, like Japanese.

What does that mean?

Every syllable ends in a vowel. Think of all the Japanese words you have in your head: Nagasaki, Hirohito, Yokahama, Hiroshima. Greek has both open and closed syllables: *telos*. So what the Mycenaeans had to do was adapt the Minoan script, which was written for an open-syllabic language, to the writing of a language that used closed syllables, as well as one that had slightly different sounds. So Linear B is an adaptation for the writing of Greek of a script that was originally designed for the writing of a Minoan language. Linear A still hasn't been deciphered because there aren't enough texts.

Are there perceptions about ancient Greek culture that we have that are mistaken?

I believe that cultural myths, even about other cultures, are like clichés. Clichés are clichés because they're true. A penny saved *is* a penny earned. With age comes wisdom. That is true. *And* it doesn't apply to all cases. You can meet old people who are still fools, and you may lose the bank account where you've put your pennies.

The same thing, I think, is really true about our knowledge of ancient Greeks. The Greeks at one stage were extremely important. And at different stages, we made of them what we wanted to. For example, Grote's great *History of Greece* was written because Grote was a parliamentarian, and he really believed in diminishing the power of the king and promoting the power of the parliament. And so what's the best model? Ancient Athens. Man, those Athenians are democracy all the way. They have citizens in the legislative council, they're chosen by lot, they take everything in front of the assembly, and so forth. So that's a truth. But earlier histories were promoting kingship, and the Spartans were the ideal. On a basic level, people have a fairly good grasp of this. But we don't want to see negatives that don't reinforce our own prejudice. There is a myth for most people, the Golden Age of Athens, the great beauty of the temples that were built, the whole cultural program of Athens. The great tragedians: Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles; the great philosophers: Socrates and Plato; the great historians: Thucydides, Herodotus coming to Athens to lecture. So it's true that it was a great golden age. But what was it based on?

Well, you're thought to be some kind of leftist radical if you point out that it was based on brutal imperialism. Secretary of State Dulles, right after World War II, gave a speech at Princeton extolling the Athenians as the models for what Americans were supposed to do after the war. There's an article in the foreign service journal explaining to American diplomats the secrets of diplomacy that one can find in Thucydides. "You *have* to read Thucydides to understand the Cold War." So our whole Cold War philosophy was shaped by the fact that most of these people had elite educations, they had read their Thucydides at Groton and Exeter, and they believed in it. The Communist bloc was the Spartan states and their allies, and the Americans and NATO were the Athenians and their allies.

But they didn't take it further and do the self-examination: what are we doing here by leaving our footprint? What are we doing by perpetuating colonialism in Vietnam? What are we doing by rejecting Ho Chi Minh? Even Republican senators were saying that we have to recognize that he is the George Washington of Vietnam. But no, we're going to support the French, and when the French are gone, we're going to support Diem, and then we're going to support Thieu, and the whole thing transforms.

But this is exactly what the Athenians were doing, and this is what Thucydides tells us happens. You have these great superpowers colliding, and then *everybody* gets sucked in. And then the superpowers get sucked in to their own vacuum process, because a civil war breaks out here, and pretty soon they have troops on the ground, and pretty soon they're colliding with each other when perhaps they had an armistice.

You even have cases where the Athenians are supporting the oligarchs, and the Spartans are supporting the democrats. So these lessons about who we are get missed because we want to use the Greeks to support an *idea* of who we are, instead of asking, who are we? What are we doing here? Is it right and legitimate to say, even post-9/11, that there were serious mistakes — let's say necessities of American foreign policy — that created a negative view of the United States? Well, you've got to be insane not to think that, but you say that, and all of a sudden you're considered unpatriotic. But the lessons are there. They're there in Thucydides.

I bring these things up not to push a political agenda, but as an illustration of the fact that you can use ancient Greek culture to see what you want to see. And part of it is the seduction of power.

When I teach an ancient Greek history course, I do bring in historical analogs, but not to push any agenda. I do give signposts of where I am on issues, and I talk to students about this issue. They say what they resent is not so much bringing in modern analogs; they appreciate that. Or even saying, "My beliefs on this are this. What are yours?" What they resent is what they call professors "hijacking a course," where you're supposed to be talking about Thucydides but you come in and rail against something that's going on, and also professors who use their power. The power relationship in class is just enormous. You have such a command of the material 30 years on that you can just reduce any argument.

I start by quoting LBJ. He said, "One thing I know about is power. I know where to find it, and I know how to use it." That, to me, is the whole of ancient history and modern history. What is power, and what are people doing with it? As social groups, as individuals. The people who rise to the top have the motivation to want power of a certain form and to use it. Thucydides saw this, other ancient historians saw it.

CARLY GLOGE

MY LIST

of 10 Most Influential Works >> Tom Palaima

1. ***The Cat in the Hat*, Dr. Seuss (1957)**
2. ***Highway 61 Revisited*, Bob Dylan (1965)**
3. ***Live at the Apollo Vol. 2*, James Brown (1968)**
4. ***Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell (1949)**
5. ***Progress into the Past*, William McDonald (1967)**
6. ***History of Greece*, George Grote (1846-65)**
7. ***The Iliad*, Homer**
8. ***The 400 Blows* (film), François Truffaut (1959)**
9. ***Dispatches*, Michael Herr (1977)**
10. ***The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien (1990)**

It's incredibly hard to resist the temptations of power.

I have liberal friends who still vilify [Robert] McNamara, as I do on a certain level. If you watch Errol Morris' documentary *The Fog of War*, McNamara's 10 lessons are lessons of power. McNamara's sense of *proportionality* comes into play with regard to Hiroshima. How do you weigh 100,000 Japanese civilians getting killed, innocents, against saving the lives of soldiers? I said in an op-ed that you can argue on a moral level that soldiers are soldiers and that civilians should be left alone. Somebody wrote me, quite appropriately, and said, "What about all the Japanese atrocities in Southeast Asia, all the millions who were killed barbarically?" Well, again, you say, what are we representing as our morality? I'm *glad* I don't have to make those kinds of decisions. But if you're going to assess those as historical lessons, you want to say to yourself, "What are the factors involved here, and how should we respond next time?"

These illustrations of our selective perception of history almost lead one to say, well, maybe we're better off not trying to use history as a template for current events.

No, I'm a firm believer that you *have* to use history, to the same extent that you have to use other human beings to understand yourself. A Freudian therapist will ask you lot of questions about yourself, but always in relation to other human beings.

I teach a seminar on war and violence, on war stories. One student came to me and said, "This seminar is not what I wanted it to be. I wanted to get into a history seminar. There's just not enough history here. Where are the hard facts? Why are we talking about the issues? Why are we reading works of fiction?" First, I pointed out to him how we were going to be looking at journalistic accounts, oral histories, true histories throughout, but we were also going to be looking at poetry, letters home, memoirs, movies, documentary and nondocumentary. I asked him what his notion of history was. His notion, because of the TAAS test approach, was that there are facts, and you learn those facts, and then you move on.

But the word *history* means examination. It means exploration, inquiry. There's a notion that history is somehow the word of God, or is dogma. This doesn't mean I'm a relativist, but means I'm a sensible human being. History is just another form of story-making with different standards of how to present information and different responsibilities for getting close to the truth of what happened.

What caused you to make this transition from ancient Greece to study war and violence as an area in and of itself?

One of the things that got me onto it was teaching *The Iliad*. Teaching it in a mythology course, I realized I was doing a poor job. I could cram the students' heads with the plot structure: Who kills whom in what battle? Where does Hector meet Andromache? Where does Achilles confront Priam? The students went away from this with a lot of facts and only the dimmest appreciation of the power of *The Iliad*. I read *The Iliad* in high school in translation, and it bored me to tears — killing after killing. Who even knows what killing is at that age? That's why we send 18-year-olds off to war, by the way. The Greeks did the same thing. You can't even conceive of your own death. When you're 18, you're pumping. You're fed this stuff, off you go.

In college, I begrudgingly turned to *The Iliad* in Greek. I read the first 15 lines, and it was the most beautiful thing I've ever read in my life. The most immediate, direct, powerful, gorgeous. There's no substitute for it. Bob Dylan says, "Words like burning coal pouring off the page ..." That's what *The Iliad* was.

My wife says I'm a pessimist. And I think that's the best way to be. There's no other way to be when you've looked at history.

But only in the Greek?

Fortunately, now we have two great translations (Stanley Lombardo and Robert Fagles) that really help. It's not quite the same, but boy, we're getting there.

I then said to myself, how am I going to get my students to understand? Just by chance I had seen the documentary, *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*. I had my students watch this. There's a captain on the operating table who's losing his leg, saying, "I couldn't napalm that village! I couldn't bring napalm on that village because there were women and children there! I just couldn't do it! But that's where they were! And they killed my boys!"

Now, you see that, and you say, "That's what war's about." *There's the crux.* There's a captain getting his leg amputated, talking about the boys he lost, and how, because he's a moral human being, he couldn't bring the fire power we have to incinerate this village, but if he had, then all of his soldiers would be alive. Again, it's the Hiroshima questions.

The whole *Iliad* is packed with these moral questions. Achilles ransoming prisoners but then going into a berzerker's rage because Patroclus is killed and going on a My Lai-style rampage. It's all right there!

When I teach *The Iliad*, I play five different versions of a song around the figure of Delia. In Dylan's version, she's a gambling girl out West. All these folk artists use the same character and tell different stories. It's exactly what's going on in the tradition that gave rise to *The Odyssey*: here's a theme, here's a cast of characters, you've got to fight in the famous war, or you've got to get home after the war. Then different folk artists tap in and transmogriphy, change things around.

You've spent a fair amount of time thinking about war and violence. What conclusions have you come to about human nature?

[Laughs] My wife says I'm a pessimist. And I think that's the best way to be. There's no other way to be when you've looked at history. There's actually a book coming out called *Big Questions in History* that I was asked to be involved in. And the whole premise is to pair a scholar with a journalist and ask them a major question about human life. I was paired with an editor of *History Today*. We were asked the question why wars begin.

It soon dawned on me that the real question is why wars never end. There's war going on sometime on the planet almost every year in recorded history. And we have certain illusions that there are times of peace. There's this widespread notion that World War I ended this halcyon period of prevailing peace. Well, that was true of continental Europe, but at the same time, all the colonial powers were involved in *brutal* colonial wars — the Boer War, and around the globe.

So my general sense is that man is a warlike animal — keep in mind, I'm not a pacifist — but I also believe that it's absolutely incumbent upon societies that control large amounts of military power — and we certainly do — to only use that with the utmost caution. To me, this means that it's incumbent upon us to set a positive example for the world in terms of cooperating with other countries, being patient, even when it tries our patience to its extreme, with things like diplomatic procedures and the United Nations. To vilify the United Nations, to me, is just as insane as the whole vilification of government that's gone on in this country for the last 25 years. The ancient Greeks would have thought we were a different species. They couldn't even conceive of us as human beings if they would plop down in 2005 in the United States and see the history, really since the Reagan period, of attacking government as something separate from ourselves, as a monster that does harm to us. The government is us. The fact that we have a representative government does not take that away.

Since you're not a pacifist, what was the last war you felt was justified?

The Second World War, but I always say, remember Studs Terkel's oral history *"The Good War."* It's italicized as a title, but has quotation marks around it, too. Yes, indeed, Nazism and Japanese imperialism were monstrosities. They certainly had to be defeated. But the bombing of Europe was overkill. The bombing of Japan was overkill. It was a tremendously problematical moral issue that's now being raised with the anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Before Hiroshima and Nagasaki, you had 60 Japanese cities, one the size of the whole city of Cleveland, that were destroyed by fire bombing, and 60 others destroyed 50 percent and upward. One city the size of Los Angeles was half destroyed. These are civilian targets. People counterbalance that with, again, Japanese atrocities in Southeast Asia. We had to put a halt to it.

These are the questions that ought to at least be openly recognized instead of some kind of knee-jerk reaction that we saved our own soldiers' lives, and we saved Japanese soldiers' lives. Leaders are called upon to restrain the passions of the public at large. The public will always be emotional and is easily induced to follow simplistic ideas. Think of Nazism. Here's a simplistic idea: "The Jews are the problem. We were stabbed in the back at the end of the First World War." You can get people to hate very easily.

So 9/11 happens, and what do we need to do? The leaders should impose the utmost restraint until we understand exactly what the nature of this whole new situation is, how most effectively to wage a war against terror. But instead, we unlock a Pandora's box by saying, "Hey, here's a concept called pre-emptive war. We can attack another sovereign nation if we think that nation is threatening us." What kind of precedent does that set? Iran and Syria certainly feel threatened now by our attention to them. By our precedent, do they have the right to attack us? What if they had the capacity to launch a missile and hit New York? Would they be able to say, "Oh, you're a threatening nation that was threatening our sovereignty." It's almost like something a school kid could figure out.

There are just wars, but there is injustice within just wars. It just strikes me that we have a real arrogance of power, under the guise of trying to do some good. Of course, we also tire very quickly. If there's a cost, then pull back.

When most people think of alternatives to war, they think of embargoes, diplomacy. Are there other alternatives that you've encountered that you consider effective?

No, but I have a good friend who's involved in high-level efforts to find alternatives to weapons; in other words, ways of disabling foreign armies that have nothing to do with killing troops — being able to spray slippery plastic on roadways so that trucks and tanks and artillery can't move on them. Short of that, war is a fairly simple thing. You have one group of men — and now women — who have weapons, and you get another group of men and women who have weapons, and you shoot at each other. The escalation in weaponry has now made it almost unimaginable. It's certainly taken all the glamour out of war. There is a place for the use of arms, but you have to be very cautious about how you use them, and not only for the precedent it sets, but because we're seeing again the impact that being in this kind of war environment has on our soldiers. There's no ability anymore to discriminate between civilian and enemy. The report that at least one innocent civilian Iraqi is killed by an American soldier every two days is a conservative statistic being produced by the military itself.

It's very hard for people who have control of power, especially when they're being criticized. What if Bush had not attacked Afghanistan and Iraq? I always do the contrafactual history, try to sympathize, maybe even with a leader that I'm not in tune with. What would his politics be? Would he have gotten re-elected? Look at LBJ: "I'm not going to be the first president in history to lose a war, especially after Kennedy started it. I'm not going to not fulfill Kennedy's mandate."

How did the MacArthur Fellowships get started?

Catherine T. and John D. MacArthur were not great philanthropists while they were alive. But he hated the idea that his millions of dollars would get gobbled up by the federal government. So as he was approaching the Grim Reaper, he said, one of these foundations would be a good way to use the money. So he set up a board with people like Jonas Salk and Ann Landers, and their idea was, if people are doing interesting things, give 'em money. Now it's become institutionalized, and people worry about gender balance and social issues, but then, it was just, find someone who's doing something *neat*.

What has being a MacArthur Fellow allowed you to do?

Well, it changed the whole direction of my life. I was in New York, teaching at Fordham University, a Jesuit College with no appreciable graduate program. And given my economic background, I was living in some pretty awful places. I lived in Hell's Kitchen back when it was a drug and prostitution zone. My place literally was above the Lincoln Tunnel.

The MacArthur Foundation couldn't locate me before the announcement because I was out camping. So the first time I knew about it was when I read it in the *Austin American-Statesman*. I happened to be here visiting someone.

The year before, I had approached the classics department here about a job, and they said, "Absolutely no, we're not interested." When the MacArthur announcement hit, the chair of the department was on a plane and read it in *USA Today*. When the plane stopped in Denver, he got off and called the department and said, "Get ahold of Palaima." So oddly enough I had an awareness that you don't always get rewarded for who you are. If you get something like this, well, other people could have gotten it, too. You were the one that was fortunate. It wasn't an inevitability. But it happened, and so I do use it as a calling card in certain instances.

I also felt that I had an obligation to do something with it that transcended me, so at the time I thought that setting up this research center would be a good use of the funds. It was obviously a sea change with what I could do with my interest. I spent from 1985 to '90 setting up the Program for Aegean Scripts and Prehistory.

Why did you want to do that?

The Linear B script was deciphered in 1952, and all the people who worked in that field were retiring. Sometimes papers were getting lost. So I thought, 1) Wouldn't it be nice to set up a photographic archive of all the inscriptions? and 2) Wouldn't it be nice to set up a resource center that would try to keep track of these papers? I think whoever recommended me had the confidence that if I got the money I would do something really useful.

Another big part of the experience is getting to know the other fellows through conferences. There's a wonderful sense from all the other fellows that they want to know what you are doing, and you want to know what they're doing. True intellectual conversation is rare.

What's next for you?

One of the strengths of having moved around in different areas — teaching ancient history, teaching Greek language, teaching war and violence studies, being an op-ed writer now, and doing public intellectual reviews and articles — is that I have a sense that as long as I'm doing something good, that's good. Whereas other people are so preoccupied with one area: "If I'm not getting this done, the world's going to fall apart!" It's not. In the grand scheme of things, if you just look at any one thing, it's inconsequential. The most important thing is just to keep on *doing* things, doing something good. In certain ways I've fallen behind on this area or that area because I have a tendency to do too much. But if I'm speaking to second graders about Greek gods or speaking at Oxford at a seminar, it's all one thing to me.

Really good teaching is like jazz improv. You know the forms because being a scholar is like being a well-trained musician, you know classical structures, jazz structures, blues structures, then it's in the moment. Almost every prof you talk to who's a good teacher who says, "Wow, I really had a good class today," what they mean is not that I went in and rhetorically wowed them, but somebody sparked something, and [snap] I was thinking about new ideas.