

# Out of the frying pan into the fire

The Peloponnesian War

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Review by Tom Palaima

## The Peloponnesian War: Athens and Sparta in Savage Conflict 431-404 BC

Author - Donald Kagan

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An ancient conflict has parallels with modern power politics, particularly when analysed by a Bush adviser, Tom Palaima finds.

Historian Donald Kagan here retells the whole depressing history of the Peloponnesian war. Kagan has transformed Thucydides' fascinating diagnostic manual of leadership pathologies and political disorders within states addicted to the acquisition or preservation of power into an Oliver Sacks-like page-turner, with the Athenians and their successive leaders as the main characters. Their behaviour, like that of Sacks' exotic patients, is at once terrifying and engrossing: *The Polis That Mistook Its Defensive Alliance for an Empire* and then acted out its psychosis.

Retelling Thucydides, and more, is an act of temerity. Kagan gives us the first 20 years of the brutalising world war and then the final seven years that are omitted from Thucydides' account. Kagan's own interpretations of motives, decisions and outcomes are inserted seamlessly into his even-tempered narrative, often supported by information from other ancient authors such as Plutarch or Diodorus Siculus. There are 30 useful maps and only occasional confusing geographical lapses, such as Kagan's reference to Methone being located in Laconia.

Like Thucydides, Kagan uses no footnotes. In his modest six-page conclusion, he stresses that throughout the progressively dehumanising conflict "the thin tissue of civilization that allows human beings to live decently and achieve their higher possibilities was repeatedly ripped asunder, plunging the combatants into depths of cruelty and viciousness of which only human beings at their worst are capable".

The war also destroyed "life, property and the ancient traditions and institutions of the Greeks". And there was no gain. Spartan claims that they were acting as liberators of the

Greeks from the tyranny of Athenian imperialism "became a mockery even before the war ended". No mechanisms or institutions were set in place to create a stable peace among competing Greek poleis or to rule out a return to the nightmarishly savage atrocities of all-out coalition warfare. Mere luck and the impossibility of recreating anything approximating the concentrated resources built up by Athens between 477 and 404BC saw to that.

The two key elements of the strategy of Pericles, the architect of the Athenian empire and career-long political spin doctor of Athenian cultural self-conception, were also eliminated. The defensive fortifications of Athens that had turned it into an island on land were torn down, and the remaining ships of the superpower fleet that was both product and tool of Athenian imperial policy were confiscated. The subject states of the Delian league, the NATO-style defensive alliance against the Persians that Pericles had ruthlessly preserved and exploited as an Athenian power bloc and source of revenues, were liberated.

After staring persistently into an abyss for years, the Spartans did pull back from becoming total monsters by not subjecting the Athenians to the extreme punishment the Athenians had earlier wrought upon Melos and the Spartans upon Plataea: execution of the total adult male population and confiscation of territory. The Athenians were also spared the imposition of a narrow ruling oligarchy, something that would have revived memories of an anti-democratic coup earlier in 411BC and its use of assassinations and general terrorism as a prelude to seizing power. Here, though, as usual in ancient Greek political equations, internal factional fears and the diplomacy of power among potential rival city states, rather than noble or decent instincts, determined Spartan policy. As Kagan explains, the Spartans needed Athens to survive, even at greatly reduced strength, as a counterbalance to the possible growth of Theban power just to the north.

Second, the stature of the victorious Spartan general Lysander brought him under the suspicion of the two Spartan kings who would have resisted any move to establish in Athens a narrow ruling group whose interests would have been allied with Lysander's.

The magnificent Landmark *Thucydides*, edited by Robert B. Strassler (1998), runs to 740 pages with many informative appendices and notes. Even a veteran Thucydides expert such as Kagan cannot tell in 30 per cent fewer pages 35 per cent more history than the Athenian general-turned-historian without considerable loss. Thucydides' original contains 141 speeches. Many stand as independent masterpieces of human expression. All function as analytical tools informing us of the motives and factors at work at crucial moments in the course of the war. Nothing of these remains in Kagan except for brief quotations and synopses.

It is impossible to read Kagan's narrative, with its explanations of specific political and strategic decisions and their immediate and long-term effects, without wondering how its lessons influenced the views of current US foreign policy that Kagan and his son Robert have championed for the Bush White House. When Kagan *fills* discusses "the efficacy of power,

the morality of power, the desirability of power" in *Policy Review* online, it is hard not to imagine his father reading to him the Melian dialogue at some impressionable age. When he argues that Europeans now, like Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries, appeal to international law and opinion rather than brute force because that is how weaker states always respond when confronting situations where much stronger states can choose simply to apply unilateral force, he clearly knows that such appeals did the Melians no good when confronting the more powerful Athenians and their *Machtpolitik* in 416BC. Kagan p re reminds us that the Athenians already espoused Kaganite doctrine just before the outset of the war, arguing at Sparta that they, the Athenians, had acted according to the natural human motives of "honour, fear and self-interest" in accepting and holding on to their empire, and that "it has always been ordained that the weaker are kept down by the stronger".

Before the Bush White House employed pre-emptive military force in the Middle East, Donald Kagan asserted: "If [our allies] want a free ride, and they probably will, we can't stop that. You saw the movie *High Noon*? We're Gary Cooper." But Kagan himself, not Thucydides, reminds us that the Spartans, not the Athenians, in the end play the role of Cooper; and Xenophon recounts how Spartan allies rejoiced as they tore down the walls of long unilaterally tyrannical Athens, ushering in what they foolishly hoped would be a "new day of freedom".

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