

Palaima: Key to the present lies in the past

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Novelist L.P. Hartley opens his exquisitely human 1953 book "The Go-Between," later made into a movie starring Julie Christie and Alan Bates, by saying, "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."

We don't have to go back very many years to find our own country and its values resembling a foreign country.

In 1947 — at the outset of the Cold War — then-Secretary of State George C. Marshall delivered an address at Princeton University, declaring: "I doubt seriously whether a man can think with full wisdom and with deep convictions regarding certain of the basic international issues today who has not at least reviewed in his mind the period of the Peloponnesian war."

What high officer of our government will ever again have such confidence in the humanistic education of their audience, even at an institution like Princeton University, to make such an historical allusion? Marshall was referring to the Greek historian Thucydides' history of what is rightly considered the first "world war" in Western history.

To simplify, Thucydides wrote his work with the belief that human behavior is fairly constant, so that the study of history can provide important lessons to how states, their citizens and their leaders will react to roughly comparable circumstances. State department official Louis Halle wrote in the Foreign Service Journal for August 1952 that Thucydides has given us a tool for "seeing more vividly what is happening to our own world."

Our Cold War policy was set and guided by individuals who believed that the United States was Athens, a free, democratic, open and liberal society opposed to militaristic, totalitarian states, the Soviet Union and Red China, where individuals were stripped of their personal freedoms by communist systems of government.

Halle saw Thucydides' history as a sanguine lesson, "the tragedy of Athens," brought on by a failure of the citizens of Athens "to live up to the moral responsibility" that they had assumed because of their "moral excellence."

It was virtually impossible for me to imagine while growing up that any patriotic Americans would want to model themselves on the Spartans, a community wherein a maximum of 10,000 elite citizens, bred eugenically, declared war yearly on the slave underclass known as helots, so that they could kill helots with impunity as legal enemies of the state.

My friend Larry Tritle, who served as an officer in Vietnam and since as an ancient historian with a Thucydidean eye for how ancient history can help us understand the present, once wrote a study of the Spartan soldier Clearchus. Clearchus, he convincingly argued, exhibited clear signs of what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder. He attributed Clearchus's symptoms to his long service during the Peloponnesian War.

I have argued that the entire Spartan system of state-run education, in which male children are taken from their families at age 7 and subjected to brutal training methods designed to produce laconic soldiers, would have brought on PTSD symptoms well before a Spartan ever saw combat.

It is, then, from my perspective, a sign that we have seriously endangered our value system that in recent thinking by soldiers, veterans and the general public about our ongoing military operations overseas the model used is the Spartans.

It explains the popularity of the graphic novel and movie "300." It explains why Stephen Pressfield's "Gates of Fire," a retelling of Herodotus' tale of the battle of Thermopylae, was wildly popular. It also explains why recent veterans like Nathaniel Fick ("One Bullet Away") conceive of their service in the all-volunteer military, mixed with and supported by paid contractors, in Spartan terms. Fick and his small band of fellow professional soldiers feel separated from ordinary civilians.

It should be a troubling development. We have become a foreign country that the aged veterans who fought for freedom in the greatest generation would not recognize.

Without universal military service and responsible congressional behavior about how we go to war, we resemble more and more the very kinds of societies we once fought hard to defeat.

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