

GO 351: The Political Thought of Thucydides

Skidmore College
Spring 2007
T TH 9:10–11:00
Ladd 106

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or by appointment

This course will consist of a close reading of one of the most important works in Western thought, Thucydides' *War Between The Peloponnesians and The Athenians*. The work is an account of a war that took place over the course of twenty-seven years (432-404 B.C), a war in which democratic Athens very nearly defeated oligarchic Sparta in a bid to become ruler of the known world. Thucydides intended this work to serve as a guide for future ages, or to be, in his famous words, "something useful...a possession for all time." For this reason, we are not reading the work out of mere antiquarian interest. Instead, we'll carefully examine the deeds and speeches of the war as narrated by Thucydides in order to find solid guidance in the face of permanent problems and issues of political life. Among those permanent issues and concerns are the following: What are the causes of war and the conditions of peace? Are human beings compelled to pursue their own advantage over and against the self-sacrifice that justice demands? What are the causes of imperialism? What are the arguments for and against it? Is capital punishment justified? What (if any) is the proper place of anger in political deliberation? What praise do citizens of democracy and of oligarchy give to these two different political regimes? How do their praises compare to what the book—the course of the war—reveals about those two regimes? Thucydides presents us with statesmen whose belief in or doubt of divine intervention in human affairs decisively affects their actions; what role does religion play in political life? What forms of religion should wise statesmen encourage or discourage in healthy political life?

Thucydides could not have provided us with this kind of guidance if his work were a naively edifying, heroically inspiring, or merely cautionary tale. He presents us with the deliberations of statesmen engaged in actual political life at a time when that life happened to be most revealing of itself. As we read his work, we see the deeds of outstanding statesmen who are engaged in a struggle over the objects of their longing: freedom and empire. We hear their speeches as they attempt to move others to pursue their goals, in accordance with their opinions of what is advantageous and what is just or noble. Thucydides writes in such a way that we become more than vicariously engaged with these participants. He orders and presents the participants' speeches and deeds so that we are deeply moved by them. We become receptive to the participants' deliberations, instructed by their victories and their defeats, their glory and their shame. By examining the careers of outstanding political leaders, and discovering what those careers have to teach us about the greatness and the limits of political life, we are forced to reflect on ourselves and our own lives.

I. Required Texts, available at the Skidmore Shop:

The Landmark Thucydides, edited by Robert Strassler (1996)

(Required secondary sources have been placed on reserve in the Scribner library.)

H.W. Fowler, *Modern English Usage*, third edition (Oxford)

II. Course Requirements:

Attendance requirements: no unexcused absences. Excused absences will be granted upon presentation of a doctor's note or a relative's obituary.

Three short essays (3-5 typed pages), due February 15, March 23, April 13.

Final comprehensive (essay) exam, as scheduled by the registrar. (Study questions for this exam will be distributed on the final day of class).

The term grade will be computed as follows: first essay 15%; second essay 20%; longer essay 25%; class attendance and participation 10%; final exam 30%.

III. Class Schedule:

Tuesday, January 23 Introduction to the course; the archeology (Bk I, chs. 1-23)

A. The Origins of The War

Thursday, January 25 The spark: Epidamnus, Corcyra, and Corinth. (I.24-65)

Tuesday, January 30 The Debate at Sparta : Who are these Athenians? (I.66-79)
A divided Spartan response (I.79-88)

Thursday, February 1 Thucydides backtracks: the 50 years truce and Athenian imperialism. The Corinthians' final speech (I.89-125)

Tuesday, February 6 Thucydides examines the sacred; Pausanias and Themistocles; Pericles' 1st speech (I.126-146)

Thursday, February 8 The war begins: Plataea, Archidamos, and the Athenian withdrawal from the countryside; Pericles' funeral oration (II.1-46)

Tuesday, February 13 Athenians under stress: the plague and Pericles' last speech; what is the deepest cause of this war? (II.47-65)
First paper Due

B. The "First" War

Thursday, February 15 Athens in action: Phormio vs. the Spartans; "technology" and the role of chance and of daring in war (II.66-103)

Tuesday, February 20 The escape from Plataea; The revolt of Mytilene and the debate between Cleon and Diodotos (III.1-50)

Thursday, February 22	The trial of the Plataeans. Corcyrean civil strife: words change their meaning. (III.51-86)
Tuesday, February 27	Purification of Delos; Demosthenes' defeat and redemptive victory. (III.87-116)
Thursday, March 1	Athens looks toward Sicily; Demosthenes takes Pylos with guerilla warfare; Sparta sues for peace. (IV.1-25)
Tuesday, March 6	Spartans at Pylos surrender; Hermocrates at Gela (IV.26-65)
Thursday, March 8	Brasidas' campaign of liberation; Sparta and slavery (IV.66-88)
Tuesday, March 12	Spring Break
Thursday, March 14	Spring Break
Tuesday, March 20	The Athenian disaster in Boeotia; Brasidas at Amphipolis, Scione, and Mende (IV.89-V.12)
Thursday, March 22	The peace of Nicias (V.13-28) Second Paper Due
C. The "Second" War	
Tuesday, March 27	The 7 years of cold war; Argos, and the battle of Mantinea; Sparta restores her reputation (V.29-83)
Thursday, March 29	The Melian Dialogue (V.84-116)
Tuesday, April 3	The debate over Sicily and the contest for the soul of Athens: Nicias vs. Alcibiades (VI.1-26)
Thursday, April 5	Debate at Syracuse over Athens and over democracy: Hermocrates vs. Athenagoras. Eros and Empire: The mutilation of the herms; Harmodius and Aristogeiton; democracy, tyranny, piety, and eros. (VI.27-61)
Tuesday, April 10	Recall of Alcibiades; Athenians in Sicily; Euphemus and Hermocrates. (VI.62-88)
Thursday, April 12	Alcibiades at Sparta; Gylippus arrives in Sicily; the response of Nicias; the tide turns (VI.89-VII.18) Third Paper Due

Tuesday, April 17	Demosthenes' arrival; defeat at Syracuse (VII.19-49)
Thursday, April 19	The annihilation in Sicily; the arete and death of Nicias (VII.50-87)
Tuesday, April 24	The revival of Athens; revolt of Chios; Alcibiades and the Persians (VIII.1-47)
Thursday, April 26	Athenian change of regimes and internal strife (48-79)
Tuesday, May 1	Alcibiades' leadership; Athenian victory at Cynossema (VIII.80-109)
As scheduled	Final Exam