Thucydides and PME:
History's Role in Intermediate and Senior Service School

by

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Attending Professional Military Education (PME) courses in-residence is an institutional reward for a job well done, as well as preparation to assume more responsibility, i.e., promotion. The crème de la crème of the active duty force, Guard, Reserve, and international officers, as well as federal civilians, are rewarded with a fascinating year in Montgomery, Leavenworth, Carlisle, Newport, Washington, or overseas. The effectiveness of history in the curriculum varies at the different institutions. This essay does not pretend to address that. Rather, this essay will attempt to demonstrate that as difficult as Thucydides is to read, the value of such historians is their ability to weave a threat from the Peloponnesian War to peacekeeping missions. The point being that studying history does matter in PME and must be considered more seriously than simply relegated to "dead guy quotes."

Consider first Pericles' flawed strategy that led to the eventual siege and capitulation of Athens. It relates to modern conflicts--specifically the American Revolution, the First World War and Vietnam—in that belligerents with real or imagined military superiority are not necessarily always victorious. Next consider three questions. First, could Kaiser Wilhelm II have learned anything from reading Thucydides--regarding a protracted struggle of force-on-force warfare? What about two asymmetrical conflicts almost two hundred years apart? Perhaps King George III or Lyndon Johnson's aides could have benefited from reading the "creator of objective historical science" (Anchor Atlas, 58). The bottom line is that study of Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War is relevant to military policy and strategy makers today.

There are often unintended long-term consequences when war is started without a clear end-state in mind. Consider Athens. Although Athenians were obliged to render military service to Sparta, the final victor in the world-wide power struggle, involving Greece, Macedonia, Thrace, the Aegean, Asia Minor, Sicily, and Lower Italy, was not Sparta, but the Persian Empire (Anchor Atlas, 58-61).

Likewise, powerful Great Britain never imagined that upstart American colonists would gain a military victory and full independence less than ten years after the first shots were fired at Lexington. In the summer of 1914, German, French and British political and military leaders, as well as the rank and file, were convinced the war would end in six months, not Christmas 1918. Similarly, United States leaders failed to foresee the prolonged agony of Vietnam when advisors were first sent there in the early 1960s. The ghost of that war still lingers--witness its haunting impact on American use of the military instrument of power during the last quarter century. But first, rewind to a war that occurred before Christ preached peace on earth and good will toward men.

A year before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War in 432 BC, Pericles convincingly tells Athenians that war with Sparta is all but inevitable. Despite the Megara decree, to which both parties are signatories, Pericles argues that "Sparta entertained designs against us" and claims Sparta refuses arbitration as called for in the treaty (Thucydides, 80). He continues with a list of Sparta's specific and unreasonable demands. He asks for citizen support to use the military instrument for no mere trifle, arguing that "they order us to raise the siege of Potidaea, to let Aegina be independent, to revoke the Megara decree; and they conclude with the ultimatum warning us to leave the Hellens independent" (Thucydides, 80-1). He emphasizes that he wants no one to think Athens is going to war for slight cause, pointing out that "[I]f you give way [to Sparta], you will instantly have to meet some greater demand" (Thucydides, 81). He goes on to say "make them clearly understand that they must treat you as equals" (Thucydides, 81).

During the "Speech of Perciles" his rhetoric exudes confidence in Athens' military capability. But he was in fact less than confident. He begins the comparison not by pointing out Athens' advantages but, rather, Spartan weaknesses. And in so doing

Pericles makes a number of what turned out to be wrong assumptions regarding Sparta's military capability. He says "[P]owers of this description are quite incapable of manning

a fleet or often sending out an army" (Thucydides, 81). These two key strategic assumptions turned out to be dead wrong. He continues, "they cannot afford the absence from their homes, the expenditure from their own funds; and besides, they have not command of the sea" (Thucydides, 81). But Chian and other Spartan allies did command the sea and eventually the landmass (Thucydides, 515). They laid siege to Athens and then demanded its capitulation in 404 B.C.. The peace conditions included razing the "long walls," dissolving the Delian League, and establishing Spartan hegemony (Anchor Atlas, 61).

By the summer of the second year, Pericles' strategy and tactics were in tatters. That second summer Spartan invasions were accompanied by plague, and Thucydides says a change came over the Peloponnesians. They were now more inclined to find fault with Pericles. But he tries to rally those questioning his strategy and reminds the beleaguered Athenians of what is at stake. "[W]hat you are fighting against is not merely slavery as an exchange for independence, but also loss of empire . . . besides, to recede is no longer possible" (Thucydides, 126). Pericles begins to back off taking full responsibility for the military debacle, arguing that "you must not be . . . angry with me who, if I voted for war, [I] only did as you did yourselves" (Thucydides, 126).

The Speech of Pericles has striking similarities to the beginning of the First World War. Even after two years of heavy casualties and little headway German leadership, like Pericles, maintained a façade of confidence as the Great War dragged on into stalemate.

After August 1914 only Kaiser Wilhelm could have stopped the bloodbath propagated upon Europe following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the Hapsburg heir apparent. He had neither the vision nor the backbone to stand up to the likes of the gloomy Chief of General Staff, General Helmuth von Moltke. Wilhelm's near simultaneous childish biases and belligerent rhetoric during the decisive hours of 31 July-1 August 1914--as the German leadership waited for Russia's response to their ultimatum--is well known: "I hate the Slavs… I

know it is a sin to do so. We ought not to not hate anyone. But I can't help hating them," the Kaiser screams (Tuchman, 73-4). The previous night, Wilhelm publicly played the mobilization card, telling the frenzied crowds milling on the streets of Berlin that the "sword has been forced into our hand" (Tuchman, 74). War was the product of his poor judgment, combined with bad intelligence from Count Pourtales, who, after seven years in Russia predicted "Russia will not fight for fear of revolution." (Tuchman, 74). Like Pericles before him and the missiles of modern warfare yet to come, historian Barbara Tuchman says that "once the mobilization button was pushed, the whole vast machinery for calling up, equipping, and transporting two million men began turning automatically" (Tuchman, 74).

Young men who survived the carnage of the First World War know, like many Vietnam veterans later in the century, the wider implications of surviving war. Erich Maria Remarque had experienced combat. "We will be superfluous even to ourselves, we will grow older, a few will adapt themselves, some others will merely submit, and most will be bewildered--the years will pass by and in the end we shall fall into ruin" (Remarque, 294). American authors like Willa Cather and F. Scott Fitzgerald had previously validated Remarque's account in the early 1920s with their novels of American soldiers in that war.

Another interesting parallel is between wars almost two hundred years apart--the American Revolution and Vietnam. They are alarmingly similar in their conduct and conclusion, perhaps suggesting that George III and Robert McNamara did not study Thucydides.

The relatively sudden thrust into force-on-force battlefield and naval engagements common in the Peloponnesian War and the wretched trench warfare of World War I, were largely absent during the American Revolution and Vietnam. The latter were asymmetrical conflicts--essentially wars where the two belligerents are of unequal military capability. Initially the British in the American Revolution and Americans in Vietnam adopted a strategy of attrition warfare. In Vietnam, General Westmoreland's intention "was to inflict on the enemy more casualties than they could tolerate, thereby forcing them [North Vietnam] to abandon efforts to subjugate South Vietnam" (Sorley, 1). More important than military capability, both Great Britain and the United States lacked sustained popular support for attrition warfare. Oddly, British political resolve began to crumble early, as the debate in parliament was vigorous. Richard Ketchum captures the mood in October 1775: "Again and again, the 'unjustness of the cause' was cited, and the points made in Parliament were taken up across the land. Universities took sides, as did clergymen and merchants; even military men expressed their antipathy to the war" (Ketchum, 64).

By contrast, Congressional debate in the United States early in the Vietnam War was muted. Public support for the Johnson administration's Vietnam policy remained surprisingly strong through mid-1967, despite rising US casualties and increasing media scrutiny of the war.

Between January 1966 and the Tet Offensive, former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara admits that "debates over ground strategy, pacification and especially bombing intensified dramatically" (McNamara, xi-xii). Underlying it was a growing policy schism between the president and his secretary of defense. The growing gap is laid bare in McNamara's May 19, 1967 memorandum to President Johnson. His lengthy memo meanders into many areas but essentially questions General Westmoreland's request for more ground troops.

Obviously close hold at the time, McNamara appears influenced by growing sentiment against the war, especially on college campuses. Either that or he may have finally awakened to the war's moral dimension--a side he admittedly lacked in the early "whiz kid" days of the Kennedy administration. While being heckled at Harvard, McNamara recalls his time as a student at Berkeley when challenged to defend an

increasingly untenable policy (McNamara, 255). Many have criticized McNamara for his hard line in 1967 and what some believe to be empty empathy nearly thirty years later. But reading his memo in 2000, McNamara gains credibility. It sounds very much like an anti-war stand that could have been written by a thoughtful anti-war activist. Arguing that the sight of a "superpower killing or seriously injuring 1000 noncombatants a week . . . is not a pretty one," the secretary is clearly struggling with demons of a policy gone badly wrong (McNamara, 269).

That memo combined with the Tet Offensive six months later began the unraveling of Johnson's Vietnam policy and Westmoreland's strategy and tactics. The general consensus is that public support turned against the war following Tet. In addition, disagreement among policymakers high in the Johnson administration combined to raise questions about whether America was winning the war. Supporters of American military strategy in Vietnam point out that Tet was not a military defeat. They are correct but miss a larger point. The visual evidence that the war was not going as smoothly as policymakers would have the public believe was a significant development then. And it has had grave implications since. Among them is the increased media scrutiny the military has received since the advent of the 24-hour news cycle. Others believe the "Vietnam Syndrome" has resulted in misusing the military in murky non-traditional roles. A potentially more serious fallout of Vietnam is possible reticence to not use the military instrument of power in traditional roles even when it may clearly be in our national interest to do so.

So what have we learned from studying Pericles, King George III, Wilhelm II, and more contemporary strategy and policymakers? A great deal. A constant theme in reading military history or listening to oral histories of the few Americans who have

actually experienced combat is their confirmation that war is hell and that it is better to avoid or deter it whenever possible. The question for civilian policymakers and military implementers is how to balance deterring war through a policy of engagement while keeping the rank and file energized in a world of changing security environments which often drive divergent military requirements. For example, do we want the same fervor exhibited by the troops in August 1914 for a peacekeeping mission in the Balkans in 1999?

The answer lies in not more PME but a more focused PME curriculum for all ranks and appropriate civilians that seriously addresses the issues raised in this essay. At present Air Force PME, certainly by correspondence, is considered a necessary and nasty hurdle to overcome for promotion. The residence programs, although better--especially with the 1999-2000 academic year's radical curriculum changes at Air Command and Staff College (ACSC)--must strive to be both academically rigorous but value-added to the Air Force in terms of product. Recently I was talking to a fighter pilot who stated, "No point in studying a losing war, just the ones we won."

This alarming response from a fellow ACSC student shows the pertinent value of—necessity--for good, historically reflective PME.

Some of the current curricula that attempt to cover everything from the budget process to planning by the joint doctrine cookbook invite disaster. Military history, to include wars from before Christ to current peacekeeping and humanitarian operations short of war, must be interpreted for present day application and, thus, made central to PME curricula. But most importantly, it must be relevant to policymakers, soldiers, sailors, airmen, and riflemen alike. Otherwise, Thucydides stands little chance of being read seriously by a new generation of war fighters with as yet undefined missions in a new millennium.

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