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First Draft of Research Paper
Tentatively titled:

**The Dual Theses Regarding Democracy
In Thucydides'
*History of the Peloponnesian War***

Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian war* stands as one of the benchmarks of Western historiography. The *History* is a history interlaced with a tragedy befitting fifth century Athens, and an understanding of the cultural and intellectual achievements of the twenty-four years covered by its author. That he stretches farther back in his archeology to cover the Persian Wars is a further benefit to his readers, because, by doing so, he manages to encompass one hundred years of Athenian democracy into the vastness of his scope. His is a history written for posterity,¹ a history written to illuminate forever the importance of the war between the Athenian alliance and the Spartan alliance.² This was his initial purpose. The study of Thucydides' *History*, however, has given much more to future generations than merely an understanding of the greatness of the Peloponnesian War; Thucydides has bequeathed an account of the decline and fall of Athenian democracy. When he began chronicling the battles fought and the speeches made, this was far from his mind. He began to develop underlying theses concerning government that, while saying volumes about Athenian characteristics, have dire consequences for his opinion of his countrymen, and for humankind in general. The *History* becomes a tragic satire as Thucydides witnesses the rapid decline of his culture.

¹ "My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last for ever." (I, 22)

² Thucydides believed that never in history were two adversaries matched so evenly as Athens and Sparta while at the height of their militaristic power. At the same time, two sides had never benefited from the commitment of the rest of the Hellenic world. (I, 1)

Nowhere does this manifest itself more elegantly than in the prose of his speeches. In a sense, the realistic, practical and prudent Thucydides, displaying the dialectical qualities that made the speeches and the political movements of the 5th century so appealing, saw Athens suffer for her own inability to raise herself above bad judgement. Adcock writes on dialectical arguments in Athens and on Thucydidean dialectics in the *History*; “A speech is like a missile which has one single purpose, to hit its target. The man who throws the spear should be able to see his mark, and Thucydides gives him eyes to see it.” (46) With this said, there is a double tragedy: Thucydides saw Athens declining and he commented on it, freely giving his opinion in his *History*; however, he recorded speeches, or the essence of what the speaker said,³ giving the speaker the benefit of popular sophism.⁴

Thucydides’ dual theses regarding the decline of Athenian democracy can be seen directly in these speeches. He lays the groundwork with Pericles, and follows the decline beginning with Cleon, Nicias, and finally with Alcibiades and the oligarchic coup of 411. Thucydides allows his readers to see the genius in all of the speeches, regardless of the content.⁵ It could be argued that Thucydides uses the speeches as a pulpit from which to offer his own opinions and prejudices about the speaker, but, if this was the case, he would be betraying his pledge to keep as “closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used.” (I,22) In addition to this promise, Thucydides freely offers his opinions on speeches and events throughout his *History*.⁶ One must take the

³ See I, 22 for Thucydides assurance of his speech recording.

⁴ John H. Finley, JR’s *Thucydides* credits sophists as the main influences for Thucydides’ recording of speeches. Since Thucydides was unable to record them exactly, he relied on the “Attic oratory of his youth,” (50) which was doubtlessly from the sophist tradition.

⁵ See Adcock’s chapter, ‘*Thucydidean dialectic*,’ in *Thucydides and his history* for a further account of this.

⁶ While Thucydides raises questions and makes criticisms, he does not provide solutions. For more on this, see *The humanity of Thucydides*, by Clifford Orwin.

words recorded as Thucydides promises they were intended.⁷ Because of the distance of the events and the lack of other immediate sources, faith in Thucydides becomes all the more important.

Dual Theses Concerning Athenian Democracy

John H. Finley, Jr. writes in *Three essays on Thucydides*; “Speaking of the successors of Pericles, Thucydides says that none far outshone the others but all vied to gratify the demos for their personal ends.” (23) Thucydides’ Athens was highly ethical and relied on virtuous citizens who placed the city first and the individual second.⁸ Pericles exemplified this in his private and political life. He placed his faith in his fellow citizens, in their ability to reason and make well informed decisions. Such was the nature of Athenian democracy.

The decline of Athenian democracy and stability began with the death of Pericles.⁹ At this point, Thucydides augments his history of the Peloponnesian War with the theses that: 1) Athens was never finer than it was under Pericles, and: 2) upon Pericles’ death, Athenian sensibility declined with each passing public figure who failed to recognize the genius of his policies and manner of leading. In a democracy like Athens, where despotism and private ambitions should have been shackled to the virtues of the citizen, demagogues needed to be kept in check. Thucydides was not prone to universal statements, and Pericles’ policies were not about expanding an empire, but

⁷ This acts under the opinion that “history’s province was, or ought to be, that of literal (though perhaps not unadorned) truth.” (Kelley, 5)

⁸ Pericles venerates this ideal in his Funeral Oration. He says; “Here each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of the state as well: even those who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well-informed on general politics – this is a peculiarity of ours; we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all.” (II, 40).

defeating aggressors. N.G.L. Hammond writes in *The speeches in Thucydides*; “Imperialism is pardonable because it is a constant feature of human nature to dominate anyone who yields, just as it is to defend oneself against anyone who attacks.” (55) Neither Thucydides nor Pericles would have disagreed with this statement, but both would have rationalized it with the belief that the glory of Athens was not in the possession of one man, and imperialism benefited the state more than it benefited the individual. The major difference between Pericles and those who followed him was their belief that conquering peoples and success in war was as much, if not more, a personal glory than a veneration of the state.¹⁰ It is at this point that Thucydides begins to record the steady decline of Athenian democracy.

Pericles

Finley writes on Thucydides’ admiration for Pericles; “It was to his mind Athens’ essential misfortune that she lacked a second Pericles to lead the people sanely and to check the demos.”(*Three essays on Thucydides*, 155) Thucydides’ belief in this led him to bemoan Pericles’ death, not because a great man died, but because an exemplary Athenian died; “Indeed, during the whole period of peace-time when Pericles was at the head of affairs the state was wisely led and firmly guarded, and it was under him that Athens was at her greatest. And when war broke out, here, too, he appears to have accurately estimated what the power of Athens was.” (II,65) Pericles was selfless – he gave up his wealth and land so the demos would not think he was getting special

⁹ II, 65

¹⁰ This is true with one notable exception: Nicias. His fault was not with his desire for glory, but for his faith in tradition and his dependence upon the past. He, unlike Pericles, was not the idealized Athenian.

treatment from Sparta.¹¹ His ingenuousness manifested itself whenever Thucydides presents him before the Athenian assembly, and his leadership in battle was not questioned, nor were his motives for leading Athens to war.

Plutarch surmises the tragedy of Pericles' death in a Thucydidean passage in his *Lives*; "The course of public affairs after his death produced a quick and speedy sense of loss of Pericles. Those who, while he lived, resented his great authority, as that which eclipsed themselves, presently after his quitting the stage, making trial of other orators and demagogues, readily acknowledged that there never had been in nature such a disposition as his was, more moderate and reasonable in the height of that state which he took upon him, or more grave and impressive in the mildness which he used." (212) Pericles' "disposition" was his civic virtue. After his death, there was no voice to quell the disunity in Athens in regards to the strategy of the war. In his life, Pericles reminded the Athenian citizenry that their empire acted as a tyranny; it may have been morally wrong to take it, but it was dangerous to let it go.¹² The method that they needed to rely upon was their internal and united strength. The Athenian empire was the greatest Hellenic power in terms of wealth, navy, government, and citizenry. These factors put together, with a prudent foreign policy, were insurmountable obstacles for aggressors to come up against. Pericles had the foresight and the benevolence to understand this, his successors did not.

¹¹ II, 13

¹² II, 63

Cleon

In H.D. Westlake's *Individuals in Thucydides*, the author notes that Cleon was "the only major contemporary figure whose general character and conduct Thucydides expressly condemns." (60) The reasons for this are many; Cleon may have played a major role in Thucydides' expulsion from Attica in 424 BC¹³, he was explicitly anti-intellectual,¹⁴ and he was prone to self-interest and partisan politics, even at the expense of the military and the demos.¹⁵ Thucydides' anger towards Cleon, however, does not appear to be the product of personal squabbling; if Thucydides' promise to keep as "closely possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used," (I, 22) is to be held as a valued truth, then Thucydides' personal judgment of Cleon is validated by Cleon's mismanagement of state affairs.

The Mytilenian debate in Book III of the *History*, shows Cleon to be as Thucydides judges him; "He was remarkable among the Athenians for the violence of his character." (III, 36) What is most interesting about Cleon's stance on the execution of the Mytilenian's is not how cruel and unprecedented the initial decision for genocide was, but on the nature of his tyrannical speech about democratic government; "We should realize that a city is better off with bad laws, so long as they remain fixed, than with good laws that are constantly being altered." (III, 37) Periclean Athens was open for discussion, debate, and deliberation. Cleon wished to change Athens into a state of swift justice, so long as that justice was in concordance with the law of the land. Cleon's tirade continues against sophists and intellectuals. He characterizes them as people who "want

¹³ Westlake credits this fact as one of the major reasons for Cleon's negative image in the *History*.

¹⁴ For a decent laugh at Cleon's expense, see Aristophanes' *The wasps*.

¹⁵ In comparing the Sicilian Athenagoras and the Athenian Cleon, Finley writes; "Thucydides is illustrating in the policies of both Cleon and Athenagoras the possibility, ever present under a democratic government,

to appear wiser than the laws,” (III, 37) as though those laws were not written by men, and as men who “very often bring ruin to their country.” (III, 37)

The Athenian Assembly split the vote to change the execution sentence, with the side of fairer punishment edging out the more extreme arguments presented by Cleon. What the Mytilenian debate shows, though, is an Athenian swing to the right, away from Pericles’ ideals of a just and virtuous society, and towards a reactionary and radical factionalization, bent on changing the prudent ways Athens had relied upon in Pericles’ era.

Thucydides’ evidence to mark this swing in Cleon’s lifetime are many. What is perhaps the most telling is not the Mytilenian debate, but Cleon’s expansionist policies. The Athenian success at Pylos in the Peloponnese was not current with Pericles’ ideal of using Athens as an unconquerable fortress. Adding to the empire would stretch Athenian forces too thin, and administering expansion would add more need for military use.¹⁶ The incident at Pylos, though successful, is clearly an example of an Athenian (Cleon) extending Athens’ reach to further his political aims. Thucydides writes; “He (Cleon) then pointed at Nicias, the son of Niceratus, who was then general and whom he hated. Putting the blame on him, he said that, if only the generals were real men, it would be easy to take out a force and capture the Spartans on the island; certainly he himself would have done so, if he had been in command.” (IV, 27) When Cleon was given the

that politicians for their own partisan ends may jeopardize a people’s military effectiveness.” (*Three essays on Thucydides*, 155)

¹⁶ Finley writes in *Thucydides*; “The question has often been discussed whether, after 445, Pericles had become convinced that Athens’ expansion was over, at least on the mainland, and the historian’s answer evidently is that he had become so convinced, so far as the present war was concerned.” (194) Pericles does not make reference to invading islands not already under Athenian rule, only maintaining the empire as it stood.

generalship by Nicias, his success may have had more to do with the leadership of Demosthenes¹⁷, but the end result was a rise in Cleon's popularity.

War may be “unguided by knowledge or reason,” (Adcock, 11) but Cleon's motivation for staying at war while he was alive is made explicitly clear by Thucydides; “Cleon and Brasidas were dead – the two people who on each side had been most opposed to peace, Brasidas because of the success and honour which had come to him through war, Cleon because he thought that in a time of peace and quiet people would be more likely to notice his evil doings and less likely to believe his slander of others.” (V, 16) Westlake is correct in stating how Thucydides' anger over Cleon's management of state affairs seems more weighted than his assessment of other Athenian leaders. Cleon, though, seems more prone to mismanagement because his primary concern was not the state or his place in it, but solely his well-being. The leaders that followed Cleon kept Athens in the forefront of their mind, though superstition or personal ambition often got in the way.

Nicias

Thucydides characterizes Nicias as a stubborn Athenian who believed, like Pericles, in sacrificing his life for his state; “For his own part, therefore, knowing the Athenian character as he did, rather than be put to death of a disgraceful charge and by an unjust verdict of the Athenians, he preferred to take his chance and, if it must be, to meet his own death himself at the hands of the enemy.” (VII, 48) Nicias' life, as Thucydides points out, was not flawed due to cowardice, lack of civic virtue, or vanity; Nicias' life

¹⁷ This criticism does seem to have personal undertones, perhaps because of Thucydides' exile in 424 and his failure in battle.

was imperfect because he failed to combine the qualities necessary for separating the intellectual mind of the fifth century, the immediate situation of war with Sparta, and a dependence upon superstition and religion. Thucydides judges the men in his *History* based upon their purposes and the manner in which they achieve success and glory for the state. Nicias' transgression is not based in any mistake he made in his reverence for Athens, but because his faith in heaven had been misplaced. Before the Athenian expedition to Sicily is destroyed, Nicias tells his soldiers, "Our enemies have had good fortune enough, and, if any of the gods was angry with us for setting out, by this time we have been sufficiently punished." (VII, 77) Thucydidean realism dictates that each human drives his own fate; Pericles himself evokes this when he says, "We do not need the praises of Homer," (II, 41) as if to say the citizens of Athens create a time great enough for worthy approbation to be sung by poets.

Though Nicias was by no means as good a leader as Pericles, he was far superior to Cleon. Nicias' uprightness is freshening after the disaster of Cleon and the brashness of the Milean dialogue.¹⁸ Thucydides almost seems to lament Nicias' passing, though, like Cleon, he brought Athens one step closer to instability and ruin. The decline from Cleon to Nicias is not as obviously in descent as Pericles to Cleon. The Athenian demos, however, by sending Nicias to Sicily and not heeding his warnings or remembering Pericles policy of remaining close to Athens, show a marked declivity in reason. That Nicias feared the judgement of his fellow Athenians is evidence of this. It seems that Cleon's reactionary ideals reigned clearly after his death. Thucydides saw Nicias like he saw Athens: as a tragic figure in the *History*. Westlake writes; "Thucydides pays this

tribute to Nicias partly through sympathy for his cruel fate and partly through a desire to do him justice.” (211) Westlake’s analysis is interesting; at this point of the *History*, Thucydides had lost faith in the Athenian citizenry to make well informed decisions and discriminating judgements. The egotism of Athens had reached the point where the moral steadfastness of Nicias was pushed aside in favor for less ethical principles.

Alcibiades

Plutarch’s characterization of Alcibiades seems to be greatly influenced by Thucydides; “His conduct displayed many great inconsistencies and variations, not unnaturally, in accordance with the many and wonderful vicissitudes of his fortunes; but among the many strong passions of his real character, the one most prevailing of all was his ambition and desire for superiority.” (234) Alcibiades, similar to Pericles, was born to lead Athens to greatness; unlike Pericles, he saw himself as an entity separate from the citizenry he desired to lead. This presents a problem for understanding Alcibiades, a dilemma that Thucydides was not able to contend with or rationalize before the *History* ends in 411; is a democracy a better way to lead people than an enlightened despot? The tension this question arises in the *History* is at first difficult to grasp – does not Thucydides’ *History* operate under the assumption that democracy is the best way to fairly govern a people?¹⁹

The oligarchic coup of 411 ushers in a new era of Thucydides’ political thought. If democracy without Pericles’ ability to help the demos understand the importance of

¹⁸ The Melian dialogue in book five of the *History* truly shows the vanity of later Athenian imperialistic aims. Forcibly subjecting the population of Melos to Athenian rule is far from the policies Pericles had in mind when he told the Athenians how to win the war in books one and two.

reason is prone to partisan rivalries, is oligarchy the cure? Adcock writes; “Thucydides may have agreed with Pope:

For forms of government let fools contest;
Whate’er is best administered, is best.” (55)

Thucydides’ judgement of Alcibiades is therefore interesting; Alcibiades was unable to lead a democracy, but he was able to keep Athens Athenian. This is important because the perseverance of the state is paramount, no matter what the form. Thucydides writes; “It is interesting to observe that Attica, which, because of the poverty of her soil, was remarkably free from political disunity, has always been inhabited by the same race of people.” (I, 2) Athens was only conquered once – by the Persians, but this was part of Themistocles’ plan to expel the Persians from Attica and to destroy their fleet.²⁰ Though Alcibiades wanted to take democracy away from Athens, he did not want to take away personal liberty or freedom. He did not want to enslave his fellow citizens. He thought that Athenian sensibility had declined to such a degree that the people were no longer mentally capable of governing themselves.

With this said, Alcibiades’ flaws must be pointed out before judgement can label him as a benevolent despot or an opportunist. He, unlike Nicias, wished for personal glory – he was a supporter of the devastating Sicilian expedition, he sought refuge in Sparta with the hope to be elevated to the leader of Athens at the conclusion of the war, and he befriended Persian Tissaphernes and convinced the Persians to intervene in the

¹⁹ Pericles’ funeral oration in book one expresses this nationalistic sentiment. Thucydides’ firm belief in Athens’ glory leads him to write to the history in the first place.

²⁰ This led to the rebuilding of Athens after the war and the Delian League’s contributions to making Athens a city of marble. (I, 87)

Peloponnesian War.²¹ However, he justified these decisions with the idea that he was saving Athens from an absurd democracy.²² Alcibiades says before the Spartan assembly; “The country that I am attacking does not seem to me to be mine any longer; it is rather that I am trying to recover a country that has ceased to be mine.” (VI, 92) Alcibiades’ language is concurrent with Plutarch’s personification of Alcibiades; he says he has a desire for superiority. (234)

Thucydides is perplexed by Alcibiades. Is he the city saviour, or are his aims to install himself as dictator? One thing is certain in the *History*; Alcibiades’ ambition, be it for whatever reason, spells the end of democracy. What it will lead to is not covered in the *History*. Thucydides’ praise of Alcibiades is on the grounds that he wants to take power away from the men who continued to corrupt Athens after the Sicilian expedition. In this way, Alcibiades is a liberator. Thucydides knew, though, that democracy could not exist under Alcibiades and that the people of Athens had proved themselves incapable of living in a city that they themselves governed.

Concluding the *History*

Thucydides’ *History* preserves the decline of Athenian democracy from the age of Pericles to the oligarchic coup of 411. Though the oligarchy does not continue to exist, Alcibiades seems to have no intention in the *History* to bring back democracy. Book eight, unlike the previous books, makes no speeches, but it does offer a eulogy for the

²¹ Francis Macdonald Cornford’s *Thucydides Mythistoricus* places another black mark against Alcibiades; “Thucydides has not told us who played on this occasion the part Cleon played in the massacre of Mytilene; but Plutarch informs us. It was Alcibiades.” (186) Plutarch writes; “He was the principal cause of the slaughter of all the inhabitants of the isle of Melos who were or age to bear arms, having spoken in favour of that decree.” (244)

forgotten democracy that was so important to Pericles; “It was for motives of personal ambition that most of them (the oligarchs) were following the line that is most disastrous to oligarchies when they take over from democracies. For no sooner is the change made than every single man, not content with being the equal of others, regards himself as greatly superior to everyone else. In a democracy, on the other hand, someone who fails to get elected to office can always console himself with the thought that there was something not quite fair about it.” (VIII, 89) So ends Thucydides’ comments on democracy in Athens.

Thucydides presents his argument that democracy was best under Pericles and that it continued to decline to 411 within the speeches and opinions offered in the *History*. The book also acts as an informative guide on how to lead an empire to greatness through the acts and deeds of Pericles and Alcibiades. In contrast, it shows how not to lead through the conduct of Cleon and Nicias. The *History* can be read as a guidebook to successful rule and to the actions that need to be avoided, namely obvious feelings of superiority, partisan politics, and dependence on superstition. Thucydides initially intended for his work to only chronicle the immense and important war between the Athenian and Spartan alliance.²³ He achieved much more.

²² In his speech before Sparta, Alcibiades says; “As for democracy, those of us with any sense at all knew what that means, and I just as much as any. Indeed, I am well equipped to make an attack on it; but nothing new can be said of a system which is generally recognized as absurd.” (VI, 89)

²³ I, I

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The History of the Peloponnesian War (Greek: ἱστορίαι, "Histories") is a historical account of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC), which was fought between the Peloponnesian League (led by Sparta) and the Delian League (led by Athens). It was written by Thucydides, an Athenian historian who also served as an Athenian general during the war. His account of the conflict is widely considered to be a classic and regarded as one of the earliest scholarly works of history. The History is divided into eight books. The History of the Peloponnesian War - By Thucydides. Written 431 B.C.E. Translated by Richard Crawley.Â Beginning of the Peloponnesian War - First Invasion of Attica - Funeral Oration of Pericles. The war between the Athenians and Peloponnesians and the allies on either side now really begins. For now all intercourse except through the medium of heralds ceased, and hostilities were commenced and prosecuted without intermission. The history follows the chronological order of events by summers and winters. The thirty years' truce which was entered into after the conquest of Euboea lasted fourteen years. Thucydides's History of the Peloponnesian War breaks off before the story is over. After detailing the armed conflict between the Athenians and the Spartans (and their respective allies) between 431 and 404 BCE, the eight-book text ends abruptly in the middle of a chapter as if, one day, the writer simply dropped his pen and left his desk, never to return. Bust of Thucydides. shakko, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY. What required such urgent and final attention? And why did Thucydides never return to complete the manuscript? Whatever the answers, the book's incompleteness adds a human touch to a work