Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- The Landmark Thucydides Discussion Guide –

Introduction: In order to understand operational art in its relationship to security policy and strategy, it is first necessary to understand the environment in which states operate. As an introductory discussion regarding the international system and the problem of explanation, it would be helpful, first, to read MCDP 1-1, which notes: “Before we can usefully discuss the making and carrying out of military strategy, we must understand the fundamental character of politics and the violent expression of politics called war.”

The outbreak of war in 431 BC presented a complex problem to Athens and Sparta. Sparta was the unrivaled land power of Greece, while Athens was the preeminent naval power. How could each defeat the other? Thucydides relates Athenian efforts to form and lead land and sea-going armies that were not afraid to match swords and shields with the Spartans. And in one of the great examples of “learning” in military history, Sparta slowly ventured onto the sea. It is also important to remember that the Peloponnesian War was fought by contending coalitions; indeed, both Sparta and Athens became involved in the war over a dispute between two of their allies.

In the end, Spartan persistence broke Athenian power and the war ended with the destruction of the Athenian fleet, followed by a Spartan blockade which choked off Athens from her lifeline, the sea. Thucydides witnessed the end of the war but could not finish his chronicle, and so other historians did. Nevertheless, given his deep pessimism about human nature a dominant theme in his book, Thucydides would undoubtedly have written powerful closing chapters about this Greek tragedy.

The origins and conduct of the war between Athens and Sparta makes an excellent case study for thinking about the relationship between policy, strategy, and operational art. Indeed, Thucydides offers one of the most insightful portraits of a state at war, including and especially a democracy. It therefore fully merits the attention of a professional military mind, in particular those charged with carrying out the policy decisions of democratic governments like that of the United States.

Prep Work:


Read and Discuss:

1. Thucydides’ history of the Peloponnesian War is a difficult text to read. Fortunately Robert Strassler has provided some very useful tools to help the reader. So, begin by reading the “Editor’s Note,” pp. xxv-xxxi. It’s also helpful to refer to the key to the map symbols on p. xxxii.

2. Of course we would be remiss not to read the entire book, but for our purposes that is unnecessary. Three large segments of the Thucydides’ history are sufficient to give us access to Thucydides’ thoughts about the nature and character of war:
Part I: The readings in Part I deal with the slide towards war of longtime rivals Sparta and Athens. The two city-states had joined earlier to repel the Persian threat, but conflicting interests slowly developed. Athens, primarily a seafaring state, entered into relations with other Greek seafaring cities on islands in the Ionian Sea and on the coast of Asia Minor (modern Turkey). These polities paid financial tribute to Athens and were allied in its Delian League, as the treasury was initially located on the island of Delos, a league member. The league depended upon the substantial navy that Athens maintained in peacetime. Most of Athens’ allies were too small and too poor to contribute ships. Sparta created its own circle of dependent states and allies, some of which were seafaring peoples in their own right. As a general rule, cities ruled by oligarchies (aristocracies) supported Sparta. Those cities with substantial trading interests developed popular institutions and democratic inclinations that usually led them to look to Athens.

- Read pp 3-49 (ending with the first paragraph at the top of pg 49: “The Spartans voted...that war must be declared”);
- Read pp 65-69 (beginning with “After this,” and ending with the first full paragraph on pg 69); and
- Read pp 79-85 (beginning with “To return to the Spartans” at the bottom of 79, and ending with the conclusion of Book One on pg 85).

Discussion Questions:

1. Sparta and Athens dominated parts of Greece, thus creating essentially a bipolar world. What brought about the conflict of 431-404 BC?

2. What do these events suggest about alliances and war? Can a reasonable parallel be drawn with World War I? The Cold War? What about today?

3. Analyze the pre-war assessment speeches by Archidamus of Sparta and Pericles of Athens. Can you think of any modern parallels?

Part II: The central portions of Thucydides’ book chronicle the horrors of developing war. In that regard, he describes how the strain of a prolonged and costly war results in the degeneration of a society. The best example of this is the comparison between the Athenian actions regarding the revolt of Mytilene and the justly famous Melian Dialogue. The widely differing outcomes are used by Thucydides to show how far Athenian sensibilities had coarsened in the intervening twelve years between the two events. Perhaps the best example of the escalating savagery was the Corecyraean Civil War, which resulted in a bloodbath that was stunning even for that time. As you continue your reading, think about various Clausewitzian concepts that you may be familiar with. For example, the element of chance took its most deadly form in the plague, which robbed Athens of its greatest asset, Pericles. His death from the plague provided a perfect opportunity for Thucydides to give an assessment of Pericles’ policy.

- Read pp 89-128 (ending with “unaided forces of the Peloponnesians” in the middle of pg 128);
- Read pp 159-167 (to the bottom of pg 167);
• **Read** pp 174-184 (beginning with “From Ephesus” in the middle of 174, and ending with the first paragraph on pg 184);

• **Read** pp 194-201 (beginning with “The Corcyraean revolution” on 194, and ending with the last full paragraph on pg 201); and

• **Read** pp 350-357 (beginning with “The next summer” at the bottom of 350, and ending with the conclusion of Book Five on pg 357).

**Discussion Questions:**

1. In his Funeral Speech in Book Two, how did Pericles advise Athenians to think about their empire? Was he compelling and effective? Were the concerns of the other Greek city-states about the empire justified?

2. What do we learn from the civil war in Corcyra about Thucydides’ view of human nature and the nature of war? Consider how this passage and others in the Thucydides’ work affect a reader’s views about democracy in the Greek world, not to mention our own.

3. Contrast the great debates at Mytilene and at Melos. What differences of time, place, character, and ethics did they reveal? Why do these differences matter?

4. The Athenian delegates at Melos sought to compel the island’s submission with the cold argument that the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept. Was this proof of war-time hardening of Athenian morals? Or was Thucydides the “realist” speaking for himself, summing up what he believed to be the hard facts of politics and war?

5. By the midpoint of the war, have the policies and strategies of the two great powers changed? If so, how?

**Part III:** This final section concerns the Athenian expedition to Sicily. The expedition was originally conceived as something of a raid, but political maneuvering in Athens swelled a light force of twenty ships into a massive armada. The Athenians achieved some early success as Syracuse, the most powerful state on Sicily, responded very slowly to the invasion. Things began to go badly for the Athenians after the arrival of a Spartan force which galvanized the Syracusans into action. Having ceded the initiative to their newly energized opponents, the Athenians tried to recover by dispatching another massive armada of reinforcements, which briefly gave the Athenians the upper hand once again. However, following a disastrous failed assault on an important piece of high ground, and several crippling naval defeats that damaged the fleet’s fighting capacity and morale, the Athenians attempted a desperate overland escape away from the city they had hoped to conquer. The withdrawal failed and virtually the entire expedition was destroyed in the Sicilian interior.

• **Read** Books Six and Seven in their entirety, pp. 361-478.
Discussion Questions:

1. What interests, forces, or personalities caused Athens to launch the Sicilian expedition? Did Athens have alternatives?

2. Ancient armies sometimes operated under multiple commanders or even rotating command. Did the Sicilian case seem to prove the folly of this method, or was it simply the particularly poor mix of commanders that was harmful?

3. Was the expedition sufficiently supported by the assembly in Athens? Begin your analysis by contrasting Thucydides’ first mention of this issue (pp 64-65) with the account he gave in Books Six and Seven.

4. Was the expedition a good idea badly executed, or simply a bad idea altogether?

Because Thucydides’ account ended prematurely, students of the war must turn to other histories to find out how the war ends and thus resolve the question of how Athens, having lost so much, fought on for nine more years after failure in Sicily. One scholar’s brief discussion in The Landmark Thucydides (the epilogue) satisfies this requirement.

- Read “Epilogue” and Appendix E, pp 549-554 and pp 597-602.

Discussion Questions:

1. After the failure in Sicily, could Athens still have won the war?

2. Does your reading of the end of the war change your view regarding the centers of gravity in this contest?

3. How do you assess the role of Persia in this lengthy conflict?

Thucydides Take-Aways:

These long selections from Thucydides are a veteran’s account of what actually happens in war, and they mirror many themes of modern warfare, including the more theoretical ones like the intrusion of chance, but also ethical issues and the weaknesses of human nature. The book provides a strong case study to any who would understand the nature of war and why and how states go to war, including such issues as pre-war assessment, national-level decision making, the problems of democracy in waging war, and the uncertainties of foreign interventions.

To the Discussion Leader:

Encourage your Marines to read this book carefully, to think deeply about what they’ve read, to challenge and debate one another on points of interest, and ultimately to relate Thucydides’ experience to our own experience today. The character of war may change but it’s nature is enduring.