Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Why Read *The Landmark Thucydides*? -

“…you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”


According to combat veteran and historian Thucydides, nations go to war for reasons of fear, honor, and interest. It may seem odd, thinking about what war might look like in the future, that we should step back over 2,000 years to study Thucydides’ masterpiece, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, but although not dealing with current events, Thucydides’ work will forever remain relevant to the military professional. Nations still go to war for the same reasons that Athens and Sparta went to war in the 5th Century BCE.

The great thing about Thucydides is that his work offers so many things for us on so many levels. His history is an exploration of human nature, particularly under the pressures of war. It is a fascinating study in leadership. The outbreak of war in 431 BCE immediately posed a classic question of strategic mismatch. Sparta was the unrivaled land power of Greece, while Athens was the preeminent naval power. How could each defeat the other? And the Peloponnesian War featured almost the full panoply of the types of warfare recognizable today: land battles between hoplites using spears and swords, as well as naval battles between fleets of triremes. Athens used all manner of indirect attacks, especially coastal raids and use of infantry to invade and wreak havoc on the enemy’s home soil. Fortification building and sieges were frequent and covered in detail by Thucydides. All that is missing is airpower.

In reading Thucydides’ work, the reader should not allow the focus of attention to become tactical details. There are too many minor naval encounters, raids, sieges, and battles to keep straight in any case. Concentrate on the broader issues of policy, politics, strategy, and operational art. Read the book carefully as the narrative differs a lot from what we are accustomed to in modern writing. Use the maps and notes to keep things straight. The appendices will introduce readers to the Greek way of war in a manner that complements such works of fiction as *Gates of Fire*. And pay attention to the speeches given by such major figures as Pericles, Archidamus, and Alcibiades, justly famous rhetoric which lays out the various notions of citizenship, war aims, national interests, and appeals to public opinion. One might recognize themes still operative today in speeches made by Marine Corps Generals as well as drill instructors, but also presidents and other statesmen.