Structure and Contingency: The Causes of the Peloponnesian War

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Thucydides called it "a war like no other" (1.23.1, trans. Hanson, 2005). It was a 27 year war that brought an end to the fifth century Athenian Golden Age, killed more Greeks in one year than the Persians killed in ten (Hanson, 2005, p. 11), and, in the end, seemed to solve nothing. "Never before had so many cities been captured and then devastated . . . ; never had there been so many exiles; never such loss of life" (1.23, trans. Warner, 1972). Such was the severity of war that words lost their meanings. Aggression became courage; prudence became cowardice; moderation became unmanly; understanding was mocked; "fanatical enthusiasm was the mark of a real man . . . . Anyone who held violent opinions could always be trusted, and anyone who objected to them became suspect" (1.82). Greeks, in effect reentering what moderns might call a state of nature, became barbarians. It was in such an environment shortly after the conclusion of the war that Socrates himself—though he fought bravely during the war—was executed (Hanson, 2005, p. 5).*

What caused this war? The Greeks themselves were unsure: "As for the war in which they [Athens and Sparta] are engaged, they are not certain who began it," Thucydides has Spartan delegates declare in a speech to the Athenians (4.20). But with so much devastation and pain, not knowing seemed unacceptable. And so it was that Thucydides (c. 460- c. 400 BC), who was himself an Athenian veteran of the war, undertook the first sustained inquiry in history into the origins and course of a single war (Finley, 1972, p. 23).

In explaining the history of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC), Thucydides hoped to do more than to record the desultory events of an unhappy time. He wrote a history that he sought to make accurate in the particulars, but his real goal was universal understanding (for the Greeks). "It will be enough for me," he wrote, "if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future. My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last for ever" (1.22). For good reason Thucydides has long been understood as not just a historian but also something of a political scientist (Doyle, 1990; Ober, 2005).

This essay investigates the causes of the Peloponnesian War as found in Thucydides and the best of modern scholarship on the question. Throughout the essay, I attempt to follow the example of Donald Kagan and the guidance of J.E. Lendon: to treat Thucydides ' history and opinion with respect, "but not with idolatry" (Kagan, 1969, 1974, 1981, 1987; Lendon, 2010, p. 423). Great historian though he was, Thucydides made mistakes of fact

and judgment, he had biases and even an agenda, and he was, as an Athenian general, a partisan in the struggle his history records (Kagan, 2010). This does not mean his history is not extraordinary; it means merely that it is human.

The essay proceeds as follows. It begins by examining how rivalry developed between Sparta and Athens in fifth century Greece, and how dual alliance systems polarized the "inter-polis" system. It then looks at the history of the First Peloponnesian War and the peace that resulted from it. The remainder focuses extensively on the immediate causes of the Second Peloponnesian War and appraises what Thucydides meant when he spoke of the "truest cause" of the war.

Timē, Rivalry, Polarity, and Alliances

In ancient Greece, polities were ranked according to their *timē* or honor. The polity on the top of this ranking was deferred to as the leader or "hegemon" (from the Greek *hegemonia*). To be the hegemon was to be the *legitimate* authority—the polity that had the right to give others commands in exigent circumstances (Lebow & Kelly, 2001, pp. 594–603). The ancient glory and history of each polity contributed to its relative status, while victory in battle was the preeminent way for a polity to increase *timē*. Such battles took place when, in response to an insult (an act of *hybris*), the offended polity sought vengeance in open battle (Lendon, 2010, pp. 6–13).

Because Sparta was the most powerful and respected polity of Greece when Xerxes invaded in 480 BC (1.18), it organized and led the Greek world against the Persians, famously fighting, of course, at Thermopylae. At the Battle of Plataea in 479, at which the Persians were decisively defeated, Sparta assigned the left flank of battle—the most honorable location after the Spartans 'own right flank—to the Athenians in recognition of their substantial contribution to the war (Lendon, 2010, pp. 40–42). Indeed, in recognition for his wisdom and courage, the Spartans treated Themistocles, the Athenian commander at the Battle of Marathon, "with more distinction than [they] ever treated any visitor from abroad" (1.74).

Upon the defeat of the Persians in 479, Thucydides reports, "Sparta was particularly friendly to Athens" (1.92). Athenians, led by Themistocles, took this opportunity to rebuild the walls and fortifications of their city (1.89 ff.). At the urging of its allies, "who were alarmed both by the sudden growth of Athenian sea-power and by the daring which the Athenians had shown in the war against the Persians" (1.90), Sparta dispatched embassies suggesting that Athens refrain from rebuilding its walls on the pretext that in the future such fortifications could be used by the Persians in a new invasion.

Themistocles replied to this challenge by giving "the Spartans a gentle poke, a beautifully symmetrical jab" in response to a previous episode in which Sparta had finished its walls at the Isthmus of Corinth while delaying the Athenian envoys, who were seeking Spartan help against the then-invading Persians (Lendon, 2010, p. 44). In order to match Sparta's earlier offense, Themistocles ensured the Spartan inspectors were delayed until the

Athenian walls were fully constructed. He then explained to the Spartan delegates that "the Athenians were capable of making up their own minds both about their own interests and about the interests of the rest of Hellas. . . . for it was only on the basis of equal strength that equal and fair discussions on the common interest could be held" (1.91). If this is what Themistocles actually said (the dialogue occurred years before Thucydides was born, and Thucydides reports his own doubts about "past history," see 1.20-21), then this was the first sign that Athens was unwilling to pay deference to a Spartan hegemon: Athens instead insisted on equality, for Athenians had "given more than [they] received" in the campaigns against the Persians (1.74).

Sparta, which was never eager to initiate a confrontation and preferred to overlook insults from polities it considered its inferior (1.18; Kagan, 1969, p. 26 ff.), ignored Themistocles 'challenge. Nonetheless, Thucydides records, "All the same the Spartans had not got their own way and secretly they felt aggrieved because of it" (1.92). And so it was that a low level of rivalry developed between Sparta, the recognized leader of Greece, and Athens, a polity whose power was rapidly increasing.

This rivalry between Sparta and Athens, though fueled by a contest for honor, should also be placed in a more specific context. Sparta and Athens were in many ways opposites: Sparta was a continental power, Athens was to become (in the years following the defeat of the Persians) a naval power; Sparta despised commerce, Athens was a commercial city; Spartans were conservative, Athenians were inventive; Sparta was oligarchic, Athens was democratic; Sparta had an empire at home (its helots), Athens was to acquire an empire abroad; the Spartan alliance system was loose, and sometimes almost multipolar, while the Athenian system was tight and (was to become) strictly imperial. Different participants in Thucydides 'history stress each of these themes. But, of course, we must be careful not to overdue the contrast: helot slaves sustained the Spartan system though agricultural labor, but Athens too had tens of thousands of slaves (7.27). Sparta was "oligarchic," but its system was also constitutionally mixed and power was dispersed among two kings (from different bloodlines), five annually elected ephors, and the general cohort of Spartan warriors, who voted in the assembly. Spartans (and Peloponnesians more broadly) may have been conservative, but as the war progressed, they learned to adapt—a development that eventuated in their great naval victories over Athens. The differences between Sparta and Athens did not doom them to conflict, but it would be difficult to understand Thucydides 'story without grasping this context.

As time passed after the building of Athens 'walls, the Spartan-Athenian rivalry gradually escalated. In one gasp, Thucydides summarizes the next fifty years of history:

> not long afterwards the Hellenes – both those who had fought in the war together and those who later revolted from the King of Persia – split into two divisions, one group following Athens and the other Sparta. These were clearly the most powerful states, one being supreme on land, the other on the sea. For a short time the war-time alliance held together, but it was not long before quarrels took place and Athens and Sparta, each with her own allies, were at war with each other,

while among the rest of the Hellenes states that had their own differences now joined one or other of the two sides. So from the end of the Persian War till the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, though there were some intervals of peace, on the whole these two Powers were either fighting with each other or putting down revolts among their allies. They were consequently in a high state of military preparedness and had gained their military experience in the hard school of danger. (1.18)

By the 430s rivalry had turned into polarity and "the two sides were at the very height of their power and preparedness and . . . the rest of the Hellenic world was committed to one side or the other" (1.1).

What precisely transpired between 479 and 433 BC, the so-called *Pentecontaetia* or Fifty Year Period, is critical in understanding the events—and the war—that followed. It was here that the structural conditions developed that eventually "compelled" Sparta "to go to war" (1.23.6, trans. Sealey, 1975, p. 92). Thucydides identifies the key factors: the expansion of the Athenian empire, rivalry between Athens and Sparta, competing alliance systems, growing polarity, and the (unfortunately named) First Peloponnesian War (460-445) (1.18).

From *Hegemonia* to *Arche*: The Birth of the Athenian Empire

After the defeat of the Persians in 479, Athens took command of the mopping up operations undertaken in the Aegean. Athens was permitted by Sparta to assume this position of leadership because of the unpopularity of Sparta's own commander among the other Greek polities (1.94-5). This suited Sparta just fine because it was not eager to lead campaigns in far away places, and, furthermore, the Spartans "regarded the Athenians as being perfectly capable of exercising the command and as being also at that time friendly to themselves" (1.95). Indeed, the Greek historian Diodorus of Sicily (who wrote in the first century BC) records that in the 470s the Spartans had an explicit debate on whether they would contend with the Athenians for control of the sea. Many Spartans believed they should actively resist Athens 'naval expansion. But advocates for sea-rivalry with Athens were defeated and the debate ended with the words of a Spartan elder: "It does not profit Sparta to dispute for the sea" (Diod. Sic. 11.50 quoted in Lendon, 2010, p. 48).

In order to prosecute the campaign against the Persians, the Athenians required the allied Greek polities to supply money or ships, forming an organization called the Delian League in 478 BC to manage the war (named thus as its treasury was originally established on the small island of Delos) (1.96-7). With time, this league of independent polities was to become the Athenian Empire. The process by which this happened was rather prosaic: in order to prevent free riding, Athens required each polity to make a contribution to the league's navy or treasury. If any polity dared resist—Naxos was the first in 476-5—it was compelled to come in at the cost of its independence (1.98-99). As most polities preferred to contribute to the treasury rather than the navy, Athens 'strength grew quickly at the expense of its allies and subjected polities. But even if its popularity

was waning, Athens, led by Cimon, continued to defeat the Persians in major engagements (1.100), which provided an easy justification for its heavy-handedness.

In its campaign against the Persians, however, Athens 'motive was not purely the freedom of the Greeks: Athenians sought an empire so that they might, Thucydides has a later Athenian speaker state, "have the strength to hold our own in relation to the Peloponnesians" (6.83). Empire was a way to ensure Athenian equality in the scale of relative *timē*, and it worked. As the same Athenian proclaims, "After the Persian war, by which time we had built our navy, we broke free from the Spartan empire and from Spartan leadership [*hegemonia*]. They had no more right to give us orders than we had to give orders to them, except that at the time they were stronger" (6.82).

During this period of imperial expansion, Athens was able to maintain good relations with Sparta because of the leadership of Cimon, Themistocles 'rival and an unabashed Laconophile. Plutarch reports that Cimon would rebuke his countrymen by booming, "that's not how they do it at Sparta!" (quoted in Lendon, 2010, p. 51). Cimon went so far as to name one of his sons Lacedaemonius, or *Spartan* (Kagan, 1969, p. 60). Indeed, in around 475, Sparta successfully used its influence in Athens to arrange the ostracism of the anti-Spartan Themistocles. For more than the next decade, Cimon would dominate Athenian politics. This period of peace and friendship between Sparta and Athens allowed Sparta to strengthen its position in the Peloponnese and overcome anti-Spartan movements in Tegea and Arcadia; it also allowed Athens to construct its empire free from opposition from the Peloponnese. The policy of dual hegemony thus benefited both Greek powers (Watson, 2009, pp. 58–59). Kagan concludes: "Confidence in the Athenians had been fully justified. They had taken no part in the Peloponnesian uprising, had given no aid to the new democracies, and had been quite ready to turn Themistocles over to Spartan vengeance. Sparta, it could be argued, might now look forward to a return to the peace and quiet of the prewar period, to its virtuous ancestral ways, to a secure Peloponnesian hegemony, defended from barbarian attack by a trusted and reliable Athens" (Kagan, 1969, pp. 55–56). In sum, relations between Sparta and Athens and their related allies appear to have been much more positive in the decade and a half that followed the Persian wars than Thucydides 'statement in 1.18 (quoted above) implies. Athens and Sparta were openly cooperating: as long as Cimon, or someone similarly friendly to Sparta, continued to dominate Athenian politics, the expectation should have been for this trend to continue.

Hybris and Vengeance: the Coming of Conflict

In 465 an earthquake shook the Peloponnese and was followed by a helot revolt in Sparta (1.101). The Spartans asked their allies, including Athens, to come aid them in the war against the helots.

There was a significant internal debate within Athens over whether it should render aid. The leader of those opposed to aiding Sparta argued Athenians should not "help or restore a city that was a rival to Athens" but instead "let the pride of Sparta lie low and be

trampled underfoot" (Plutarch quoted in Kagan, 1969, p. 72). Cimon, however, prevailed by arguing that Athens should "not leave Hellas lame nor see their city deprived of its yokefellow," an open acknowledgement of the dual hegemony that currently existed in Greece (Plutarch quoted in Kagan, 1969, p. 72). Cimon then led an army to the Peloponnese, helping the Spartans defeat the rebels in open battle. As their allies departed, the Spartans laid siege to the remaining helots who had fortified Mt. Ithome. Once they realized their own weakness at siege operations, Sparta called its allies again in 462—naming especially the Athenians—to come and help finish off the rebels (1.102; Lendon, 2010, p. 52).

Once the Athenians arrived, however, the Spartans "grew afraid of the enterprise and the unorthodoxy of the Athenians; they reflected, too, that they were of a different nationality and feared that, if they stayed on in the Peloponnese, they might listen to the people in Ithome and become the sponsors of some revolutionary policy" (1.102). Out of fear, then, Sparta sent the Athenians home while retaining its other allies. The Athenians, insecure in their new identity as a great power, believed this to be a dishonorable act on the part of Sparta—a grave insult—and were "deeply offended." In vengeance, as a punishment for such Spartan *hybris*, Athenians "denounced the original treaty of alliance which had been made against the Persians and allied themselves with Sparta's enemy, Argos" (1.102). In another act of spite, when Sparta finally defeated the helots (on negotiated terms), Athens "received the exiles and settled them" (1.103). These Athenian acts, to the Greek mind, were not ignoble. As a modern historian reminds us, the Greeks considered revenge to be "among the noblest possible motivations for war" (Lendon, 2010, p. 53).

In consequence of the Athenian "humiliation" in the Peloponnese, Cimon, that great friend of the Spartans, was ostracized once he returned to Athens in c. 461. Kagan notes the sad irony: "the expedition that he [Cimon] had urged to guarantee friendship between Athens and Sparta provided the weapon with which his enemies in both states could destroy that friendship" (Kagan, 1969, p. 73). With Cimon's defeat, Athens would no longer be comfortable with the dual hegemony of the status quo. That being said, though Athens 'feathers had been ruffled, that was all: the two hegemons of Greece were still at peace.

One further fact should be noted here: before the outbreak of the earthquake, Thucydides tells a quaint story of a rebellion in c. 465 at Thasos. The Thasians, who had gotten into a disagreement with the Athenians over some gold deposits, sought to leave the Delian League. Athens responded with an invasion and siege. The Spartans, Thucydides reports, then promised to help the Thasians by invading Attica. This never came about because of the earthquake and revolt in Messina. This would indicate that in fact the rivalry had escalated significantly and that the Spartans already were willing to attack the Athenians and desired merely a pretext (1.101.1). If this story were true, it seems strange that the Spartans would be so willing—that very year—to request an Athenian army to enter their lands and come to their aid. Kagan vouches for the authenticity of the story (1969, p. 61, fn. 15), but more recent scholarly treatments are more wary. Lendon, for example, writes,

"Thucydides no doubt thought the story true, but in fact it has all the signs of a manufactured casus belli: at once secret and stillborn, it was quite impossible to prove or disprove. Perhaps there had been a message sent between Thasos and Sparta: certainly it is easy to imagine the angry Athenian invention of, or elaboration upon, such contacts, in the hour of fury after Cimon's dismissal from Ithome" (55). Regardless of where one comes down on this question, Sparta's reluctance to actually engage in battle with Athens if it could otherwise be avoided is demonstrated clearly in the course of the First Peloponnesian War. In other words, if in fact the Spartans made such a promise, it is possible they had no intention of keeping it.

The First Peloponnesian War (460-446 BC)

Corinth, Sparta's largest ally, ensured the peace of the post-Persian era did not last. Obsessed with a piece of land held by Megara, also an ally of Sparta, Corinth initiated a war in 461. Sensing a moment of opportunity, Megara in response left the Spartan alliance and joined with the Athenians, who, still smarting from Sparta's previous insult, were looking for vengeance. This significantly affected the balance of power in Greece. Megara, located in the Isthmus of Corinth, dominated the passes between the Peloponnese and Attica. As long as it was allied to Sparta, Athens could not attack by land. But if Megara allied itself with Athens, Sparta would be unable to attack Athens. Sparta did not constrain Corinth because it could not: though a member of the Spartan alliance, Corinth consistently pursued an independent policy. Indeed, its rejection of the Peace of Nicias in 421 would come to be a prime cause of the continuation of war thereafter. Corinth's action in 461 was rash, selfish, and typical: as the modern historian Arnold Wycombe Gomme put it: "Corinth was ready to risk the stability of the Peloponnesian League, not to mention the peace of the Greek world in general, rather than give up a claim to some strip of land" (Gomme quoted in Kagan, 1969, p. 25). Kagan's conclusion is apt: "This was a clear example of the Corinthian tail wagging the Spartan dog" (26).

The Athenian alliance with Megara was no minor affair. As Kagan writes, it "could only be interpreted as an act of war against the Spartans. Athens 'acceptance of a rebellious ally into the Athenian alliance, her fortification of the vital route between the Peloponnese and the rest of Greece were acts that Sparta could not tolerate. The Athenians knew this quite well but did not shrink from the deeds" (Kagan, 1969, p. 80). A refocus on *timē* makes sense of Athens 'aggressive actions. With Cimon gone, the Athenian democracy, now led by a young Pericles, still desired vengeance for Sparta's insult, but also open equality—or perhaps even something more. It was willing to fight to achieve this objective.

In addition to being at war with Megara, which was now defended by Athenian soldiers and fortifications, Corinth was likewise at war with Argos, also over another minor territorial dispute. In around 458, Athenian soldiers met Corinthians and their allies, the Epidaurians, at Haliae, on the eastern side of the Argolic Gulf. This was the first major

action of First Peloponnesian War (called thus by modern historians; the ancient name for the conflict is not known) (Lendon, 2010, pp. 59–61). The Athenians lost this first battle, but the war quickly expanded as Aegina, Athens 'longtime rival, joined Corinth and her allies in the war with Sparta, Argos, and Megara (1.104-5; Lendon, 2010, p. 62). Athens, likewise, may have joined with the Argives in a battle against the Spartans around Oenoe in the Argolid (Lendon, 2010, p. 63).

Up until this point, there is little evidence that Sparta and Athens clashed head-on (Cartwright, 1997, pp. 65–66). This changed, however, once an ally of Athens invaded Doris, the ancient homeland of the Spartans. The Spartans, who held a moral debt to their mother state, marched to its defense with 1,500 hoplites and 10,000 allies (1.107). Once the Spartans were successful at Doris, they pondered how they could return home. Because Athens held the passes at Megara, the Spartan army chose to wait in Boeotia. The Athenians then "marched out against them with their whole army. . . . They made this attack," Thucydides reports, "partly because they thought that the Spartans were in difficulties about their way back, and partly because they had some suspicions of the plot to overthrow the democracy" (1.108). At the battle, though it was close, Athens was defeated, an outcome that allowed the Spartan army to return home (1.108). Two months later, unperturbed by its defeat, Athens dispatched a new army, which, in an act of vengeance for its earlier loss, defeated Sparta's allies and took control of central Greece (Boeotia and Phocis) (1.108).

Simultaneous with the conduct of the First Peloponnesian War, Athens was engaged in a major campaign in the eastern Mediterranean and in Egypt against the Great King of Persia. The Athenian Egyptian expedition ended in total disaster in around 454 with as many as forty to fifty thousand casualties (Kagan, 1969, p. 97). Worried about the course of the war on this second front, in around 451, Cimon, having just returned from a decade of exile, negotiated a five years 'truce with the Peloponnesians and led a new 200-ship expedition against the Persians in Cyprus (1.112; Lendon, 2010, p. 72).

Sparta used the truce with Athens to fight against other adversaries, scoring a major victory against its ancient rival Argos, which it bound to peace for thirty years (Lendon, 2010, pp. 72–3). It also used the truce to restore control of the temple at Delphi, the most holy site in ancient Greece, to the Delphians. But "as soon as they had retired, the Athenians marched out, took the temple again, and gave it back to the Phocians" (1.112). Athens, in short, abided by the terms of the truce—and may even have been a "saturated power" whose goal was simply to keep what she had (Kagan, 1969, p. 107)—but, nonetheless, she still sought to humble Sparta wherever she could. This was certainly the interpretation the first century AD Greek historian Plutarch attributed to this event: Pericles, he reported, "considered it a great achievement to hold the Lacedaemonians in check, and set himself in opposing to these in every way, as he showed by his action in the Sacred War" (Plutarch, *Pericles*, 18.2-3 quoted in Kagan, 1969, p. 122).

In 447 and 446 as the five-year truce was ending, a series of revolts weakened the Athenian position considerably: in central Greece, the Boetians revolted and defeated the

Athenians in an ambush; then Euboea, the great island to Athens 'east, tired of Athens imperium, revolted; to top it all off, Megara switched its alliance back to Sparta and slaughtered the Athenians in its city (1.114-5). These revolts followed similar rebellions on the coast of Asia Minor (Erythrae and Miletus) (see Kagan, 1969, pp. 98-99). Once the truce ended, Sparta invaded Attica in this moment of Athenian weakness, but, rather than ravishing the fields around the city, the Spartan king Pleistoanax made a peace settlement with Pericles in which Athens surrendered its holdings in central Greece and Sparta agreed not to interfere in the affairs of the Athenian Empire (1.114-5). The reason Pericles was willing to negotiate was straightforward: Athens simply could not fight the Corinthians, Spartans, Persians, and its own revolting allies at the same time. This agreement was ratified in 446/5 as the Thirty Years 'Peace. The treaty itself was an "equal treaty" that recognized Athens as Sparta's equal in its division of allies and its prescription for the arbitration of disputes (Lendon, 2010, p. 80).

The First Peloponnesian War broke out because of Athens 'quest for vengeance in response to the perceived insult of being sent away from Messina on the one hand and Corinth's selfish border dispute with Megara on the other. The first created conditions of intense rivalry; the second opened a window of opportunity for Athens to decisively shift the balance of power, thereby enabling it to punish Sparta, which it stepped through. The war could have been a contest merely between Athens and Sparta's allies, but Athens intentionally escalated the war by attacking Sparta's forces in a moment of perceived weakness. Athens then set about conquering for itself a land empire to complement its maritime empire. Even after its tremendous defeat in Egypt and during the five-years truce with Sparta, Athenians could not resist an opportunity to inflict their vengeance on Sparta at Delphi. What was most extraordinary about the war was Sparta's reluctance to fight: cut off in Boeotia, there was no way Sparta could avoid battle at Tanagra; even when Pleistoanax finally invaded Attica, it was with so much reserve that he was forced to flee into exile when he returned home. Thucydides 'later judgment that Athens compelled Sparta to war (1.23.6) matches the facts of the First Peloponnesian War. As Spartans witnessed the very stability and security of the Peloponnese dissolve, what else were they to do?

There was also an important religious element in the conflict. As Stefan Dolgert observes, "Sparta directly acted against Athens only twice, and on both occasions it was a threat to her status in the Delphic *amphictiony* that prompted her to send out armies into the field" (2012, p. 671). From the Spartan perspective, the war may have been just as much about religion as it was about rivalry with Athens, an insight exclusively realist readings of Thucydides would not otherwise permit (Ahrensdorf, 1997).

The Thirty Years 'Peace was no defeat for Athens. As Kagan comments, in it, "Athens agreed to abandon her continental empire, which she had, in any case, already lost" (1969, p. 128). By acknowledging Sparta's predominance on the Greek mainland, Athens satisfied Sparta's most basic strategic need. This was why Pleistoanax was willing to withdraw his forces without exacting gratuitous punishment on the fields of Attica; his

withdrawal was the ultimate subordination of war to politics. That it left the passions of many Spartans so unsatisfied that Pleistoanax himself became the scapegoat of Spartan rage reflects the sway of *timē* in Greek politics (Lendon, 2010, p. 80). That the peace nonetheless held reflects, in this particular instance, the ultimate triumph of reason over emotion.

By 446/5, therefore, the Greek world was divided into recognized blocs. Both sides agreed that going forward allies would not be permitted to change sides, though neutrals could do as they desired. The solution to the contest for supremacy between Athens and Sparta was dual hegemony and spheres of influence. The *de facto* division that preceded the First Peloponnesian War and that was responsible for its outbreak had been made *de jure*. Thucydides 'earlier assessment is now worth repeating: the Greek world was "split into two divisions, one group following Athens and the other Sparta. These were clearly the most powerful states, one being supreme on land, the other on the sea" (1.18). Kagan's evaluation is one of optimism: "Since neither proved strong enough to defeat the other in its own element, a peace that recognized dualism conformed to the facts and so gave hope of future stability" (1969, p. 130). Nonetheless, uncertainty remained: many Spartans still wanted vengeance; many Athenians still desired continental empire; and, ominously, "the Corinthians," Thucydides reports, had begun "to conceive a bitter hatred for Athens" (1.103). In short, the system had been stabilized, but rivalry and animus remained strong in a context of polarization and contending alliances.

The Second Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC)

The Thirty Years 'Peace lasted only fifteen years. In 431, the Second Peloponnesian War broke out, beginning a twenty-seven year nightmare: a war started by fathers and left to their children (1.81); indeed "the greatest war of all" in Thucydides 'estimation (1.21). What caused the system, which had apparently been stabilized in 446/5, to breakdown?

A Popular Interpretation

A common answer is structural: in response to growing Athenian power, Sparta initiated a war to preserve its political leadership and power superiority. Two facts have contributed to making this the dominant interpretation of the war among popular commentators.

First, this appears to be the general explanation Thucydides himself offers for the war. He famously wrote, "The real reason for the war is, in my opinion . . . . the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta" (1.23). With such an authoritative judgment, holders of this view contend, there really is not much more that needs to be said.

Second, the cause of the war is interpreted as structural because structure is what explains hegemonic war. In other words, the cause of the war is deduced as a necessary consequence from a more general theory of international relations (IR). This theory is

realism broadly considered, but as there are various realist explanations for war (Levy & Thompson, 2010), this is too broad a formulation. More precisely, some versions of neorealism (e.g., Mearsheimer, 2014) and popular versions of power transition theory hold that power shifts within the context of hegemonic competition make war inevitable. As a recent study on Thucydides contends, "When hegemonic rivalry is paramount, the states involved would appear to be on an inevitable collision course. Sparta and Athens, like Great Britain and Germany before the First World War, were clearly bent on systemic primacy; hence the wars between them did have an aura of inevitability" (Platias & Koliopoulos, 2010, pp. 33–34). In short, the Peloponnesian War is just one instance within the larger pattern of great-power conflicts.

According to the conventional "inevitability" explanation, Sparta was a revisionist power and Athens a status quo power. Athens desired to hold on to its empire, while Sparta, finding Athenian power to be intolerable, launched a "preventive" war in order to totally destroy it (Platias & Koliopoulos, 2010, pp. 40–41). According to this view, "the final pre-war crises over Potidaea and Corcyra played a comparatively minor role in the outbreak of the war. Those crises did influence the timing of that outbreak, but nothing more; the crucial role was played by the structure of the international system, which made it likely that war would break out" (Platias & Koliopoulos, 2010, p. 23). This interpretation of the Peloponnesian War, as noted above, relies on some combination of accepting Thucydides 'supposed "inevitability" statement as the war's definitive explanation and imposing a realist IR explanation onto the war's causes. It also assumes that *either* the Thirty Years 'Peace did not stabilize the system *or* that the growth of Athenian power in the fifteen-year interim had the effect of destabilizing it, necessitating war. In order to evaluate this case, we turn to Thucydides.

"What Led to This Great War Falling Upon the Hellenes" (1.23)

1. *Stasis* and Cuts of Meat: Epidamnus, Corcyra, and Corinth

The immediate origins of the Second Peloponnesian War are to be found in the city of Epidamnus, located "on the right of the approach to the Ionic Gulf" (1.24) in modern day Albania. Epidamnus was a colony of Corcyra (modern day Corfu). In 435 a dispute at Epidamnus between factions led to *stasis* (factional strife/civil trouble): the democrats drove out the aristocrats, who then joined the enemies of the city and became pirates. Looking to defeat the aristocrats or end the conflict, the democratic faction in Epidamnus then requested the help of its mother city, Corcyra. The Corcyraeans, however, refused to even receive the Epidamnian ambassadors, possibly because they desired the two factions to weaken each other so much that they could dominate the polity (Kagan, 1969, p. 209); in desperation, the ambassadors went to Delphi and inquired whether they should "hand over their city to the Corinthians," the founders of Corcyra and therefore a sort of honorary founder of Epidamnus, in order to get relief. Receiving an affirmative reply, the democrats "sent to Corinth, and made over the colony to the Corinthians," begging the city to come to their aid (1.25).

The Corinthians were happy to come to the aid of the Epidamnian democrats as "they hated the Corcyraeans because they failed to show to Corinth the respect due from a colony to the mother city" (1.25). Corinth and Corcyra, Thucydides goes on to explain, were engaged in a no-holds-barred competition for *timē*: Corcyra, in particular, insisted that its great fleet and riches made it equal, or perhaps even superior to, its founder and so it refused to honor Corinth at religious festivals—specifically, refusing to give Corinthians prized cuts of meat at Panhellenic gatherings (Crane, 1992, p. 5). Indeed, rivalry between the two cities was the stuff of legend: the two, Thucydides earlier reported, had fought the "first naval battle on record" 260 years earlier (1.13)! And so it was that Corinth honored the request of the Epidamnian democrats and sent volunteers to the city to garrison it.

When the Corcyraeans found out that Corinth had gotten ahead of them in their battle for *timē*, "they reacted violently" and dispatched a fleet to Epidamnus, which "demanded in the most threatening and abusive language" the Epidamnians reinstate the exiled aristocrats and eject the Corinthian garrison (1.26). Kagan puts this diktat in context: "This was not a proposal for discussions or negotiation; it was an ultimatum, delivered in insolent language, whose terms were totally unacceptable. Corinth could not accept them without disgrace, and the Epidamnian democrats could not accept them without the greatest danger to themselves" (1969, p. 222).

When the Epidamnians rejected the Corcyraean command, the Corcyraeans laid siege to the city. Once word of the siege reached them, the Corinthians prepared a large allied fleet to go to the city's relief (1.27). Upon learning of Corinth's substantial response, the Corcyraeans, realizing they had bitten off more than they could chew, sent an embassy to Corinth who proposed solving the dispute through arbitration and threatened an alliance with Athens if the Corinthians did not comply (1.28). Thucydides notes that Spartan ambassadors accompanied the Corcyraean envoys. Kagan explains that this indicated Sparta desired the dispute to be peacefully resolved and opposed Corinthian intransigence (Kagan, 1969, p. 225). Nevertheless, the Corinthians, who were unwilling to treat their own colony as their equal, refused this offer, reasonable though it was, and dispatched their fleet, a force of seventy-five ships and 2,000 hoplites (1.29). The Corcyraeans met the Corinthians with eighty of their own ships and defeated them decisively; at the same time, Epidamnus surrendered to its besiegers. From then until the end of 434, the two sides existed in a state of open warfare, but with no major engagements (1.30).

Corinth, meanwhile, was preparing another major expedition to Corcyra. In response, the Corcyraeans made good on their promise to abandon their neutrality and seek an alliance with the Athenians to "see whether they could get any support from that quarter" (1.31). An assembly was then held at Athens in 433 and the representatives of both Corcyra and Corinth argued before it.

The Corcyraean representatives argued that they were in the right legally, that war was coming—indeed, had "almost broken out already" (1.36)—and that Athens had better ally itself with Corcyra before war began in order to maximize its capabilities. Indeed, the

dispute—never mind that it was caused by a chance *stasis* in a small city far away—was part of a monstrous Spartan and Corinthian conspiracy: the Peloponnesians had attacked the Corcyraeans first "in order to attack you afterwards" (1.33). The idea here was that Corcyra would be forced to ally itself with Corinth, which would enable the Peloponnesians to mount a challenge to Athens 'total sea dominance. The Corcyraeans point out that the alternative to this dread scenario would be Athenian control of the Corcyraean navy, which would eliminate even the hint of a Peloponnesian naval challenge (1.35; 1.36).

At first the Corcyraeans insist that the Athenians would risk nothing in such an alliance (1.33). Since war was coming anyway, antagonizing Corinth or Sparta would not be a mistake. This argument was apparently not found to be entirely convincing to the Athenians, for later in their speech the Corcyraeans respond to those Athenians who were "apprehensive about a breach of your treaty with Sparta" (1.36), stating: "whether you feel apprehensive or not, you will certainly have become stronger, and that this fact will make your enemies think twice before attacking you; whereas if you reject us, however confident you may feel, you will in fact be the weaker for it, and consequently less likely to be treated with respect by a strong enemy" (1.36). The argument here is that a boost in Athenian capabilities will allow the Athenians to better deter war—or, as the Romans put it: *Si vis pacem para bellum*. Immediately after this statement, the speakers revert back to their war-is-coming mantra. The Corcyraean argument, in its logic, mirrored that of Philo of Alexandria who four centuries after this debate would argue that God had no name and that it was blasphemy to speak his name. In the case of the Corcyraeans, the argument was that war was inevitable and that an Athenian alliance could help deter war. One or the other, but both?

Thucydides has the Corinthian speakers respond with arguments based on honor, friendship, and security. The honor argument is that Corinthians "did not found colonies in order to be insulted by them, but rather to retain our leadership and to be treated with proper respect." Even if they happened to be in the wrong, still "the right thing would be for them to give in to us" (1.38). As far as the Corinthians were concerned, this dispute was about *timē*, not fear as the Corcyraeans alleged (1.33). In the friendship part of the argument, the Corinthians insisted that they had "some title to [Athenian] gratitude" for they had aided Athens in its fight with Aegina before the Persian wars and, more recently, prevented the Spartans from aiding Samos in its rebellion from the Athenian alliance (1.41). Finally, the Corinthians argued that an Athenian alliance to a polity with which Corinth was actively engaged would both violate the spirit of the Thirty Years ' Peace and would cause a war that was not otherwise inevitable (1.40). Responding directly to the Corcyraean assertion that "when one makes concessions to one's enemies, one regrets it afterwards, and the fewer concessions one makes the safer one is likely to be" (1.34), the Corinthians argued that for the Athenians "a much wiser course would be to remove the suspicions which we already feel towards you in connection with Megara. And you will find that an act of kindness done at the right moment has a power to dispel old grievances quite out of proportion to the act itself" (1.42). Were Athens to follow Corcyra's advice, and seek to snatch "some apparent but dangerous advantage," it would

find itself less secure and at war. Power and security, the Corinthians argued against the Corcyraeans and today's offensive realists, were sometimes mutually exclusive.

The speeches being completed, the Athenian assembly made its decision: there would be no alliance. Thucydides then simply reports that a second assembly was held at which the Athenians changed their minds. Scholars agree that Thucydides intentionally sped through this development in order not to name the man responsible for the second assembly, his hero, Pericles. Kagan writes: "The common view held Pericles responsible for bringing on the war. This was precisely the view Thucydides wanted to refute, and his technique was to treat the Athenian decision impersonally, as a consequence of all the Athenians 'deliberations and an inevitable response to the situation" (Kagan, 1969, pp. 237-238). But this critical decision was no inevitable response. To the contrary, it took all of Pericles 'influence to convene a second assembly and to sway the voters to make the alliance. Thucydides 'explanation for why the Athenians so voted should be quoted in full:

> The general belief was that, whatever happened, war with the Peloponnese was bound to come. Athens had no wish to see the strong navy of Corcyra pass into the hands of Corinth. At the same time she was not averse from letting two Powers weaken each other by fighting together; since in this way, if war did come Athens herself would be stronger in relation to Corinth and to the other naval Powers. Then, too, it was a fact that Corcyra lay very conveniently on the coastal route to Italy and Sicily. (1.44)

Reasoning thus, Athens dispatched ten ships to Corcyra, specifying that they were to be used in a defensive manner. Significantly, Lacedaimonius, the son of Cimon, that great friend of Sparta, was given the command (1.45).

Though surely disappointed by Athens 'alliance with Corcyra, Corinth would not be deterred from its quest for vengeance on its upstart colony and so launched its second fleet against the Corcyraeans. At Sybota (433), where the Corinthian fleet met with the Corcyraean fleet, reinforced as it was with the ten Athenian ships, Corinth achieved a sort of victory, destroying seventy Corcyraean ships (1.54). Indeed, only the intervention of Lacedaimonius 'forces and the last minute arrival of thirty additional Athenian vessels prevented a total rout. Once the Athenian reinforcements arrived, the Corinthians retreated and so in the end both sides claimed a victory. Thucydides concludes the section ominously: "So Corcyra remained undefeated in her war with Corinth and the Athenian fleet left the island. But this gave Corinth her first cause for war against Athens, the reason being that Athens had fought against her with Corcyra although the peace treaty was still in force" (1.55). A power equilibrium (i.e., the Athenian intervention), in sum, prevented the resolution of the dispute. There is irony here: in c. 459, Athens 'decision to ally itself with Megara, which was then at war with Corinth, had led to the First Peloponnesian War. Now, in 433, Athens had again allied herself with a polity actively at war with Corinth. The outcome this time would be no better (Tannenbaum, 1975, p. 539).

Kagan stresses that Athens 'defensive alliance with Corcyra was meant to straddle the horns of a dilemma: Athens needed to deter a Corinthian attack so as to maintain the naval balance of power while avoiding an open war with Corinth, which would violate the terms of the Thirty Years 'Peace (1969, pp. 235-41). There is certainly something to this, but in fact Thucydides reports (as quoted above) that the Athenians 'motives were even more complex than this (Stadter, 1983).

According to Thucydides, Athens was willing to ally itself with Corcyra in order to improve the balance of power: war with the Peloponnesians was coming so the more allies the better. The fear that Corcyra's navy would be captured by Corinth, which could then use it to dispute Athenian maritime supremacy, complemented this position. The alliance was also intended to actuate a clever strategy of baiting, bleeding, and bloodletting: it allowed Corcyra to defy Corinth and to meet it in battle (for a discussion of the three bs, see Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 153 ff.). Finally, the alliance opened a door to Athens for future western expansion and control of strategic sea-lanes, a door heretofore blocked by Corcyra's independent status.

As Stadter (1983) convincingly argues, Athens 'objective at Sybota was not deterrence: Athens desired Corcyra and Corinth to fight as long as the total defeat of the former was avoided (1.50-51). He writes, "The logic of this decision explains the small number of ships sent with Lakedaimonios to Corcyra. It was not to Athens 'advantage for Corinth to be so frightened by a large Athenian force (say, of fifty ships) as not to dare to engage" (134-5). The strategy, moreover, worked: Sybota sufficiently weakened Corcyra that it could no longer pursue an independent course; it also made Corinth more reliant on Sparta. Athens 'strategy was *not* that of a disinterested power merely attempting to maintain the status quo. Pericles saw an opportunity in the dispute to achieve total naval supremacy—to facilitate the conditions by which the only other substantial navies of the era would be eliminated. The double strategy (commit, but not much) guaranteed Athenian sea dominance for as far as anyone could then see. But it committed a larger transgression: had Athens dispatched a serious fleet and deterred the Corinthian attack, perhaps Corinth would have then been willing to accept arbitration or perhaps the dispute would otherwise have been resolved; had it chosen *not* to ally itself with Corcyra, perhaps Corcyra would have backed down over Epidamnus (on how balances of power prevent the resolution of disputes, see Chan, 2013); even had Corcyra not backed down, most of the Corcyraean ships would still have been destroyed in the coming battle, and therefore the Corinthian attack would not in fact threaten any vital Athenian interest (Bloedow, 1991, pp. 195-200, 202). In the actual event, Pericles 'strategy succeeded in its objective of primacy; that it did so by marching the Greek world down the path to war must be seen as tragic.

The suggestion that Athens had a vital interest in maintaining total naval dominance (Kagan, 1969, p. 241) deserves closer attention. Kagan accepts Corcyra's argument: were Corinth to defeat it in battle and force it to join the Peloponnesian alliance, then Athens would be threatened in the war to come. Yet two particulars vie against this conclusion. First, after the anticipated Corinthian-Corcyraean battle, there would likely have been

little Corcyraean fleet left. In point of fact, this is what happened. At Sybota, Thucydides reports that 70 Corcyraean ships were sunk; this would have been a loss of around 14,000 men (Bloedow, 1991, p. 209). Had Athens not joined the battle at Sybota, it would be reasonable to project losses even more severe than this—indeed, the practical destruction of the Corcyraean fleet. A Corinthian acquisition of the few remaining warships would have posed absolutely no threat. Second, Thucydides unambiguously judged both the Corinthians and the Corcyraeans to be backwards in their naval technology and tactics. Indeed, at the Battle of Sybota, Thucydides reports, aghast, that the battle was one in which "courage and sheer strength played a greater part than scientific methods" (1.49.1-3). Even had Corinth acquired significant numbers of Corcyraean ships this would not have enabled her to challenge Athens on the sea. Pericles himself recognized this in a future speech: the skills of a seaman were hard to come by and they took constant practice; as such, the Peloponnesians would find the scientific art of seamanship "a difficult lesson to learn" (1.142.6-9).

Put in this context, Corinth's dispute with Corcyra could hardly have constituted a "vital" Athenian interest. Is the *possibility* of a *slight* to *moderate* unfavorable shift in the balance of power a sufficient justification for acts that are openly expected to make the outbreak of a major war more likely (Bloedow, 1991, p. 200)? To answer this question in the affirmative is to condemn a too keen focus on the balance of power as foolish; to answer it in the negative is to conclude that Athenian interference at Sybota was either based on ignorance or, more likely, driven predominantly not by fear of loss but by opportunity for gain.

2. Cucumbers, Hares, and Suckling Pigs: Athens and Megara

If the Battle of Sybota had been the only journey down the road to war, it seems probable that the Greek world need not have been destined to endure twenty-seven years of slaughter. But alas, it was not. Already in the dialogue at Athens between the Corinthians and Corcyraeans, the Corinthian ambassadors had argued that by making a concession to Corinth on the issue of Corcyra, the Athenians could lessen Corinthian angst "which we already feel towards you in connection with Megara" (1.42). What was this issue that caused the Corinthians so much anxiety and apparently supported the Corcyraeans ' argument that war was already coming anyway?

Most likely, the issue of contention was the Megarian Decree. Thucydides himself avoids speaking of the Decree wherever possible. In his narrative, he skips from Corcyra (1.31 ff.) to Potidaea (1.56 ff.; discussed below) and then to the Spartan decision for war (1.66 ff.). Megara, we will recall, played an essential role in the First Peloponnesian War: during a time of tense relations, Corinth got into a border dispute with Megara, the polity that dominated the Isthmus of Corinth; the latter then used the environment of rivalry to its advantage and defected to Athens, which was spoiling for a war anyway. Towards the end of the war, Megara defected back to Sparta, slaughtering the Athenian garrison. The resulting peace attempted to ensure such a war could not happen again by forbidding allies to change alliances. But there is no reason to suppose the Athenians had forgiven the nasty Megarians for their backstabbing betrayal.

At some point in the 430s (the precise date has been debated), Athens imposed a punishment on Megara, accusing the Megarians of "cultivating consecrated ground, of cultivating land that did not belong to them, and of giving shelter to slaves who had escaped from Athens" (1.139.1-2). Of the nature of the punishment, Thucydides merely records that the Megarians "were excluded from all the ports in the Athenian empire and from the market of Athens itself" (1.67.4). As a result, Aristophanes reports, "if anyone ever saw a cucumber, a hare, a suckling pig, a clove of garlic, or a lump of salt, all were denounced as Megarian and confiscated" (*Acharnians*, 532-539 quoted in Kagan, 1969, p. 255). Because Megara was protected by the terms of the Thirty Years 'Peace, Athens could not punish its offense through force. Accordingly, it designed an ingenious economic embargo, likely designed simply to insult the Megarians—a clever way to achieve vengeance without battle (Lendon, 2010, p. 91). This is probably what the Corinthian speakers meant when they referenced the ill feelings over Megara, though some scholars (including Kagan, 1969, p. 256) insist this reference was not to the Megarian Decree but to the Corinthian "bitter hatred" Athens provoked in the First Peloponnesian War. Either way, whenever the Decree was issued, it provoked widespread enmity.

Whether the Megarian Decree was really about a religious dispute is open to question. Kagan suggests the purpose of the Decree was to punish Megara for aiding Corinth by contributing twelve ships at Sybota (1.46) and to deter future such actions by Corinth's allies (1969, p. 266). A potential objection to such a purely realpolitik explanation is the question why similar decrees were not imposed on Corinth's other allies (Elis, Leucas, Ambracia, and Anactorium) for they too contributed to the Sybota campaign (Dolgert, 2012, pp. 677–678). Whatever the precise reason for the Decree, it was a significant step down the road to war: it provoked fear in Sparta, antagonized its allies, and provided grist for the wheels of the Peloponnesian war parties who interpreted it as a signal of Athenian revisionism vis-à-vis the Thirty Years 'Treaty (Kagan, 1969, p. 269 ff.). Beyond the satisfaction of taking vengeance, such a Decree could accomplish nothing useful. The common opinion of fifth century Greece was that Pericles was responsible for the Peloponnesian War because he imposed the Decree and then refused to withdraw it. Kagan is right: nothing in Thucydides vindicates Pericles of that charge (1969, pp. 269–271).

3. The Straw that Broke the Camel's Back: Potidaea

Corinthian and Athenian animus culminated at Potidaea, on the first of the three prongs of the Thracian Chalcidice in the North Aegean, in 433. Potidaea was a Corinthian colony *and* part of the Athenian empire (1.56), an arrangement that heretofore had likely not caused any problems (Kagan, 1969, p. 274). However, after the Corcyraean and Megarian disputes, "Corinth was searching for means of retaliation against Athens." Athens, therefore, took preemptive action, ordering Potidaea to destroy its fortifications, send hostages to Athens, banish its Corinthian magistrates, and refuse their annual replacements. "These demands were made because Athens feared that, under the

influence of Perdiccas and of the Corinthians, Potidaea might be induced to revolt and might draw into the revolt the other allied cities in the Thracian area" (1.56-7).

In response to these demands, the Potidaeans sent ambassadors to Sparta and convinced the Spartan authorities "to invade Attica if the Athenians attacked Potidaea." Emboldened by this Spartan pledge, the Potidaeans chose to revolt rather than submit to the Athenian demands (1.58). Fearing the revolt would be put down, the Corinthians then gathered 2,000 troops, which they dispatched to Potidaea as "volunteers"—a sign they still sought to officially maintain peace (1.60). Athens meanwhile dispatched an army, which laid siege to the city by land and by sea, with the result that there was "no hope that it could survive unless some miracle happened or else the events in the Peloponnese took a different turn" (1.65).

These events are significant because of the context in which they took place. The Potidaean ultimatum was supposed to signal Athens 'strength, complement the Megarian Decree in its defiance of Corinth, and warn other potential troublemakers of the costs of insolence. It may have done these things, like the Megarian Decree, but it also further convinced the Peloponnesians of Athenian rapaciousness and revisionism, in effect expanding the scope of conflict from Athens vs. Corinth to Athens vs. nearly every major Peloponnesian polity (Kagan, 1969, p. 279-280). Insofar as this was not Pericles ' intention, it would not be mistaken to see Pericles sleepwalking into conflict: an ultimatum issued in fear, leading to a wider regional confrontation and to an expensive and undesirable siege, and, ultimately, to systemic war.

The Spartan Decision for War

The First Assembly
The siege of Potidaea had the unhappy outcome of forcing a Spartan decision on the question of war. Corinth used the time crunch to her advantage, summoning her allies to come to Sparta and make the case for war with Athens. Sparta acquiesced, holding an assembly at which the accusations of the allies could be heard. Here Athens was publically indicted by not just all the major powers of the Peloponnese, but Megara and Aegina besides (Lendon, 2010, p. 100). After allowing the various allies "to do their part in hardening Spartan opinion against Athens" the Corinthians gave the primetime speech (1.67). In it, they made two broad arguments: Athens was an aggressive state bent on war while Sparta was a negligent state, too lethargic and self-focused to meet the Athenian challenge (1.68-1.71). Specifically, ever since Athens built her Long Walls after the Persian War, she had been threatening the freedom of the Greeks. Even now she was besieging innocent Greeks and Sparta was withholding freedom "not only from those who have been enslaved by Athens but even from your own allies" (1.69). If the Spartans refused to act, the Corinthians noted at the end of their speech, they would sacrifice the "leadership of the Peloponnese," which had been handed down from their fathers, and give up their greatness. In such a scenario, the Corinthians and the rest of Sparta's allies would despair and be forced "to join a different alliance" (1.71).

Athenian representatives on other business in Athens listened to these accusations of Sparta's allies, but refused to respond to specific complaints, insisting that the Spartan assembly was "not a court of law, competent to listen to pleas either from them or from us" (1.73). In other words, even in its hour of danger, Athens insisted upon claiming its perfect equality with Sparta. Instead, the representatives argued that the greatness of the Athenian empire would make any war against it foolish, and that, while the empire may be unpopular, it was not particularly unjust (1.73-1.78). The Athenians insisted, moreover, that the structure of the inter-polis system compelled them to act in particular ways, not intentional malevolence.

Specifically, Athens first expanded to protect itself from Persia, and then to increase its honor and riches. Rivalry with Sparta, however, followed, replacing the Persian threat. In such an environment, "it was clearly no longer safe for us to risk letting our empire go, especially as any allies that left us would go over to you. And when tremendous dangers are involved no one can be blamed for looking to his own interest" (1.75). This is as good a statement of the security dilemma as any in the ancient world (for the best modern discussion of the concept, see Booth & Wheeler, 2008). Athens had to act forcefully because it feared it would grow weak if it did otherwise; were it to become weak, its empire, and even Attica itself, would be vulnerable to its rival Sparta. But in acting forcefully to maintain its empire—the present case in point was of course Potidaea—Athens had intensified its rivalry with the Peloponnesian states, which believed she was acting aggressively and unjustly. In the end, the Athenian representatives requested that the matters of dispute be solved through arbitration, as specified in the Thirty Years ' Treaty (1.78).

The Speeches of Archidamus and Sthenelaidas
Having heard their allies, the Spartans sent them away so they could debate the matter privately (1.79). Against the consensus that "Athens was already acting aggressively and that war should be declared without delay," the Spartan King Archidamus, whom Thucydides describes as "a man who had a reputation for both intelligence and moderation" made the case against war (1.80-1.85).

Archidamus 'speech is the most perspicacious, the most wise, the most temperate, the most strategic, and the most timeless of any in Thucydides. Here was a man—a very King of the Spartans—who foresaw that a rash decision for war would leave the conflict "to our children after us" (1.81). Here was a man who had "taken part in many wars" and so, unlike the young and the rash, lacked the "general enthusiasm for war," understanding that war was neither good nor safe (1.80). Here was a man who understood that Athens was a naval power and that Sparta was a land power, and so demanded to know, "What sort of war, then, are we going to fight?" (1.81). Here was a man who knew that, unlike in 446, the Athenians would not be easily cowed for they had "too much pride to become the slaves of their own land, or to shrink back from warfare as though they were inexperienced in it" (1.81). Here was a man that understood that Athens was in fact injuring Sparta's allies (1.82) but insisted that Sparta should seek to solve the disputes

through arbitration even as it sought financial support "both among Hellenes and among foreigners" (i.e., the Persians) in order to construct a *navy* that could challenge the Athenians (1.82). It was the nature of deterrence, he understood, that Spartan bluster now could not force the Athenians to back down, and a Spartan invasion now would only, having driven them to a "state of desperation," harden their resolve (1.83). Here was a man who understood that the complaints of allies could be resolved one way or another—and that, indeed, it was the *allies* and *not Sparta* that had been injured—but that peace settlements once war has begun were "not an easy thing at all" (1.82). And here was a man, finally, who understood then what it would take other Spartans years of war to acknowledge: that since the Athenians had requested arbitration, it would be illegal for Sparta to nonetheless launch an attack (1.85; 7.18.2).

But just as a prophet is without honor in his own city, so Sthenelaidas, one of the Spartan ephors of 432, casually ignored Archidamus 'arguments, mocking calls for careful consideration (1.86). The case for action was simple: Athens was acting aggressively to the allies of Sparta—a fact the Athenians themselves did not care to dispute—these allies were "good allies," and no Spartan could sit down and "discuss matters" with aggressors. "Therefore, Spartans," he climaxed, "cast your votes for the honour of Sparta and for war" (1.86).

And so the assembly, driven by the irrational rhetoric of Sthenelaidas, which young Spartans found persuasive (Bloedow, 1981), and forced into moral conviction by his appeals to Spartan honor (Allison, 1984, p. 15), voted that "the treaty has been broken and that the Athenians are aggressors." Though this was a vote in favor of war, it was *not* a declaration of war, a step that would be considered at a second assembly in which the allies themselves would be asked to vote, "so that, if they decided to make war, it should be done on the basis of a unanimous resolution" (1.87). Thucydides then ends his report on this first Spartan assembly by writing that "The Spartans voted . . . that war should be declared not so much because they were influenced by the speeches of their allies as because they were afraid of the further growth of Athenian power, seeing, as they did, that already the greater part of Hellas was under the control of Athens" (1.88).

Whether Thucydides 'opinion on why the Spartans voted for war is here accurate can be questioned (Rhodes, 1987). If the Spartans were convinced by Sthenelaidas 'speech, then honor and anger, not fear, would be the predominate motives. Regardless, it is important to understand this assessment in its context. It is not abstract power that the Spartans were worried about—indeed, the Corinthians criticize Sparta on just this point—but the way in which the Athenians used this power, specifically when they "began to encroach upon Sparta's allies" (1.118). This latter assessment is linked with the first statement, as the first immediately precedes the *Pentecontaetia* (1.89-1.117), Thucydides 'digression into the growth of the Athenian Empire, while the second immediately follows it (Kagan, 1969, p. 305-306).

Corinth's Desire for Vengeance and Pericles 'Hostility to Concessions

Kagan is undoubtedly correct in his assessment that "it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that if it had not been for Corinth the Spartans would probably have taken no action whatever" (1969, p. 307). Indeed, the fact of the matter is that no vital Corinthian interest was threatened by Athens 'alliance with Corcyra, by its Decree against Megara, or by its siege of Potidaea. Corinth could have just given in, or at least settled for arbitration, and it would have been none the worse; indeed, it likely would have received more than it deserved. But in making such a concession, Corinth would be admitting that it was *not* a great power equal to Athens or Sparta and that her preferences did not have to be respected. The Corinthians, hungry for vengeance and *timē*, were unwilling to make any such concession, and so they pushed the Spartans forward.

To this relentless Corinthian campaign, the Athenians responded with a speech that was intended "to divert their audience from the idea of war" (1.72). The tack the Athenian representatives took was one of deterrence: they would emphasize the greatness of the Athenian Empire while refusing to make concessions, or even address particular issues, in order to deter the Peloponnesians from further advancing down the road to war. In a very important passage, Kagan acknowledges that such an approach "is a dangerous policy and may in some cases bring on the very war it tries to avoid" (1969, p. 299). In the present case, as Kagan admits, it did; what was needed at the Spartan assembly (and thereafter) was not deterrence but appeasement—concessions meant to reassure the Peloponnesians of Athens 'peaceful intentions (for a theoretical discussion see Kupchan, 2012). Indeed, this is just what the Corinthians asked for in their debate in Athens during the Corcyraean crisis (1.42). "We must admit," Kagan writes, "that the Corinthians could not have succeeded without the help of Pericles (1969, p. 309). His lawful but nonetheless aggressive policies vis-à-vis Corcyra, Megara, and Potidaea convinced Spartans of Athenians 'arrogance, aggressiveness, and expansionist desires. He concludes:

> A firm, unyielding line backed by a show of strength is a fine tactic of diplomacy against an adversary who is convinced of its employer's basically unaggressive intentions. Such was Sparta's attitude when it was controlled by Archidamus and the peace party. It is far less useful, indeed it is very dangerous, when used towards a state that has come to fear that its user is too powerful, aggressive, and ambitious. These were the fears of the war party and it seems likely that the hard line of Pericles helped convince uncommitted Spartans and some who had favored peace to support the war. (1969, p. 310)

Here was tragedy: Pericles and his representatives, although simply eager to maintain the status quo of the Thirty Years 'Peace, in effect argued and acted in collusion with the Corinthian warmongers. A collision with Sparta would be the outcome.

The Second Assembly
The second assembly, in which the allies collectively voted for war (1.125) has no surprises. Before the second assembly, the Corinthians, as was their wont, dispatched embassies to each ally, lobbying them to vote for war (1.119). At the actual assembly,

Thucydides reports a speech in which the Corinthians argue that war is just, as the god at Delphi had endorsed it (1.118-119), and propagate what later would become a key point of war propaganda: "let us liberate the Hellenes who are now enslaved" (1.124). Nonetheless, the allies did not initiate any offensive action, as they judged themselves unprepared.

Athens and The Last Chance for Peace
After the Peloponnesian League decided it would fight, Sparta dispatched three embassies to Athens "so that there should be a good pretext for making war if the Athenians paid no attention to them" (1.126).

The first embassy demanded a curse connected with Pericles—who, Thucydides reports, was "invariably opposed to Sparta, allowing no concessions and urging Athens on to war" (1.127)—be removed, the hope being that it would result in his exile, concessions on the part of the Athenians, and peace. The Athenians replied with a counter demand along the same religious grounds. The second embassy "made most clear" that "war could be avoided if Athens would revoke the Megarian Decree" (1.139); Athens quickly rejected this demand. The third embassy declared, "Sparta wants peace. Peace is still possible if you will give the Hellenes their freedom" (1.139). The Athenians then held an assembly to debate the question. Thucydides records then the speech of Pericles, the last oration before the war's beginning.

Was a conciliatory response to the Spartan embassy's demand that Athens cancel the Megarian Decree a final opportunity to step off the road to war? Pericles argued it was not. "My views are the same as ever," he declared to the assembly. "I am against making any concessions to the Peloponnesians" (1.140). Pericles 'reasons for this position were as follows:

- Sparta was now, and had been before, plotting against Athens.
- Sparta had sought to solve the dispute by "trying to give us orders" (1.140); but Athens "would do nothing under duress," (1.145) for it would injure Athens' status to give in to an equal (1.141).
- Sparta had not accepted arbitration, as agreed on in the Thirty Years' Peace.
- If Athens were to withdraw the Megarian Decree, "you will immediately be confronted with some greater demand, since they will think that you only gave way on this point through fear. But if you take a firm stand you will make it clear to them they have to treat you properly as equals" (1.140).
- Athens was better positioned to be victorious (1.141) and would be victorious as long as she made no terrible mistakes (1.144).
- Finally, resistance to Sparta's demands would make the Spartans "less eager to attack" (1.144).

Convinced by these arguments, the Athenians voted Pericles 'strategy to become the official policy of the polity (1.145). The war began the following year, started not by

Sparta—which evinced little desire to initiate hostilities—but mischievous Thebes, a Peloponnesian ally (see book 2 of Thucydides). Indeed, even as Sparta was marching to ravish Attica, Archidamus dispatched a final envoy to see if the Athenians would make any concession at all that would allow him to call off the war. But because of "a resolution of Pericles," the Athenians "refused him admission to the city or access to their assembly" (2.12).

What are we to make of Pericles 'arguments and response to the Spartan ambassadors? Kagan, as is so often the case with Thucydides, has provided the best explanation. Pericles believed war to be inevitable. He believed also that only his defensive strategy could bring Athens victory (1.144). Without his leadership, demagogues would repeat the errors of the First Peloponnesian War: contesting central Greece against Sparta; launching unnecessary campaigns of conquest; and seeking to protect the fields of Attica (Kagan, 1969, pp. 335-336). Pericles could restrain the mob from being led astray; no one else could. Pericles, however, was in his seventies. If Athens was to be victorious in its struggle with Sparta, war needed to come soon, while he still lived. And so, Pericles did not attempt to prevent or put off the war: to the contrary, he welcomed its coming by forcing Sparta's hand (Kagan, 1969, p. 338).

Pericles had apparently decided war was inevitable in response to Spartan leaders like Sthenelaidas, men driven not by reason but honor, emotion, and fear. The disputes over Corcyra, Megara, and Potidaea—even if they were resolved, would this sate the rage of such men (Kagan, 1969, p. 329)? The answer of course is no. But not all Spartan leaders were as vulgar as Sthenelaidas. Archidamus understood the horror of war and truly desired to avoid it. Proof of this can be found in the second Spartan embassy, which required Athens to simply withdraw the Megarian Decree. In other words, Sparta was willing to allow Corinthian interests at Potidaea to be crushed by the besieging Athenian forces were Pericles to simply throw her a bone. But Pericles would make no such concession, for he believed it would simply embolden his enemies. He also believed any war would be relatively short, and that Athens would be victorious (Kagan, 1969, p. 340).

Pericles 'strategy was misguided. His belief that war was inevitable in fact made war inevitable. His belief that concessions would accomplish nothing was in defiance of the facts of the case. His belief that the war would be short, mirroring that of the Spartan war party, was egregiously specious. And his confidence that Athens would be victorious would be disproven, finally, in 404 when it surrendered. He was wise to warn against repeating the mistakes of the First Peloponnesian War, but after his death in the plague of 429, he could do nothing to restrain the mob, which in the years to come would violate his prohibitions with a stupendous expedition to Sicily.

The "Truest Cause" of the Peloponnesian War

Corinth pushed, Pericles pulled, and eventually Thebes acted, forcing Sparta into war. The Second Peloponnesian War was not a preventive war dictated by the nature of the inter-polis system. The popular interpretation (Platias & Koliopoulos, 2010) is wrong.

War broke out when a host of necessary factors piled on top of each other. General rivalry driven by a competition for *timē*, a tight alliance system, and an increasingly unpopular Athenian Empire did make systemic war possible. But in itself, this was not sufficient to cause war.

Other necessary factors included Corinth's hatred of Corcyra and its quest for vengeance in the affair with Epidamnus; Athens 'greedy alliance with Corcyra, its punishment of Megara, and its preparations for war and preemptive action in Potidaea; Corinth's obsession with becoming a great power, which made it unwilling to back down; Sparta's split political system, which prevented it from accepting Pericles 'offer of arbitration; the nearly universal belief that war would be short; the backward nature of Greek diplomacy, which permitted no permanent embassies, required public debate on sensitive issues, and lacked the ability to facilitate inter-polis conferences to resolve disputes (on the immaturity of diplomacy in the ancient world generally see Eckstein, 2010; in the context of the Peloponnesian War see Lebow, 1991, pp. 146–147); the belief among war parties everywhere (in Corcyra, Athens, Corinth, and Sparta) that war was inevitable; Pericles ' obsession with credibility and deterrence; and Pericles 'unrealistic grand strategy. Even if just one of these factors had not been present, war likely would not have happened.

But does not this contradict Thucydides 'own judgment in 1.23.4-6? Here he wrote:

> As to the reason why they broke the truce, I propose first to give an account of the cause of complaint which they had against each other and of the specific instances where their interests clashed: this is in order that there should be no doubt in anyone's mind about what led to this great war falling upon the Hellenes. But the real reason for the war is, in my opinion, most likely to be disguised by such an argument. What made war inevitable was the the [sic] growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta. As for the reasons for breaking the truce and declaring war which were openly expressed by each side, they are as follows. (Thucydides, 1972)

This certainly makes it sound as if Thucydides looks to explain the war not by examining the "complaints"—the immediate disputes of Corcyra, Megara, and Potidaea—which merely "disguise" the "real reason," but by reflecting on the broader trends of growing Athenian power, and the fear which this in turn inspired in Sparta. One needs only to pick up a popular international relations book to see such an interpretation (for discussions, see Ahrensdorf, 1997; Bagby, 1994; Bedford & Workman, 2001; Doyle, 1990; Garst, 1989). Serious historians like Kagan have also accepted this as Thucydides 'definitive judgment (while disagreeing with its truthfulness) (1969, pp. 357-374).

Whether, indeed, the above translation is faithful to the Greek text, however, has been seriously challenged. Many scholars insist that the English translators of this critical passage have, since Hobbes, let down their readers. Raphael Sealey, in an influential article (1975), proposed an alternative translation.

> As for why they broke the treaty, I have written down first the complaints and the disputes, so that no one may ever inquire whence so great a war arose among the Greeks. Now the most genuine cause, though least spoken of, was this: it was the Athenians, in my opinion, as they were growing great and furnishing an occasion of fear to the Lacedaemonians, who compelled the latter to go to war. But the complaints of each side, spoken of openly, were the following, complaints which led the parties to break the treaty and enter a state of war. (p. 92)

Sealey's translation has the immediate merit of getting the subject of the "most genuine cause" clause correct: it is not impersonal forces but *tous Athenaious*, the Athenians (p. 91-92). The Greek is accusative specifically to emphasize its importance ("It was the Athenians who…"). Unlike standard translations, which make war sound "inevitable," Sealey argues that in this statement Thucydides is actually attributing responsibility to Athens, specifically (p. 92). Thucydides can contrast this "most genuine cause" with those more spoken of, because Spartan aggression was the common explanation for war (p. 93). (This explanation for the contrast of causes, it should be noted, directly contradicts Kagan's account [1969, p. 372], which supposes Pericles, Thucydides 'hero, to have been the most spoken of cause.)

Definitive treatments from Arthur Eckstein (2003) and Andreas Osiander (2007, pp. 139-164) complete Sealey's argument. According to Eckstein, Warner adds three words/phrases to Thucydides 1.23.5-6 that simply do not exist in Greek: "real cause," "inevitable," and "disguise" (2003, p. 760). These three added words give the impression that Thucydides is focusing on system-level processes, but in fact are mistranslations.

As for how the passage ought to be translated, Eckstein agrees with Sealey's earlier translation, noting that it "has increasingly found favour among classicists" (2003, p. 765). He emphasizes in particular that popular translations like Warner's (and Crawley-Wick, recently reissued in *The Landmark Thucydides* [1996]), mark 1.23.5 and 1.23.6 in opposition by placing a "but" between them ("But the real reason for the war…"). This translation is mistaken, for the Greek "suggests that the one *explains* the other"; 1.23.6, begins therefore with the idea of "For, you see" (Eckstein, 2003, pp. 770; 773). That Thucydides would link these (the causes of complaint and the truest cause) makes sense, as the "complaints" and "disputes" Thucydides spends so much time on are the fuel of the power-transition fire (p. 763). Eckstein thus concludes:

> Thucydides thought that future enquirers into the origins of the Peloponnesian War would obtain a complete and final answer if they *combined* the detailed information he offered on the complaints and quarrels (I.23.5 followed by I.24-67) with the implications of I.23.6 on the power-transition crisis, and if they understood the particular events of I.23.5 within a structural framework. This is understood by classicists, but not by political scientists misled by bad translations. (2003, p. 773).

Thucydides 'innovation was to put the immediate clash between Athenian and Spartan interests into a systemic perspective (p. 766). The power transition was a necessary factor, but other factors were required in order to bring about war: these were the complaints and causes.

Osiander (2007) concurs with these earlier critiques of the common English translations. From a corrected literal translation of 1.23.5-6, he draws four immediate implications. The "truest cause" of the war is "the Athenians"—who are the grammatical subject of the sentence (p. 154)—"doing something" (p. 142-3). What it is they are doing is "achieving greatness" and "giving the Lakedaimonians cause for worry." The Athenians are the cause because they "left no other option but war" (p. 143). There is nothing abstract and noting inevitable to derive from the passage.

Osiander's second exegetical argument adds a new refinement to translating this critical passage. He argues that translators wrongly turned an *additive link* ("achieving greatness *and* giving the Lakedaimonians cause for worry") into a *causal link* through the use of relative clauses. Thomas Hobbes translated the line "the growth of the Athenian power, which putting the Lacedaemonians into fear necessitated the war" (Warner's translation is similar). But this is actually more of an interpretation of the text than a translation, for, as Osiander writes, "whereas Thukydides places the greatness (not power) of the Athenians and the fear of the Lakedaimonians side by side without either specifying the nature of the link or establishing a hierarchy, in Hobbes the fear of the Lakedaimonians becomes a corollary of the power of the Athenians" (p. 143). Thucydides explains the truest cause of the war to be Athens achieving greatness *and*—in addition—"giving the Lakedaimonians cause for worry" (pp. 143-144). Athens 'achievement of greatness is a necessary but not sufficient cause for the war; according to Thucydides 'own assessment, the war required a second necessary cause—specific actions by Athens that threatened Sparta. That both variables are required is reinforced later in Thucydides, when, in explaining Sparta's final vote for war, he reverses the order: fear precedes Athens 'growing power (1.88; Osiander, 2007, p. 144). Here, Osiander notes, "the Lakedaimonians are concerned about their relative power *because* the Athenians give them cause for fear" (p. 144).

This interpretation has the merit of making sense of the *Pentecontaetia* (1.89-1.117), Thucydides 'digression into "how Athens came to be in the position to gain such strength" (1.89) and what it did with its power. During this period the relatively benign Athenian *hegemonia* turned into an *arche*—an empire imposed by force. Eventually Athens itself takes the place of the Persians of 480 as "the symbol of rank despotism" (Lebow, 2003, p. 125; cf. Osiander, 2007, p. 149-50). Far from being some modern interpretation, this is of course what the Greeks of 431 believed themselves (2.8-9). Athens, a great power, abused its power and so embittered the Greek world, inspiring fear in its neighbors. When Athens threatened to consolidate its hegemony further in a series of crises (Corcyra, Potidaea, and Megara) that threatened Sparta's existence as a

hegemon, war was the outcome, though not one Athens intentionally sought nor one Sparta seemed able to avoid (Osiander, 2007, p. 155).

The idea that Athens simply grew so powerful that Sparta launched a preventive war to restrain its growth—the popular interpretation of the Second Peloponnesian War—is mistaken. Thucydides does speak of Athens achieving greatness, but as Osiander notes, this only means "the Athenians achieved great power at some point in time—presumably at the beginning of the half-century under consideration" (p. 152). Indeed, as Kagan has demonstrated, Athenian power remained stable in the years following the First Peloponnesian War, years in which both Greek hegemons scrupulously respected the rules set by the Thirty Years 'Peace (1969, p. 189; for more recent discussions see Meyer, 1997).

In the end, if the scholarly critics of popular translations of Thucydides 1.23.4-6 are correct, then Thucydides can be, at least in part, vindicated of Kagan's charge that he intentionally made war seem to be inevitable in order to protect the reputation of Pericles, who had been popularly condemned as the man responsible for the war (1969, p. 372). In other words, Kagan's case against inevitability is solid, even certain. But this need not, and should not, also be a case against Thucydides (Gruen, 1971, pp. 331–332).

Conclusion

This essay has argued that ideas, specifically the Greek conception of *timē*; the structure of the Greek world, specifically its rivalries, contending alliance systems, and polarity; a series of contingent events, specifically *stasis* at Epidamnus and disagreements between Megara and Corinth; and individuals, specifically Pericles and his belief in the inevitability of war and therefore his refusal to compromise, combined to bring systemic war to Greece in 431 BC. Other contributing factors include the underdeveloped nature of Greek diplomacy, the general belief that war was inevitable and that it would be short, and general overreliance on deterrence and compellence (Lebow, 2007). War was the outcome of a long chain of events. The Greeks of the fifth century walked down a "road to war" (Senese & Vasquez, 2009; Vasquez, 2009). There were many opportunities to stop walking, to step off, or even to turn around. These opportunities were not taken. Instead, the actors confidently advanced forward. There were a few voices of reason along the way that cried out for the actors to make concessions and solve their disputes through peaceful means. Archidamus, the Spartan King, represents these lonesome voices.

If we were today to absorb something from Thucydides 'account, it should include rejecting "a general enthusiasm for war" (1.80); it should include the duty of leaders to step off the road to war, that road dominated by honor, credibility, deterrence, compellence, visions of inevitability, and dreams of short wars, even when domestically costly; it should include the recognition of man's inability "to calculate accurately events that are determined by chance"; and it should include a sense of respect for that laconic slowness and caution which can equally well be known as wisdom and sensibleness

(1.84). Were we to learn these lessons, we would disprove the validity of Thucydides' claim that, "human nature being what it is," "the events which happened in the past . . . will at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future" (1.22).

*All translations of Thucydides are from Rex Warner's 1972 translation unless otherwise noted.

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