

Policy Watch: Thucydides and America

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"The History of the Peloponnesian War," by the Greek historian Thucydides, remains one of the classics of international relations even though it was written some 2,500 years ago. The Peloponnesian War, between the Greek city states, was mainly one between a democracy, Athens, and a dictatorship, Sparta -- a type of conflict the world has seen much of since the beginning of the 20th century. What is particularly sobering about the book is that Athens, the democracy, lost out in the end.

In recent times, of course, the major democracies have won their wars with the major dictatorships. World War I, World War II, and the Cold War are the best examples of this. Yet Thucydides' book is still highly important to understand, since what he showed us is how a democracy, with all its advantages, can lose a war through making a series of poor decisions. And, as at other times in modern history, there appear to be eerie parallels between what Thucydides described so long ago and today.

In the Peloponnesian War, Athens and Sparta fought each other off and on for many years. Confident that it would defeat Sparta in the ongoing war, Athens sent a military expedition to intervene in Sicily. The Sicilian venture, though, turned into a disaster for the Athenians. The more evident it became that Athens was in trouble militarily, the more difficult retaining support from its democratic allies became for it. Both the diversion of Athenian forces and the loss of its allies served to help Sparta in its war effort. Indeed, the war ended in a Spartan victory over the Athenians.

Historical parallels are never exact, but there do appear to be some similarities between what Athens did in the Peloponnesian War and what the Bush administration has done in the war on terror. Shortly after Sept. 11, the Bush administration intervened militarily in Afghanistan and toppled the Taliban regime which had provided safe haven to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida. The administration was so confident that it would soon defeat the "remnants" of the Taliban that it thought it could also successfully intervene in Iraq.

But after over three years of trying, it has not succeeded in pacifying the country. Nor does it seem likely that it will do so any time soon. In addition, the American intervention in Iraq alienated many of its democratic allies while the difficulty of the conflict has led to several others withdrawing their forces from there. Finally, far from being defeated, the Taliban "remnants" in Afghanistan have reemerged. It is increasingly clear that the war there is far from over too.

It is impossible to say whether Athens would have defeated Sparta if it had not intervened in Sicily. Similarly, it is impossible to say whether the United States would have been more successful in Afghanistan if it had not intervened in Iraq. In both cases, though, these second wars were ones that the democracy that launched them could have avoided. In both cases, the result may have been far different if these two democracies had finished the first wars before launching the second ones.

What is especially troubling about the present is that there are influential voices calling for America to launch a third war -- against Iran -- while the ones in Afghanistan and Iraq are still ongoing. However justified intervention against Iran might appear to those calling for it, reading Thucydides provides a strong warning against the dangers of overextension.

And these dangers are real. America may not suffer as precipitous a decline as Athens did. But like Athens, America is likely to find that being bogged down in endless warfare does not serve either to keep its allies or expand its influence.

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