

September 20, 1949

Notes to Thucydides' history of the  
Peloponnesian War

It is just a week ago that I read Thucydides away from town on vacation in the mountains. I was very much impressed and also I was considerably frightened. For this is what I said to myself: neither Sparta nor Athens wanted war, yet they went to war with each other. They fought a terrible war which lasted for 30 years. If this happened to Sparta and Athens, what then are the chances that Russia and the United States can avoid war in a situation which is so very much alike to theirs?

I do not mean to say of course that either the United States or Russia resemble Athens or Sparta. In many respects these Greek city-states were politically more mature. Their political systems were better adapted to the conditions of their days than are the political systems of the United States and Russia adapted to present day conditions.

In many respects both Sparta and Athens were much more democratic than are Russia or the United States. Foreign policy decisions were reached in these Greek cities in public discussions. The people not only approved by majority vote the foreign policy decisions but they also understood these decisions.

What is so similar is not the internal organization of the Greek city-states on the one hand and of Russia or the United States on the other; what is so similar is the situation in which Sparta versus Athens found themselves 400 years B.C. and the situation in which the United States versus Russia find themselves today.

Sparta and Athens did not want to go to war but both looked upon war between themselves as a possibility which could not be disregarded. Therefore each one felt impelled to take steps which would make it more likely that it should win the war if war came. Every such step which Sparta took to improve her chances in case of war and every such step which Athens took to improve her chances in case of war, was of necessity a step which made war more likely to occur. Finally the time came when



Sparta regretfully decided that war was inevitable; that it had better set a date for it and prepare in earnest against the day. The date set was not a very close one; rather it was a fairly distant date.

When Sparta arrived at this fateful decision, it did not break diplomatic relations with Athens. It kept on sending delegations to Athens, addressing to Athens exhortations. The last of these exhortations was the simplest and the most sweeping of all: "Sparta desires to maintain peace", it said, "and peace there may be if Athens will restore independence to the Hellenes". These exhortations sound to me exactly like the exhortations which we are addressing these days to Russia.

When the Peloponnesian War finally started, it did not start as a war between Sparta and Athens. It started as a war between an ally of Sparta and an ally of Athens. Albania is an ally of Russia. Just a week ago or so one of our allies threatened to attack Albania.

By what right do we assume that we have a better chance of escaping war than had these Greek city-states? Admittedly the present leadership of the United States is not too bad; certainly it could be much worse. And the Russian leadership undoubtedly could be much worse also. But what about the leadership of Sparta and Athens? Can we seriously say that Mr. Truman is a better man than was Pericles, or that the Kremlin can be expected to show more wisdom than did the leaders of Sparta?

What I am trying to say is not that war between Russia and the United States is inevitable but rather that some element that was absent in Greece will have to enter into the picture or else history is going to repeat itself. As long as we consider it more important to have the best possible chance of winning the war, if there is one, than to diminish the chance that there will be a war, we will move along the same path as did Sparta and Athens.

It is easy enough to understand what made Sparta and Athens act the way they did. They acted as one hundred per cent patriots must act. One hundred per cent



patriotism was considered a virtue in Greece, and maybe at that time it had its usefulness. But many things have changed in these last two thousand years. The fastest courier took longer to get from Sparta to Athens than it takes the slowest plane to fly from London to Moscow today. The Peloponnesian war was fought with bows and arrows -- our war will be fought with atomic bombs. One hundred per cent patriotism in the twentieth century is not a virtue, but a crime, and as long as we still consider it a virtue we shall live in mortal danger from here on.

There are other things which have changed in the last two thousand years. We cannot say that there was an evolution in the human race. As human beings we may not be superior to the Greeks but something happened nevertheless. Something happened when Christ was born. The Gods of the Greeks resided in Greece, on Mount Olympus; our God does not reside on Pike's Peak in the United States of America.

Is this relevant? I hesitate to say. For our policies are shaped by statesmen and statesmen do not commune very much with God. Occasionally they speak of him and undoubtedly they consider themselves as Christians. But suppose that a neighboring planet were equipped with a powerful telescope and the scholars of that planet could visually observe every move and action of our statesmen without being able to hear what they are saying. Would these scholars find any evidence indicating that our statesmen are Christians? Our statesmen say that they have sympathy for the Russian people. The poor Russians, they say, are captives of their government, but our statesmen think that their sole responsibility is to the American people for the Russians are, after all, foreigners. Do they really think that God considers them as foreigners?

It seems to me that as long as we look upon one hundred per cent patriotism as a virtue and permit our statesmen to act accordingly, we shall not be able to do any better than did Athens and Sparta. Because wars have become worse, we shall probably do worse.



You may ask: why blame the statesmen -- why not blame the people. In America at least, you may say, it is the people who determine policy. In a sense they do and in a sense they do not. The people in Greece had more influence on the shaping of foreign policy than the people have today. I know that I am talking about for I am one of the people. How can I influence the shaping of our policy when I cannot even find out what our policy is? I can see that we are building up an alliance in Western Europe, but I can also see that this alliance must of necessity break to pieces as we move toward the time when the Russians will be prepared to hurl atomic bombs, mounted on rockets, at Paris, Amsterdam, Brussels and London, and we shall be unable to protect these cities. What then is the purpose of building up these alliances? Or have we like Sparta made up our minds that there will be war and have we set a date for it? Have we decided that there shall be war before our allies will be at the mercy of Russia?

I am raising these questions; the answers I do not know. Our Secretary of State, Mr. Acheson, strikes me as a reasonable man; a man of intelligence and goodwill. I assume that he must have a policy that may make sense but I am damned if I know what it is.

I, as one of the people, am asked if I am in favor of the Marshall plan, and I say that I am. I am asked if I am in favor of the Atlantic Pact, and I say that I am. But all this time I know that I am being asked the wrong questions.

For this is a question our statesman ought to put before the American people: The United States could adopt a generous -- yes, a magnanimous -- policy towards Russia, but if she does so she will take a risk. For if such a magnanimous policy is adopted and fails, and if then there is a war we shall be less certain of winning that war than if we played the game close to our chest. Are the American people willing to take a lessened chance of winning the war, if there is a war, for the sake of having a chance of winning peace?



The Russian government ought to put the same question to the Russian people.

No one has the right to say in advance what answer the American people, what answer the Russian people, might give to this question once they properly understand it. For all we know they might very well give the wrong answer. If they did, then the statesmen would have a clear mandate for acting out their part in this Greek tragedy; then the statesmen would have a clear mandate with flags waiving to lead us down the road to destruction.

But first the statesmen ought to declare a moratorium in foreign policy, until every American and every Russian has had a chance to read the story of the Peloponnesian war.