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A war without heroes

by Barry Strauss

A review of *A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War* by Victor Davis Hanson

On Victor Davis Hanson's War Like No Other.

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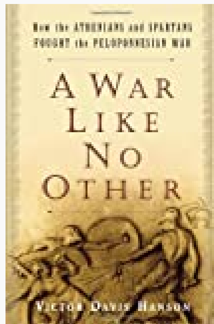

Victor Davis Hanson

A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War

Random House, 416 pages, $29.95

Victor Davis Hanson may just be our best military historian of the ancient world. He has traced the hard hand of war on Greek grain fields and olive groves, analyzed the agony of the ancient Greek infantryman, explicated specific battles, and put forth an ambitious theory of a western way of war that began in early Greece. It is only natural that he would turn now to the Peloponnesian War.[1] Not that anyone would approach the subject without a measure of trepidation.

The Peloponnesian War is the Everest of ancient military history, big and frightening, and not just because it lasted the twenty-seven years from 431 to 404 B.C. and involved the major powers of the Mediterranean World from Sicily to Persia. What makes the war peculiarly difficult is its gatekeeper, Thucydides, the man who chronicled or, rather, "composed" it (to use his ancient Greek word), since he came up with the notion of uniting four short, separate but successive

conflicts into one, great war, the subject of his long, difficult, and classic history. Thucydides was not only an expert on that war, having served as an Athenian admiral, but he was a genius, and an enigmatic one at that. The literature on the subject is formidable, from Thomas Hobbes to Georg Busolt and most recently Donald Kagan's wise and erudite four-volume history. But Thucydides keeps his cards close enough to the chest that centuries of modern scholarship still leave many questions unanswered.

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Hanson largely sidesteps the subject of strategy, which Kagan handles so masterfully. Instead, Hanson focuses on the experience of war, primarily of battle, with considerable attention to the epidemic that devastated Athens in the early years of the conflict. This is an innovative approach and Hanson executes it brilliantly. He has produced a literary work whose theme is the paradox, tragedy, and even absurdity of a war whose main achievement was to unleash "the Greek creative talent for killing." The Peloponnesian War destroyed the Athenian Empire without replacing it with anything that the Greeks could rally behind. The result, ultimately, was to leave Greece prey to conquest by the Macedonians Philip and Alexander.

Hanson's Peloponnesian War lacks heroes. Pitched battle takes second place to skirmishes, raids, night attacks, and terror campaigns. We hear of cruelty, butchery, and cannibalism: This is not the glory that was Greece, but a Mediterranean chamber of horrors. The reader thinks of such disillusioned World War II novels as *Catch-22* or *Slaughterhouse Five* or Malaparte's neglected masterpiece, *The Skin*.

This may seem like strange territory for Hanson, who is not only a classical scholar but a journalist. He is a neoconservative advocate of an aggressive American foreign policy that is not afraid of using force in the interests of spreading freedom and democracy. But the paradox is more apparent than real. Hanson is too shrewd a student of warfare to imagine that "the romance of a good nineteenth-century fight," as he puts it, is likely to be on offer today. In Iraq and Afghanistan, in every airport and in the London Underground, and in hundreds of unseen alleyways and mountain passes, we are locked in the dubious battles of a dirty war. Hanson's account of fear, fire, and terror (to cite some of his chapter titles) is a tale for the times. Yet if there is a mournful quality to Hanson's meditation, the book is no lament: like Stan Getz playing Burt Bacharach, Hanson makes art out of loss. How sad that war has lost its mythic appeal, now, let's get on with it; that is how we might read the book's message.

Hanson approaches the Peloponnesian War thematically. Since most readers will need a refresher on the conflict's long and convoluted narrative (it has four main phases and fighting on land and sea from Anatolia to Sicily, as well as plenty of diplomacy and politics), Hanson offers a short

synopsis as well as glossaries of people, places, and things. The chapters focus on the variety of military experience during the war: ravaging of the land ("fire"), the Athenian epidemic ("disease"), political coups and unconventional fighting ("terror"), infantry battle ("armor"), sieges ("walls"), Athens' disastrous Sicilian expedition ("horses," because of the Sicilians' decisive superiority in cavalry), and the war at sea ("ships").

Hanson handles each of these subjects well, but he particularly shines in his account of the Sicilian campaign of 415–413 B.C. No other analysis of the operation demonstrates quite so clearly just how much Athens failed for want of horses. Athens' goal was to cut off the island's chief city, Syracuse, and force its surrender. At every turn, however, Syracuse's superiority in cavalry defeated the invader. Yet Athens came closer to success than is often acknowledged, as Hanson argues persuasively. The trouble is, as he also notes, it is unclear whether success in Sicily would have achieved Athens' larger goals. Sparta might simply have shrugged its shoulders and gone on fighting.

Hanson's encyclopedic knowledge of ancient warfare is on display throughout, backed up by a detailed set of endnotes as well as select bibliography. Indeed, the book can be read like an encyclopedia, thumbed through slowly and at intervals, savored section by section. Here, for example, we learn that an infantryman's bronze armor was a quarter- to a half-inch thick, there, that Greek cavalrymen were short, light, and rode on ponies; now we see the holds of Athenian triremes heaving with rowers sitting just above the water, and now we hear the dull thud of Spartan axes on the wood of five to ten million Athenian olive trees—wood that generally withstood their attacks.

It is a book of sharp insights and jewel-like aperçus. Hanson shines at the little details, for example, the image of the Olympian rationalist Pericles on his deathbed, covered with pustules and reduced to wearing an amulet around his neck as a last, desperate life-saving attempt in an epidemic. Another example is Hanson's picture of the Boeotians attacking the central-Greek city of Plataea with a "pressurized concoction of sulfur, coal, and pitch" sent through a hollowed-out beam; 200 defenders were incinerated. Or take his gruesome evocation of the Athenian massacre of political prisoners on the island of Corcyra (modern Corfu), in which captives were roped together and whipped as they ran between two long lines of pike-wielding infantrymen. But the sixty or so men who died in this cruelty pales before the 2,000 helots massacred by their Spartan overlords—not because they had done anything wrong, but only because they might have represented potential rebels.

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No human cunning escapes Hanson's sight. For example, he looks into the mind of Lysander, the

Spartan commander who destroyed the Athenian fleet in 405 B.C. and then prowled the Aegean, driving Athenians everywhere back home where their city was under siege. The point, Hanson speculates, was to cause another epidemic like the one of the 420s, but it didn't work. And he uncovers and makes sense of a penchant for sieges on the part of Athens' rogue leader, Alcibiades. Since the classical Greeks were unable to take cities by storm—another paradox discussed incisively here—sieges were usually decided by tricks and betrayal. No wonder a con man like Alcibiades displayed such fondness for sieges.

Modern analogies appear frequently and they range from somber to comic. The Peloponnesian War was less an international than a domestic conflict, like the American Civil War. Rowers below deck on an Athenian trireme (that is, galley) elbowed and squabbled with each other like American football players putting on their gear in a hot August locker room. Often, Hanson's analogies are jarring, but they are meant to be. When he tells us that Thucydides covered war almost like an embedded reporter or that the Spartan military was as bad as the Waffen-SS in its treatment of the subject helot population or that Athens engaged in ethnic cleansing of rebellious Aegean islands, he aims to narrow the gulf between the ancients and us. And he does so often. Analogies to early modern and modern battles unfold from front to back cover, as do comparisons to great commanders from Cortés to Patton. Modern arms such as dreadnoughts, tanks, aircraft carriers, and even Kevlar helmets all appear as complements to weapons of the age of spears and galleys. What these analogies lose in the specificity of the ancient experience they gain in immediacy and accessibility.

But perhaps the most accessible aspect of *A War Like No Other* is also its most human feature. Again and again, Hanson lingers over the few, very few names of ordinary men who died in the fighting. Astymachus, Xenares, and Glausidas go unremembered but unfairly so, because the Peloponnesian War was theirs alone. Hanson's effort to bring them back to life—them, and not only the giants of the agora—is only one small measure of the achievements of this exceptional book.

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Notes
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1. *A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War*, by Victor Davis Hanson; Random House, 416 pages, $29.95. Go back to the text.

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