***'A War Like No Other': Where Hubris Came From***

**Book Review by Paul Johnson** Oct. 23, 2005

WHY should a distinguished classical scholar like Victor Davis Hanson provide us with yet another book about the Peloponnesian War? He is in no doubt: he is writing a tract for the times. "Perhaps never," he insists, "has the Peloponnesian War been more relevant to Americans than to us of the present age."

This Greek civil war, between Athens and her allies and Sparta and her allies, lasted 27 years, from 431 to 404 B.C., and ended with the capitulation of Athens and its occupation by Sparta. Its interest for Hanson is in comparing Athens to the United States. At the outset of the war, Athens was the richest city in the world and, within Greece, the sole superpower, with an omnipotent navy. Athens was also a democracy, anxious to export her political system and way of life throughout the Greek world, if necessary by force. The war was fought because Sparta, a military oligarchy, feared Athenian imperialism and cultural dominance, and persuaded other Greek cities to join with it in an attempt to cut Athens down to size. Hanson sees the United States as sharing Athenian hubris and inviting nemesis by trying to export democracy to countries like Iraq and Afghanistan. The fact that Hanson himself supports American policy gives his book an ironic twist. **Question 1- Who won the Peloponnesian War?**

**Question 2- Why was Athens attacked by other city-states?**

My old tutor at Oxford, A. J. P. Taylor, always insisted, "The only lesson of history is that there are no lessons of history." He would have laughed at Hanson's book: "Such learned nonsense!" But Taylor was, characteristically, exaggerating. History has many lessons to teach, provided we don't push the comparisons too far. In the 19th century, the English ruling classes, educated at Oxford and Cambridge, were obliged to study Athens in detail, in the original Greek texts, to discover what lessons could be learned in the management of Britain's enormous world empire, and indeed in the conduct of the parliamentary democracy. There were some, even in the 18th century, who foresaw America's greatness and drew parallels with fifth-century B.C. Greece even then. Hanson quotes Thomas Paine: "What Athens was in miniature, America will be in magnitude."**Question 3- How would studying the past successes and failures of the ancient Greece help advanced nations today?**

The story of the war was told, most famously, by the greatest of ancient historians, Thucydides, who was himself a witness and participant, holding a senior command in the Athenian forces. He was then disgraced for failure and exiled, and that gave him the opportunity to produce his history, writing it while the war was going on, and ending his text, almost in midsentence, before it was over. Thucydides is notable for his concern to be accurate, his use of documents and his objectivity, although an Athenian patriot. He called the war "the greatest upheaval in history," and realized it would have enormous long-term consequences for Athens and for Greece as a whole. The scale of the fighting, as well as its prolongation, was unparalleled, as was the cruelty inflicted by both sides. **Question 4- What did Thucydides attempt to accomplish?**

Hanson compares the conflict to World War I as a tragic and needless event that had nothing inevitable about it and might have been avoided by wiser counsels, and that exacted a huge human price from the participants. The fact that this was a civil war fought between belligerents who shared a common language and (to some extent) culture, added an extra dimension of bitterness. In the American Civil War, Hanson notes, 600,000 Union and Confederate troops died from combat or disease, that is 1 in 50 of a population of 32 million. But Athens, in the Sicilian expedition alone in the years 415-413 B.C., lost one in 25 of the people of her entire empire. The cost of this one campaign was four times what it took to build the Parthenon.

**Question 5- Why is World War I used as a comparison to the Peloponnesian War?**

**Question 6- The author, Hansen, explained the Peloponnesian War was more tragic than our nation’s Civil War. What evidence supports his view?**

Hanson rightly dwells on the cultural cost of the war because the fifth century B.C. was the golden age of Athenian culture. Not only were great statesmen like Pericles involved in the war, but so were writers and philosophers. Socrates had doubts about the wisdom of the war but, Hanson says, "those worries were not enough to prevent him from fighting heroically in her cause in his potbellied middle age." Euripedes criticized Athenian atrocities but still wanted Athens to win. Aristophanes, the great comic genius, denounced the folly of the war but remained patriotic. The war took a heavy toll on the Athenian political and military elite: a majority were killed or executed on campaign, died of wounds, or (like Pericles) of the plague that swept through overcrowded Athens, or were exiled for failure. It is hard to think of anyone, on either side, who "had a good war." The war seems to have ended forever that splendid Athenian self-confidence that was behind her extraordinary achievements in the fifth century B.C. It was "never glad confident morning again." **Question 7- What is meant by there was a “culture loss” during the Peloponnesian War?**

It is a mistake, I think, to give too much weight to Thucydides, simply because he is such a marvelous writer, and his voice so much more adult than the voices of others we hear from the period. After all, there was an earlier Peloponnesian war that lasted 15 years, 461-446 B.C., and Athens's collapse and surrender in 404 was not the end of the matter. By 403 B.C. she had regained her democracy and her freedom, and during the next decade she rebuilt her fleet and Long Walls and, with other cities, destroyed Spartan imperialism. Plato grew up during the great Peloponnesian War, but the second half of his life saw a magnificent Athenian revival in culture. In artistic terms, the first half of the fourth century B.C. was a continuation of the Golden Age.

**Question 8- Thucydides contemplated that the Peloponnesian War was effectively the end of democracy. Why does this author disagree?**