Colleagues and Friends,

The Norman Levan Center for the Humanities at Bakersfield College is pleased to publish this scholarly and thoughtful lecture by Michael Peters, President of St. John’s College in Santa Fe, New Mexico. His lecture, given at Bakersfield College, is the second annual Levan Lecture presented by the Levan Center and St. John’s College.

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Sincerely,

Jack Hernandez

Director of the Norman Levan Center of the Humanities, Bakersfield College
Democracy and Empire: Thucydides’ The Peloponnesian War

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Good evening. It is a pleasure to be at Bakersfield College to deliver the Levan Lecture. Bakersfield College and St. John’s College are both indebted to Dr. Norm Levan for his vision and generosity. I am honored to present this lecture named for Dr. Levan. My thanks to Bakersfield College President, Greg Chamberlain, and the Chairman of the Levan Center for the Humanities, Dr. Jack Hernandez, for inviting me to speak and for their hospitality.

I want to discuss one of the classics in western thought on politics and war, Thucydides’ The Peloponnesian War – the war between Athens and Sparta and their allies, from 431-404 BC. It would be impossible in the time we have this evening to explore all the issues raised by Thucydides in his monumental work. I will, therefore, focus on the challenge Athens faced in maintaining both its domestic democracy and its empire and the interaction between the two in the course of the war. I will also, as much as possible, use Thucydides own words.

At the outset of his work, Thucydides writes, “[I]f it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future, . . . I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time.” (1.22.4) He certainly succeeded. Just last month for example, David Sanger referred to Thucydides in an article he wrote for the Sunday New York Times. Similarly, while I will not attempt to link the issues Thucydides raises directly to contemporary events, I will conclude with some of the lessons from the Peloponnesian War which may have some contemporary relevance.

First, a word about Thucydides. He was an Athenian general. Following his defeat by the Spartans at the battle of Amphipolis, 427 BC, he was, in his words, “exile[d] from my country for twenty years . . . ; and being present with both parties, . . . , had leisure to observe affairs more closely.” (5.26.5)

Let me also say a few words about the two principal protagonists, Athens and Sparta, in the fifth century BC. Despite a history of conflict among the Greek states, they had united to resist the threat and invasion from Persia. Athens built a maritime empire from alliances formed during and after the Persian War. The foundation of the Athenian empire was its fleet which had defeated the Persians in the decisive battle of Salamis. Athens’ maritime empire was the source of her power abroad and prosperity at home. Members of the empire,
principally Aegean islands and cities along the Aegean coast of Greece and Asia Minor, having for the most part given up their fleets, paid tribute to Athens, and were, in return, protected by the Athenian fleet. Thus mutual interest, principally focused on the Persians threat, held the empire together. In addition, having led the Greek coalition against the Persians without Spartan assistance, Athens was celebrated by her fellow Greeks as the savior of their civilization.

At the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War Athens had about forty thousand citizens -- property owning males over 30 years of age. Each year the citizens elected ten generals as their leaders. But the highest authority was the citizens' assembly, which met at least 40 times per year. Foreign, domestic, military and civil policy was subject to the assembly. The citizens held their elected generals directly accountable. Several times a year the generals were subject to a formal review of their performance and potentially a trial. If tried and convicted, they faced fines, ostracism, exile or other punishments. For his failures at the battle of Amphipolis, Thucydides was tried and exiled.

Pericles, elected a general for over 30 years, was the most powerful figure in Athens at the outset of the war. Pericles' rule was the 'Golden Age" of Athens in the arts, architecture, philosophy, literature and more. All made possible by revenues generated from empire -- trade and tribute.

Sparta, located on the Peloponnesian Peninsula, led a much looser and principally land-based alliance including several substantial city states, notably Corinth and Thebes. Sparta's principal domestic concern was controlling the helots, somewhere between serfs and slaves, who farmed the land for the Spartans. The helots outnumbered the Spartans seven to one, and the ever present fear of a helot uprising and their natural caution made the Spartan rulers reluctant to launch attacks and engage in wars, especially protracted wars, any distance from home.

With this brief introduction let's look at the relationship of Athenian democracy and its empire in three areas: the decision to go to war; the war strategies; and the decision for and conduct of the ill-fated Sicilian campaign.

Athens Decision to Go to War:

Corinth, one of Sparta's principal allies, caused the initial spark that led to the Peloponnesian War. To reassert control over one of her colonies, Corinth came into conflict with Corcyra who turned to Athens for support. This led Athens to become embroiled with Corinth. Corinth appealed to Sparta for support against Athens, and after some hesitation and negotiations Sparta did so.

Thucydides outlines a number of tactical reasons for Sparta's decision to go to war with Athens, including those above; however, he concludes "the real cause [was] . . . The growth of power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired . . ." (1.23.6) For their part the Athenians justified their power and empire in this way, "The empire we acquired not by violence, but because you (Spartans) were unwilling to prosecute to its conclusion the war against the barbarian (Persians), and because the allies attached themselves to us and
spontaneously asked us to assume command. ... [T]he case. ... compelled us to advance our empire to its present height; fear being our principal motive, though honor and interest afterwards came in. [W]hen you ... ceased to be friends ... , it appeared no longer safe to give up our empire." (1.75.2-4) The fundamental cause of the war, therefore, was Sparta’s fear of Athenian power and Athens’ fear of and determination not to allow Sparta to challenge her and her empire. Or to repeat Thucydides, “fear, honor and interest.” (1.23.6)

As I mentioned, despite the provocations and the urging of their allies neither side immediately initiated direct hostilities. Pericles, who Plutarch describes as having “a reputation for wariness and did not envy the glory of generals,” attempted to deter the Spartans by reminding them of Athens’ great naval and economic strength. The Spartans recognized their inherent disadvantages and sent several missions to Athens in an effort to resolve their disagreements. However, no matter how manageable their immediate differences, fear, as Thucydides describes it, made the fundamental differences between Sparta and Athens virtually irreconcilable.

In their final mission to Athens, the Spartans presented an ultimatum, “Sparta wishes the peace to continue and there is no reason why it should not, if you [the Athenians] would let the Hellenes be independent.” (1.139.3) In other words Sparta’s bottom line demand was the end of the Athenian empire. This demand was also Sparta’s rallying cry to her fellow Greeks: Its purpose in opposing Athens was to insure freedom for the Greeks. Sparta saw herself, and wanted others to see her, as the Greeks’ champion against unnecessary, unwanted, and overbearing Athenian domination. In other words, it was in the interest of Sparta and the other Greek states to destroy the Athenian empire.

The final Athenian decision to go to war lay with the assembly. Pericles, after attempting to deter Sparta and avoid conflict, urged rejection of the Spartan ultimatum. He argued, “... [A]ll claims from an equal, urged upon a neighbor as commands, ... be they great or small have only one meaning, and that is slavery.” (1.141.1) This was a call to the Athenian sense of justice and honor as well as her self interest. Pericles was confident that the Spartans could be deterred. Because he believed that the Spartans would understand that should it come to war, they could not prevail. As he explained to his citizens “[The Spartans] ... are ... without experience in long wars across the seas.” (1.41.3) They “cannot afford the absence from their homes (a reference to their concern for the helots), the expenditure of their own funds; and besides, they have not command of the sea.” (1.141.4) Pericles explicitly linked Athenian independence to the strength of her fleet and the maintenance of her empire. And, in Pericles’ mind, if Sparta could not be deterred, Athens had no choice but to go to war to protect her empire, and thereby her independence. The assembly agreed. Unfortunately, Pericles miscalculated on both counts.

The Athenian Strategies:

The strategy Pericles proposed was based on his belief that, “[The Spartans] will not be able to supply the deficiency except by a battle, while we have plenty of land both on the islands and the continent. Rule of the sea is indeed a great matter. Dismissing all thought of our land and houses, we must vigilantly guard the sea and the city. No irritation ... must provoke us to a battle with the numerical superiority of the Peloponnesians. We must cry not over the loss of houses and land but of men’s lives ... .” (1.143.5)
Pericles continued, “I have many other reasons to hope for a favorable outcome, if you can consent not to combine schemes of fresh conquest with the conduct of the war, and will abstain from willfully involving yourselves in other dangers; indeed I am more afraid of our own blunders than of the enemy’s devices.” (1.144.1) Thus Pericles put forward a defensive strategy which, because he believe it would be more costly to Sparta than Athens, would result in an Athenian victory. Therefore he urged: Avoid pitched battles; curb the passion for foreign conquest; defend but do not expand the empire; and outlast the resource poor Spartans. The Athenians adopted Pericles’ plan.

As we have seen, Pericles’ strategy was predicated upon the strength of Athenian democracy along with his perception of Spartan weaknesses. It was based on the power of the Athenian fleet and access to resources from the empire. It was furthered by the fortifications surrounding Athens and her port of Piraeus, which made the option of abandoning the countryside, protecting the citizens and still continuing the war effort possible. It was also based on his belief that Sparta would be deterred and not launch an attack, but if she did so, Sparta could not sustain a protracted war. Again, unfortunately, this turned out not to be correct. Or as Thucydides put it, at Pericles urging, “[The Athenians] were to prepare for the war and to carry in their property from the country. They were not to go out into battle, but to come into the city and guard it, and . . . ready their fleet, . . . . They were also to keep a tight rein on their allies – the strength of Athens being derived from the money brought in by their payments, and the success in war depending principally upon conduct and capital.” (2.13.2)

Reining in or holding the allies was crucial, but from the very outset the interests of Athens and her allies began quickly to diverge. This divergence of interests was an increasing challenge, because Thucydides found that throughout the Hellenic world, “Men’s feelings inclined much more toward the Spartans, especially as they proclaimed themselves the liberators of Hellas . . . So general was the indignation felt against Athens, whether by those who wished to escape from her empire, or [those who] were apprehensive of being absorbed in it.” (2.8.4&5) So Athens’ strength was based on the loyalty of its empire which was uncertain at best. At the same time Sparta had achieved the position of honor formerly held by Athens – “liberator of the Greeks.”

Finally, after the period of hesitation and negotiation, Sparta invaded the Athenian homeland, Attica. The Spartans expected the Athenians to follow the standard practice in land warfare of the time and to bring their army into the field for the sake of their country and their honor. Instead, following Pericles’ strategy, the Athenians refused combat and retreated behind the city walls. As a result, the first year of the war was indecisive and contrary to Pericles’ hope, certainly more harmful to the Athens than Sparta and introduced the possibility of an extended conflict. Despite having accepted Pericles strategy, the Athenian citizens grumbled about their property losses and the lack of military action and Thucydides reported, “Pericles was the object of general indignation; his previous counsels were totally forgotten; he was abused for not leading the army which he commanded, and was made responsible for the whole of public suffering.” (2.21.3)
The next year of the war was even more costly for Athens due not only to further losses in the countryside but also to a virulent plague that ravaged the city. Many Athenian citizens viewed the plague as divine punishment while the Spartans pillaged their land. At the same time, the Spartans were emboldened by the plague seeing it as a positive sign from the gods.

The Athenians found even greater fault with Pericles and were eager to come to terms with Sparta. Pericles, believing firmly in his strategy, encouraged them to hold on. In addition, he explicitly linked the continuation of their democracy at home with the demands of empire in his famous Funeral Oration, "[W]hat was the road by which our greatness grew . . . it is called democracy. Our laws . . . afford equal justice to all and we acquire friends by conferring not needing favors. . . . In short, I say we are the school of Hellas." (2.36-41) "[Y]our country has a right to your services in sustaining the glories of her position. These are a common source of pride to you all, and you cannot decline the burdens of empire and still expect to share its honors. You should remember also that what you are fighting against is not merely slavery as an exchange for independence, but also loss of empire and danger from the animosities incurred in its exercise. . . . For what you hold is, to speak somewhat plainly, a tyranny; to take it perhaps was wrong, but to let it go is unsafe." (2.63.1-2) Pericles acknowledged that it may be easier to build an empire based on mutual interest than to keep one, especially in wartime. He made clear that what sustains a democracy at home, justice and honor, is at odds with what is necessary to maintain an empire abroad, tyranny. While he persuaded the Athenians not to sue for peace, "the public feeling against him did not subside until he had been [tried,] convicted and fined." (2.65.3)

Pericles died shortly thereafter, probably from the plague. Following his death Athens had no unified, consistent leadership so essential to the conduct of war. Thucydides summarized Pericles' contribution and the troubles that followed, "He told [the Athenians] to wait quietly, to pay attention to their marine, to attempt no new conquests, and to expose the city to no hazards during the war, and doing this, promised them a favorable result. What they did was the very contrary, allowing private ambitions and private interests, in matters quite foreign to the war, to lead them into projects unjust both to themselves and to their allies. . . . Nor did they finally succumb till they fell the victims of their own intestine disorders." (2.65.7-13) As the war went on the Athenian sense of justice was undermined both internally and externally.

After Pericles' death Athenian circumstances deteriorated as the treasury was depleted and the strategy altered. It began with revolution in the empire.

The island of Lesbos revolted from Athens and sought an alliance with Sparta. Lesbos was one of the few Athenian allies that had retained its own fleet. As the Lesbians explained to the Spartans, "We accepted each other against our inclinations; fear made [the Athenians] court us in war, and us them in peace; sympathy, the ordinary basis of confidence, had its place supplied by terror; fear having more share than friendship in detaining us in the alliance; and the first party that should be encouraged by the hope of impunity was certain to break faith with the other." (3.12.1) In other words, mutual interest no longer sustained the alliance and was replaced by terror, fear and coercion. The citizens of Mytilene, the principal city of Lesbos, further advised the Spartans that, "It is not in Attica that the war will be decided, as some imagine, but in the countries by which Attica is supported." (3.13.5) Given their failure to draw the Athenians into direct combat in Attica and the importance of the Lesbian fleet, the Spartans agreed to bring Lesbos into their alliance.
Athens responded aggressively to this state of affairs, sending a fleet and an army to blockade Mytilene. As a result the war became even more costly to Athens, and for the first time she was forced to fund the campaign with a direct tax on her own citizens as well as to demand increased contributions from the empire.

Eventually the Athenians subjugated the Mytilenians and executed the prisoners they had brought back to Athens. Not content with this, the Athenians, as Thucydides says, “in the fury of the moment determined to put to death not only the prisoners . . . , but the whole adult male population [of Mytilene] . . . and make slaves of the women and children. The morrow brought repentance with it and reflection on the horrid cruelty of a decree which condemned a whole city to the fate merited only by the guilty.” (3.36.2 & 4).

So the assembly reconsidered. Cleon, then one of the leading generals, pushed for the original decision declaring, “I have come before you now convinced that a democracy is incapable of empire, never more so than by your present change of mind . . . , forgetting that your empire is a despotism and your subjects disaffected conspirators, whose obedience is insured not by your suicidal concessions, but by superiority given you by your strength and not their loyalty. . . . For, if they were right in rebelling, you must be wrong in ruling. However, if, right or wrong, you determine to rule, you must carry out your principle and punish the Mytilenians as your interests require; or else give up your empire and cultivate honesty without danger. Make up your minds . . . Punish them as they deserve and teach your other allies by striking example that the penalty of rebellion is death. Let them know this and you will not so often need to neglect your enemies while you are fighting with your own confederates.” (3.37.1-40.7) Cleon outlined the basic Athenian dilemma: you cannot rule abroad in the same way you rule at home. Justice or right had no role within the empire. Ultimately, only fear and coercion held the empire together requiring harsh and perhaps unfair treatment for whose who attempted to stray.

Diodotus, another general, rebuked Cleon saying, “I consider it far more useful for the preservation of our empire to put up with injustice voluntarily, than to put to death, however justly, those whom it is in our interest to keep alive. . . . This is at once the best for the future, and the most terrible to your enemies at the present moment; inasmuch as good policy against an adversary is superior to the blind attack of brute force.” (3.47.5 & 3.48.2) In other words, the empire could not be held together by force alone and justice served both Athenian self-image and self-interest. Diodotus carried the day, but the debate on how to control an increasingly rebellious empire continued throughout the war leading to further dissention at home, increased turmoil abroad and ultimately defeat.

The next summer Athens went on the offensive beyond its Aegean empire dispatching a fleet to Sicily as Thucydides put it, “The Athenians sent it upon the pleas of their common descent, but in reality to prevent the exportation of Sicilian corn to the Peloponnesus and to test the possibility of bringing Sicily into subjection.” (3.86.4) Not only did Athens want to prevent grain from going to Sparta but, due to her own crop losses in Attica, she also needed the Sicilian grain for herself. Two years into this campaign Athens reinforced the enterprise with additional ships. This foray to Sicily represented another critical step in Athens repudiation of Pericles strategy of defending but not attempting to expand her empire.
Later the same year the Athenians also made a major assault on the southwest coast of the Peloponnesian peninsula. In an extended campaign the Athenians forced the Spartan defenders to surrender, capturing almost 200, from among the best families. Thucydides declared, "Nothing that happened in the war surprised the Hellenes so much as this. It was the general opinion that no force or famine could make the Spartans give up their arms, but that they would fight on as they could, and die with them in their hands: indeed people could scarcely believe that those who surrendered were of the same stuff as the fallen..." (4.40.1-2)

The Spartans sued for peace, but Thucydides goes on, "the Spartans, hitherto without experience of incursions or a warfare of the kind, finding the helots deserting, and fearing the march of revolution in their country, began to send envoys to Athens... The Athenians, however, kept grasping at more, and dismissed envoy after envoy..." (4.41.3-4)

Meanwhile in Sicily, the Athenian commanders, seeing no prospect for success, withdrew. Arriving back in Athens the generals were tried and banished by the assembly. Because, per Thucydides, "So thoroughly had the present... [success on the Peloponnesian Peninsula] persuaded the Athenians that nothing could withstand them and that they could achieve what was possible and what was impractical alike, with means ample or inadequate it mattered not... this made them confuse their strength with their hopes." (4.65.4) Flushed from the recent triumph in the Peloponnesus and not withstanding the lack of success in Sicily, Athens demanded Sparta's complete capitulation. Fueled by greed, ambition and the desire to extend the empire, the Athenian assembly would accept nothing short of total victory.

The following summer, further incited by their greed and ambition and also yet further pressed for money, the Athenians continued their expansionist policies against the Aegean island of Melos. Melos had initially remained neutral in the war, but as Thucydides described it, "upon Athenians using violence and plundering their territory, assumed an attitude of open hostility." (5.84.2)

The Athenians besieged the Melians and demanded they join the Athenian empire and pay tribute. In perhaps the most oft referenced portion of Thucydides work, the Melian Dialogues, the Athenians assert their right to empire and subjugation of Melos saying, "you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only a question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." (5.89) Further, Athens had, "come in the interest of our empire... and besides extending our empire we should gain in security by your subjection; the fact that you are islanders and weaker than others rendering it all the more important that you should not succeed in thwarting the masters of the sea." (5.91.5 & 97)

The Melians, calling upon the Athenian sense of justice and persuaded that Sparta would come to her defense, refused to bow. Unfortunately, their faith in both Athens and Sparta was misplaced and they suffered an utter defeat at the hands of the Athenians. "[They],... put to death all the grown men... and sold the women and children for slaves,..." (5.116.3-4) This was the most manifest example of Athenian abandonment of mutual interest and Pericles assertion of Athens, "acquiring friends by conferring not needing favors." It also represented a dramatic rejection of Pericles defensive strategy and admonition not to
expand the empire. Athens resorted to brutality, motivated by fear and the need for resources to prosecute the war. It completely reversed the policy of moderation based on justice with one of deterrence through terror, something that would have been impossible to contemplate within Athens itself. The actions against the Melians, therefore, irrevocably divided the Athenian principals of rule at home and rule abroad. Rather than observe the guidance of Pericles and Diodotus, the Athenians, feeling a sense of power, driven by ambition and requiring more and more resources, aggressively extended the empire, showed no mercy to the conquered and asserted a principal of might makes right that was fundamentally at odds with their commitment to justice and their domestic democracy.

The Decision for and Conduct of the Sicilian Campaign:

Fresh from their victory in Melos, the Athenians again looked toward Sicily. As Thucydides says, “most of them, being ignorant of its size and of the number of inhabitants, . . . , and . . . that they were undertaking a war not much inferior to that against the Peloponnesians.” (6.1) The immediate reason for the expedition was that a Sicilian city appealed to Athens to “order . . . matters in Sicily as they deemed best for the interests of Athens.” (6.8.2) From a strategic viewpoint this was a preemptive strike intended to prevent Syracuse, the major Sicilian city, from coming to the aid of Sparta.

The leadership in Athens at the time was divided into two factions led by generals with opposing strategic views, Nicias and Alcibiades. Nicias was the more pious personally and cautious politically and strategically. He was responsible for the only extended truce during the war, the so-called Peace of Nicias. Alcibiades was more personally vain, ambitious and high living and more bold politically and strategically. Neither, however, was capable of prevailing over the other politically. They were in constant competition fostering dissention among the citizenry over domestic policy and the war’s objectives and strategy.

In spite of their differences, Alcibiades and Nicias were chosen jointly to command the Sicilian expedition. But, Nicias argued strongly against the action, “of grasping for another empire before we have secured the one we already have. . . . [O]ur struggle, . . . if we are wise, will not be for the barbarian . . . in Sicily, but to defend ourselves most effectively against the . . . machinations of Sparta.” Nicias was essentially recommending the Pericles’ defensive strategy. (6.10.5 & 11.7)

However, Alcibiades countered, “They are our confederates, and we are bound to assist them, . . . We did not take them into alliance to have them help us in Helles, but that they might so annoy our enemies in Sicily as to prevent them from coming over here and attacking us. It is thus that empire has been won. . . . since if all were to keep quiet or to pick and choose when they ought to assist, we should make but few new conquests, and should imperil those we have already won. . . . Moreover, we cannot fix the exact point at which our empire shall stop; . . . we must not be content with retaining what we have but must scheme to extend it, for if we cease to rule others, we shall be in danger of being ruled ourselves.” (6.18.1-3) In other words, Alcibiades proposed an even more ambitious and aggressive strategy: Maintaining the empire required expanding it.

True to his nature, fearing Alcibiades had persuaded the Athenians and hoping to shake
their resolve, Nicias further argued that the campaign would require overwhelming force and massive resources. His argument, however, had the opposite affect. The assembly gave Nicias everything he said they needed and more. Thucydides concluded, “Everyone fell in love with the enterprise. The older men thought that they would either subdue the places against which they were to sail, or at all events, with so large a force, meet with no disaster; those in the prime of life felt a longing for foreign sights and spectacles, and had no doubt they should come safe home again; while the idea of the common people and the soldiery was to earn wages at the moment, and make conquests that would supply a never-ending fund of pay for the future. With this enthusiasm of the majority, the few what did not like it feared to appear unpatriotic by holding up their hands against it, and so kept quiet.” (6.24.3-4) The Sicilian campaign, therefore, was launched based on an unfortunate mix of ignorance, greed, divided command and the foibles of Athenian direct democracy.

So an expedition, unprecedented in scope, was launched under the joint command of Nicias, Alcibiades and a third general, Lamachus. From the outset the enterprise was rent by their disagreement on strategy. Nicias, as was typical, urged caution and Alcibiades, supported by Lamachus, pushed for aggressive action. As the Athenian armada was nearing Sicily, however, the assembly ordered Alcibiades to return to Athens to stand trial on charges of sacrilege.

These charges arose in a period of great domestic unrest, bordering on hysteria, reflecting and aggravating the political divisions in Athens. Spurred by this lack of unity, the Athenians began to act among themselves in ways more consistent with how they had come to behave toward the empire. For example, suspending the law forbidding torture of citizens during interrogation. Thus at the outset of an already ambitious campaign, Athens, for domestic reasons, withdrew arguably its most capable and certainly most committed commander. On the trip back to Athens, however, Alcibiades managed to escape and fled to the enemy, Sparta.

Meanwhile in Sicily, Lamachus was killed and Nicias, assuming that he could outlast the Syracusans, cautiously and ineffectively engaged them. Unfortunately, Syracuse had received reinforcements from Sparta. His spirit further sapped and suffering physically, Nicias then wrote the assembly, “I know that it is in your nature to love to be told the best side of things, and blame the teller if the expectations which he has raised in your minds are not answered by the result; and I therefore thought it safest to declare to you the truth.” Nicias, obviously mindful of the fate of past unsuccessful Athenian generals in Sicily, continued. “Now you are not to think that either your generals or your soldiers have ceased to be a match for the forces originally opposed to them. But...a... Sicilian coalition is being formed against us;...a fresh army is expected from the Peloponnesus, while the force we have here is unable to cope even with our present antagonists; and you must promptly decide either to recall us or send out to us another fleet and army as numerous again, with a large sum of money and someone to succeed me,...” (7.15.1)

Again Nicias’ plea did not turn out as he hoped. Instead, Thucydides tells us, “when the Athenians had heard it they refused to accept his resignation, but chose him two colleagues,... They also voted to send out another army and navy.” (7.16.1-2) The commonly accepted military dictum is to reinforce success and not failure. Nonetheless, again based
on ignorance, greed and the foolishness of their direct democracy, the Athenians chose
to do the opposite -- substantially reinforce their forces and still not allow the reluctant and
ineffective Nicias to relinquish command.

As the campaign in Sicily continued the Spartans, with the encouragement of Alcibiades,
again invaded Attica. (7.19.1) "Summer and winter the Athenians were worn out by having
to keep guard on the fortifications, . . . But what most oppressed them was that they had two
wars at once, and had thus reached a pitch of frenzy which no one would have believed
possible if he had heard of it before it came to pass. For could anyone have imagined that
even when besieged by the Peloponnesians entrenched in Attica, they would still, instead of
withdrawing from Sicily, stay there besieging in like manner Syracuse, a city in no way inferior
to Athens . . . [N]ow seventeen years after the first invasion, after having suffered from all
the evils of war, going to Sicily and undertaking a new war nothing inferior to that which they
already had with the Peloponnesians." (7.28.3-4) And, still the Athenians at home did not
reconsider.

In Sicily, in spite of the substantial reinforcements, the tide turned dramatically against the
Athenians. Demosthenes, the general who had arrived with the additional forces, recognizing
their difficult position, "was of the opinion that they ought not to stay any longer, . . . [H]e gave
his vote for going away without further loss of time, . . . . He also said that it would be more
profitable for the state to carry on the war against those who were building fortifications in
Attica, than against the Syracusans . . . ." (7.473-4)

But Nicias, "was unwilling to admit their weakness, . . . refused to lead off his army, saying
that he was sure that the Athenians would never approve of their returning . . . For himself,
he knew the Athenian temper, sooner than perish under a dishonorable charge and by an
unjust sentence at the hands of the Athenians, he would rather take his chance and die,
. . . , a soldier's death at the hand of the enemy." (7.48.2-4) Thus, the fear of shame and
punishment at home adversely affected the decision of a commander in the field. Pointing
out once more the difficulty Athens found in balancing her direct democracy and the realities
and imperatives of an empire at war and highlighting the disconnect between her political
and military objectives and her capabilities.

Ultimately, the Syracuse-Spartan forces decisively defeated the Athenians, killing many,
capturing the rest and butchering the commanders. Thucydides concluded, "This was the
greatest Hellenic achievement of any in this war, or, . . . , in Hellenic history; at once most
glorious to the victors, and most calamitous to the conquered. They were beaten at all
points altogether; all they suffered was great; they were destroyed, as the saying is, with a
total destruction, their fleet, their army—everything was destroyed, and the few out of many
returned home." (7.87.5)

Thucydides recorded the Athenian reaction to the debacle in Sicily: "When the news was
brought to Athens, for a long while they disbelieved even the most respectable of the soldiers
who had themselves escaped from the scene of action and clearly reported the matter, a
destruction so complete not being thought credible. When the conviction was forced upon
them, they were angry with the orators who had joined in promoting the expedition, just as
if they had not themselves voted it, . . . Nevertheless, with such means as they had, it was
determined to resist to the last, and to provide timber and money, and to equip a fleet as they best could, to take steps to secure their confederates . . . . " (8.1.1&3-4)

Despite the devastating loss in Sicily the war dragged on for another nine years. During most of that time both Athens and Sparta courted the "barbarians", seeking an alliance with Persia to tip the balance. Alcibiades, in one of the most amazing demonstrations of flexible loyalty, aided the Spartans for a time, then briefly went over to the Persians and finally returned to and fought valiantly for Athens. However, Sparta with Persian support finally defeated the Athenians, ironically, in a primarily sea battle. Following that battle the Spartans occupied Athens, overturned the democracy and installed an sympathetic oligarchy.

Thus a war that Athens entered to protect her independence and democracy and preserve her empire resulted in just the opposite. She lost, her independence, her democracy and her empire.

Conclusions:

What lessons may we derive from Thucydides descriptions and explanations about the war and particularly Athens attempt to balance its democracy and empire?

First, interest:
Mutual interest among states is most easily achieved when there is a common external threat, in this case the Persians. It dissipates rapidly when that threat disappears or is replaced by other more pressing concerns, be they domestic or foreign.

Second power:
Economic, political and military power and success breed envy, certainly among your potential enemies, but also among your erstwhile friends and allies. The power and influence that derive from political, economic and military dominance or hegemony breed countervailing power and the potential for conflict. This very clearly happened with Athens.

Third, democracy and empire:
Empires are rarely sustained by mutual interest alone. Ultimately, they are held by force and fear. Therefore, while empires may be an asset in peacetime, they often become a burden in war. They require the expenditure of more and more resources and the use of more and more force to maintain. They become particularly burdensome in an extended conflict. Thus, it may seem that expanding the empire is the only means to insure you can maintain it. This can lead to overreach and defeat.

In addition, in wartime, freedom, justice and democracy at home can be undermined by the measures required to hold an empire abroad. Specifically, when mutual interest dissolves and wartime policy shifts to force and fear or "might makes right" abroad, it can lead to profound distortions of the domestic polity. Something Athens experienced.

Fourth, war aims and strategy:
Objectives in war must be achievable and the strategy pursued must offer a high probability of success. The decision to go to war can never be treated lightly. Before opting for war, the
state must clearly and accurately understand both its desired ends, its means for achieving those ends and the enemies' capabilities. Pericles certainly miscalculated these factors.

This is particularly true when pursuing a war of attrition and assuming the strategic defensive, the Pericles strategy. It is difficult for a defensive strategy to be decisive, since the enemy holds the initiative. A war of attrition requires substantial political will, extensive resources and the clear prospect of the ultimate failure of the enemy's will.

In any war, but again, especially in a war of attrition, maintaining a consistent strategy is difficult when the political and military leaders are subject to the whims of popular opinion. Too often popular passions overcome prudence, reason and sound strategy. Too often the momentum and passion of war make it very difficult to rationally calculate costs and benefits and frequently results in reinforcing failure and hastening defeat. Hence, Sicily.

Fifth, preemption or preventive war:
Preemption or preventive war, especially at great distance from your home base, is a most demanding strategy. Preemption seeks to counter a threat that is not immediate and perhaps not obvious or well understood. It is, therefore, more difficult to measure success or properly evaluate setbacks. This may lead to errors in judgment in the field, at home, or both. These errors or blunders are often more damaging than the enemy's action. The challenges of a preemptive strategy are exacerbated if it results in a war on multiple fronts. The Sicilian campaign is an illustration.

Lastly, command:
Divided or rotating commands, especially when political and military leadership is conflated increase the probability of muddled strategy, miscalculation, blunder and ultimately, failure. A problem that plagued Athens throughout the war after the death of Pericles.

These factors contributed to the misfortunes of Athens as Thucydides records them. They are lessons all political and military leaders must keep in mind and have been learned and relearned over the course of history, even today. They are as Thucydides put it, "a possession for all time." (1.22.4)

Thank you again for this opportunity to speak with you this evening. I look forward to our discussion.

* All references are from The Landmark Thucydides, A Comprehensive Guide to The Peloponnesian War, edited by Robert B. Strassler