1 In the Mirror of Antiquity: The Problem of American Empire

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We have been asked to compare the experience of empire in antiquity with contemporary articulations of empire and to consider whether lessons drawn from the ancient past may shed light on the imperial trajectory of contemporary international politics. The Western imagination has long been troubled by the question of how we moderns stand in relation to antiquity; indeed, it is possible to write histories of modern political thought in terms of that question.[1] To think of the matter in this way is to essentially ask what we and our forebears think and have thought about antiquity; but in the way the editors of this volume have posed their own question, there is also a hint of another perspective, one that might be somewhat crassly summarized by this question: What would antiquity think of us? Put differently, are there enduring lessons in ancient political thought that speak to the present moment? Are we to be either fortified or struck down in our imperial ambitions by the wisdom of the ancients?

This chapter ventures some observations with respect to these differing approaches to the subject. The first question is whether the United States today may fairly be considered an empire. I believe the appellation to be just, though there are certainly good reasons why American policy makers do not like the term. Second, I will be examining how the contrasting experiences of Greece and Rome entered into the American imagination in such a way that the lessons drawn from antiquity formed an essential aspect of what may be termed 'the American project.' Finally, I will consider the question of American empire from the vantage point of the lessons implicit in Thucydides' masterful account of the great war between Athens and Sparta.

The American invasion of Iraq in March 2003 and the development by the Bush administration of a new national-security strategy provoked an enormous volume of commentary – a flood of books, essays, and op-ed pieces – on the theme of American empire. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, wrote one critic, 'produced a dangerous change in the thinking of some of our leaders, who began to see our republic as a genuine empire, a new Rome, the greatest colossus in history, no longer bound by international law, the concerns of allies, or any constraints on its use of military force.'[2] The question urgently demanding attention, wrote another critic, 'is not whether the United States has become an imperial power [but] what sort of empire [Americans] intend theirs to be.'[3]

It was not only critics of American foreign policy who found 'empire' to be the most apt label for what the United States had become. Neoconservative supporters of the Bush administration did so as well. Columnist Max Boot insisted that 'Afghanistan and other troubled lands today cry out for the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets.'[4] Other neoconservatives, such as Charles Krauthammer and Tom Donnelly (the latter of the Project for the New American Century), agreed that it was time to come out of the closet on the subject of American empire. Of the supporters of the Bush's Iraq policy, perhaps the most brazen was British historian Niall Ferguson, who not only came out of the closet but nearly burned down the house. His argument was 'not merely that the United States is an empire but that it always has been an empire.'[4] Ferguson, like others, insisted that the United States should step up to the imperial responsibilities that fall to it as a conservator of world order, and he feared that it would not.

Thirty-five years ago, in the ideological heat generated by the war in Vietnam, few defenders of that war spoke of it as an imperial venture.[5] The charge of American empire was an indictment, an ascription of hidden intent used to encourage a repudiation of the forbidden temptation. That charge arose on the left and was condemned on the right. 'Once,' wrote critic Jonathan Schell, 'the left had stood alone in calling the U.S. imperial and was reviled for defaming the nation. Now it turned out to have been the herald of a new consensus. Yesterday's leftwing abuse became today's mainstream praise.'[6]

Or so it seemed. In fact, as time went by, observers on both the right and the left developed second thoughts. The Bush administration never accepted the 'imperial' label and repeatedly insisted in its public

pronouncements that the United States was not and had never been an empire. 'We have no empires to establish or utopias to promote,' Bush declared. An academic proponent of the Bush Doctrine, who later joined the administration, denounced the 'imperial' label as reflecting a total misunderstanding of the purposes of Bush's national-security doctrine. 'Let us stop talking of an American empire, for there is and there will be no such thing.'[7] Victor Davis Hanson, another strong supporter of the Bush Doctrine, denounced the 'imperial' moniker as a gross misrepresentation of reality. '"Imperialism" and "hegemony,"' wrote Hanson, 'explain nothing about recent American intervention abroad – not when dictators such as Noriega, Milosevic, the Taliban, and Saddam Hussein were taken out by the U.S. military. There are no shahs and Your Excellencies in their places, but rather consensual governments whose only sin was that they came on the heels of American arms rather than U.N. collective snoozing.'[8]

The neoconservatives' reconsideration of empire ultimately has a very simple explanation: at the beginning of the twenty-first century, imperialism is widely viewed as bereft of political legitimacy. In a democratic age in which legitimate government is held to rest on the consent of the governed, to avow an imperial project is to draw attention to oneself as pursuing aims that will be widely regarded as illegitimate. The instinct of the Bush administration – to deny that the United States wants anything to do with empire – was undoubtedly much surer and more deeply attuned to public sentiment than the excited proclamations of a few intellectuals. *Pace* Schell, the 1960s denunciations of empire were not the advance wave of a new consensus. That does not mean, however, that there is no such thing as the American empire. It does mean that its architects will henceforth not be so obtuse and unfeeling as to denominate it as such. That will be left to its critics.

Yet the critics also developed second thoughts. The dominant leitmotif of critics was that Bush had abandoned the honourable traditions of American internationalism to chase after the elusive and disreputable goal of an American imperialism. Instead of leading the world in cooperative enterprises, as post–Second World War American internationalists had done, the United States under Bush now proposed to dominate the world. This theme, however, sat uneasily alongside the conviction – pronounced on the left since Vietnam – that the United States had long entertained imperial ambitions. On this view, Bush could scarcely be said to represent something new under the sun,

though critics differed as to when the transformation from republic to empire had taken place. Some writers detected the change as having arisen with the end of the Cold War and the elimination of a geopolitical counterweight to the United States. Others followed the lead of J. William Fulbright, who wrote in the midst of the Vietnam War that America had succumbed in Southeast Asia to the lure of empire and who insisted that such a course represented a grave departure from American traditions.[9] If a vast complex of overseas bases and standing military establishments was the decisive development, perhaps the most logical date was 1945, when the United States first emerged as superior to all other states in the various dimensions of power.

Once the search began for precedents to 'empire as a way of life,' however, it became apparent to many that 1945 marked merely the ascendancy of the United States to 'global empire,' in the words of historian Ronald Steel. The imperial urge, these historians believed, long predated the moment of global ascendancy. It could in fact be traced to the beginnings of the nation's history, if not before. 'The American nation was no sooner founded,' wrote Steel, 'than its leaders embarked on an energetic program of expansion that – through diplomacy, conquest and theft from its original inhabitants – brought into the ever-expanding Union all the lands east of the Mississippi, then the vast territories of Louisiana, followed by Texas and a third of Mexico, the Pacific Northwest, Alaska, Caribbean and Pacific islands seized from Spain, and the once-independent kingdom of Hawaii.'[10] Historians Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton also emphasized 'the centrality of imperial ambitions to the development of the United States.'[11] According to this view, only a kind of profound historical amnesia prevents Americans from appreciating how *traditional* and *characteristic* are the ambitions of the Bush administration. The Bush Doctrine, on this view, was no wayward eruption of a revolutionary president but a logical working out of propensities well established from the outset.

It would be difficult to deny that the United States, at one time or another, has acted in an imperialist manner. If empire is defined as the domination of one people by another state separate and alien from it, then assuredly there have been episodes in which one can speak confidently of an American empire. In the 1830s an opponent of Indian removal, Congressman Henry Storrs, declared that he would not sacrifice the reputation of America's founders, who had counselled just treatment of the native inhabitants, 'for all the Indian lands that avarice ever dreamt of, and all the empire which ambition ever coveted.' Of course

he lost that argument.[12] The Cherokee and other southern tribes were removed. So, too, America undoubtedly acquired an empire in the war against Spain at the end of the nineteenth century. The regeneration of the Philippines and the acquisition of protectorates over various Caribbean islands followed an imperialist script. 'Has it ever occurred to you,' asked the *Missionary Journal* in 1899, 'that Jesus was the most imperial of imperialists?'[13] When facing peoples outside the society of states (then European and Christian in character), the United States did indeed act so as to displace peoples in its path. Thus far, then, those who would insist on a long imperial pedigree for America are adducing facts that cannot be denied. It is also true, however, that when America faced towards Europe and the society of states, its message was avowedly anti-imperial.

Several pertinent distinctions, moreover, are lost if the Bush Doctrine is seen as simply the latest instalment in a long imperial project. If it is true that there are precedents for an American imperialism, it is also true that Bush raised the empire business to an entirely new level. At its core, the Bush Doctrine proposed that the United States extend the position of military domination that fell to it as a consequence of victory in the Cold War; and that same doctrine was unafraid and unapologetic when it came to using force to reshape the international system. In embracing a doctrine of preventive war, the United States was abandoning the policies of containment and deterrence that it had followed during the Cold War. In announcing that it intended to preserve against all rivals its preeminent military status, it was jettisoning its previous commitment to arms control. In its insistence that it would no longer be bound by the laws traditionally governing the use of force – laws that forbid preventive war, torture, and the violent overthrow of regimes for the purpose of changing their political form – the United States had come to breathe a spirit of defiance towards international law. Especially in the early years of the Bush administration, America seemed recklessly indifferent to the views of traditional allies and airily dismissed the importance of showing a decent respect for the opinion of mankind.

In its pure form, as it were, the distilled essence of the Bush Doctrine was undoubtedly an imperial project, one that was far in advance of America's Cold War policy. It proposed a mastery of the state system by one power that recalled what Schell termed 'the hoary old nightmare of the ages, the always feared but never realized project of universal empire.'[14] Whereas empire signifies the domination of one people by another, universal empire had traditionally signified the domination by

one power of the state system as a whole. This vision could only really take root in circumstances of unipolarity. In this regard, a new vista had opened after the collapse of the Soviet Union that created an entirely different milieu from that which existed during the Cold War. Those observers (among both supporters and critics) who insisted that the Bush Doctrine represented a revolutionary change in American policy were closer to the mark than those who emphasized continuity.

Though various critics err in downplaying the novelty of the administration's grand design, the more telling objection is that these imperial ambitions are doomed to frustration. The essential paradox is that the more ambitious and arrogant the United States becomes in its conduct of statecraft, the less likely it is to succeed in its aims. The Iraq war, of course, is the classic example of this phenomenon. It was this war that, above all else, earned the United States the appellation of an imperial power; yet by the same token, it is the Iraq war that has most clearly illustrated the limits of American power. At the outset of the war, one commentator insisted that 'the extent of American military superiority has become almost impossible to overstate.'[15] Subsequent years have shown that it is very possible to do so. The fact that the United States enjoyed a remarkable technological advantage over any other state; the fact that its military expenditures were larger than those of the next fifteen nations combined, equal to approximately half of total world military spending; the fact that it had accumulated since 1989 an extraordinary record of short, successful wars – all of this promoted scepticism towards the idea that military power has certain intrinsic limitations. The experience of the Iraq war has rightly renewed that scepticism. Though the consensus criticism of the U.S. military's performance in Iraq is that the Bush administration went to war 'without a plan,' the more telling point is that it is extremely difficult to see what combination of strategy and tactics might have enabled an occupying foreign army to impose a pacification on a refractory people.

We have here a sort of exemplification, at the level of grand strategy, of the Peter Principle – the idea that people will rise in organizations to the level of their incompetence. There is a kind of debility that attends the possession of so much power, for given sufficient time it will expand to the margins of its capability. What there is to use, gets used. Once committed, moreover, the imperial power cannot lose. It straps itself to the wheel, invests its resources in projects that will demonstrate its credibility, and persists in enterprises that ought not to have been undertaken in the first place but that, once undertaken, immediately become vital interests whose sacrifice is unthinkable. That relationship

between extravagant aspiration and subsequent decline goes to the core of the American predicament today.

American policy, then, is imperial in aim but likely to fail. The Bush Doctrine represents a bid for mastery of the state system and is an authentic working out of Charles Krauthammer's call, at the end of the Cold War, 'to go all the way and stop at nothing short of universal dominion.'[16] But the verdict on this policy in the future is likely to be something on the order of Frederick Gentz's judgement on the eighteenth-century European powers: 'Our greatness occasioned our fall; our insatiable desire of advancing was the cause of our enervation; our meritorious ambition led to our present humiliation.' The causes of this Gentz traced, as might we, to 'attempts to rise from the safer paths of experience into regions yet untried of speculative politics.'[17]

The steps the United States took towards a form of universal empire actually followed an old script. Those steps had been prophesied. Few themes in the American story are of more antique lineage than the proposition that standing military establishments give rise to endless wars and that nothing is more fatal to republican government, and to liberty, than a policy that is friendly to war and to the militarized institutions that war fosters. To late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American republicans, the examples of England under Cromwell and France under Napoleon reflected a logical trajectory that was utterly alarming to the apostles of republicanism, and they were well aware, too, that the lines of this drama had been written in Roman history and in the subversion of the Roman republic by Julius Caesar. The belief that the military must be strictly subordinate to the civil power was a lesson drawn from the experience of ancient Rome, as from the experience of modern Britain and France. George Washington earned the undying gratitude of his countrymen by acting in accordance with that lesson and returning, like Cincinnatus, to his plough after rendering his valiant services to the republic.

In this as in other respects, the experience of antiquity hung over the early years of the American republic. To a degree difficult for us to appreciate, the mental horizons of the Founders were steeped in the experience of antiquity and the lessons drawn therefrom. The American conception of republicanism, as one observer has noted, was largely inherited from Rome: 'This included (1) pursuit of justice and the common good, through (2) the rule of law, under (3) a mixed and balanced government, comprising (4) a sovereign people, (5) a deliberative senate and (6) an elected magistracy. Americans in every faction endorsed

this basic conception of republican government and the patrician vision of (7) ordered liberty and (8) public virtue it sought to preserve.'[18] The experience of ancient Greece, too, weighed heavily. Alexander Hamilton was dazzled by the 'bright talents and exalted endowments' of ancient Greece, and his eulogist, Fisher Ames, believed that 'the glory of Greece is imperishable.' It would last as long, Ames thought, 'as learning itself, which is its monument; it strikes an everlasting root, and bears perennial blossoms on its grave.'[19]

But the experiences of Greece and Rome brought forth examples not only to be emulated but also to be shunned. 'It is impossible,' remarked Hamilton, 'to read the history of the petty republics of Greece and Italy without feeling sensations of horror and disgust at the distractions with which they were continually agitated, and at the rapid succession of revolutions by which they were kept in a state of perpetual vibration between the extremes of tyranny and anarchy.'[20] In Greece, the 'want of a solid fœderal union to restrain the ambition and rivalship of the different cities [had ended,] after a rapid succession of bloody wars ... in their total loss of liberty and subjugation to foreign powers.'[21]

Rome, by contrast, was a case study of the perils of conquest and the thirst for imperial and despotic rule over distant provinces. All throughout the American Revolution the charge had been rung against Great Britain that its aspirations for the colonies were equivalent to Rome's for those 'plundered and spoiled' provinces conquered in the 'one hundred years before Caesar's dictatorship' – an experience which suggested to the eighteenth-century mind that 'though free governments have been commonly the most happy, for those who partake of their freedom, yet are they the most ruinous and oppressive to *their provinces*.'[22] Antifederalists rang the same charge in the debates over the Constitution. It required no great imagination to trace the connection between great size and despotism, to see why empire meant both the exploitation of subjects and the loss of republican liberty, to espy the fatal sequence by which Caesar had crossed the Rubicon and seized the purple. 'History furnishes no example,' wrote the eighteenth-century anti-federalist writing under the pseudonym Brutus, 'of a free republic, any thing like the extent of the United States.' Once Rome and other ancient republics grew too large, they had become 'the most tyrannical that ever existed in the world.'[23]

Greece and Rome thus entered the early American imagination in the form of minatory lessons regarding the consequences of international anarchy and universal empire. Greece had destroyed itself by falling

victim to the forces of disintegration and anarchy; Rome had corrupted itself through territorial expansion and military conquest. 'Greece,' as one senator expressed the prevailing consensus, 'was destroyed by division, and Rome by consolidation.' He urged America to 'profit by their example; lest, in our zeal to perform what we cannot accomplish, we one day become what Greece and Rome now are.'[24] Americans had profited by their example by constructing a federal union that was to combine the advantages of a wide-ranging empire, one that ensured peace and order over an extended territory, with the liberty and independence of the small republic. Jefferson's reference to an 'empire of liberty' reflected this search for a form of government that would represent an elaborate counterpoise between the forces of decentralization and those of centralization, or anarchy and empire.

That elaborate construction, of course, proved impossible to maintain, and the American Civil War brought the realization of Jefferson's fear, expressed in 1821, that the United States, sundered between North and South, would see a revival of the Athenian and Lacedemonian confederacies, which would then 'wage another Peloponnesian war to settle the ascendancy between them.'[25] The ideological categories that informed the debate over federal union, however, did not disappear; indeed, they were given renewed expression in the debates over American foreign policy in the twentieth century. Like the American experiment in federal union, twentieth-century internationalism reflected the search for a middle path between the odious alternatives of international anarchy and universal empire. In the Atlantic community that emerged after the Second World War, such internationalism received its fullest expression. America was to lead in the creation of an international order that would frustrate bids for global domination by hostile totalitarians while at the same time suppressing the tendency towards international anarchy inherent in any system of sovereign states. The United States sought the creation of a preponderant power that would aggregate the forces of the 'peace-loving' nations into a system of collective security; and it believed that this power had to be expressed through international institutions that it would play a central role in creating. A peaceful world ordered by law, one in which offensive uses of force were categorically forbidden, was at the core of this scheme. This would represent an advance on the anarchical European system, one that in the American estimation had brought civilization very nearly to the brink of extinction in the course of two horrific world wars. In crucial respects this vision represented the rearticulation of

ideals deeply embedded in the original conception of federal union, now to be instantiated on a planetary scale.

This was a grand and noble conception, capable of eliciting admiration and loyalty from others. It is only against the backdrop of this conception that one can appreciate the astonishment and near horror with which the world greeted the Bush Doctrine. For the United States, at the moment of its greatest power, to abandon the idea that power needs restraint amounted to an admission that its past declarations of fidelity to international law and international institutions had been a sort of mask disguising deeper impulses towards aggrandizement. America's allies began to think if not act in the fashion of the Mytileneans, who, as they contemplated their revolt from Athens, insisted that 'we did not become allies of the Athenians for the subjugation of the Hellenes, but allies of the Hellenes for their liberation from the Mede.'[26]

If an essential task of statecraft is to somehow realize the advantages of both empire and liberty without falling victim to either oppression or anarchy, it follows that empire – understood as the construction of a system ensuring peace and order over an extensive territory and a variety of peoples – is capable of providing essential public goods. Gibbon pronounced the experience of Rome in the Augustan age as the happiest period in the history of mankind. It was reserved for Augustus, said Gibbon, 'to relinquish the ambitious design of subduing the whole earth, and to introduce a spirit of moderation into the public councils.' Rome, Augustus appreciated, 'had much less to hope than to fear from the chance of arms.' In the prosecution of remote wars, 'the undertaking became every day more difficult, the event more doubtful, and the possession more precarious and less beneficial.'[27] Augustan Rome's determination to 'neither endure nor to offer an injury' must surely command admiration, as must the state of peace that resulted from this policy. But whether empire actually achieves this state of happy felicity is a contingent question. When perpetual peace is sought through perpetual war, this pleasing scene vanishes, and we are left to consider empire in its more natural and less agreeable state.

The Roman experience must also draw alarm by virtue of the relationship it shows between external aggrandizement and internal transformation – or, put differently, the effect that acquiring an empire abroad has on the empire's home.[28] That effect, perhaps more than any other, has been the one that American critics have fastened on in objecting to empire. Whatever we call the vast conglomeration of extended commitments undertaken by the United States, it is reasonable to ask what sort

of effect they have had on America's domestic institutions. The classical experience suggests that they should have the effect of increasing executive power, of creating an 'imperial presidency,' and that in large measure is what has happened in the United States. It is impossible to understand the growth of presidential power in America without reference to the expansion of America's overseas commitments. So when President Eisenhower warned in his Farewell Address of the emergence of a military-industrial complex and insisted that the danger of the misuse of this power 'exists and would persist,' he was expressing a danger familiar to students of Roman history. John Calhoun identified the essential process at work in his speech opposing the acquisition of all Mexico: 'There is not an example on record of any free state holding a province of the same extent and population, without disastrous consequences. The nations conquered and held as a province, have, in time, retaliated by destroying the liberty of their conquerors, through the corrupting effect of extended patronage and irresponsible power.' It was said of Calhoun that 'it was easy to fancy, when you heard him, that you were listening to an oration from the lips of a Roman senator, who had formed his style in the severe schools of Greece.' Never more so than on this occasion. 'When the Roman power,' Calhoun warned, 'passed beyond the limits of Italy, crossed the Adriatic, the Mediterranean, and the Alps, liberty fell prostrate; the Roman people became a rabble; corruption penetrated every department of the Government; violence and anarchy ruled the day, and military despotism closed the scene.'[29]

A further illustration of this effect comes from the French analyst Emmanuel Todd, who compares the expansion of the United States after the end of the Cold War with the expansion of Rome into the Mediterranean after the defeat of Carthage: '[Rome] collected taxes or tribute throughout its empire and was able to transfer to the central capital massive quantities of foodstuffs and manufactured items. The peasants and the artisans of Italy saw their economic base disappear as this Mediterranean economy was globalized by the political domination of Rome. The society was polarized between, on the one hand, a mass of economically useless plebeians and, on the other, a predatory plutocracy ... The middle classes collapsed.'[30]

This is a disturbing parallel because globalization has undoubtedly increased returns on capital while forcing labour to compete with low-wage workers abroad, heightening the stratification of American society. That development, in turn, cannot fail to impair the republican character of America's domestic institutions, which have always been

seen to rest upon the existence of a strong and vibrant middle class. For reasons not unlike those witnessed in Roman times, that middle class is becoming increasingly eviscerated.

These admonitions from Roman history suggest that the widespread evocation of America as a new Rome is to be received with decided ambivalence. For the Roman experience suggests that empire threatens the republic and that it may do so even if republican institutional forms continue in place – a phenomenon conveyed in Gibbon's description of Rome under Augustus as an 'absolute monarchy disguised by the forms of a commonwealth.' If, at its best, empire provides the basis for peace and order over expansive territories, uniting in a single system peoples who might otherwise be at one another's throats, at its worst it is a destroyer of republics and a breeder of desolation in the zones of violence that exist on its periphery. It makes an anarchy and calls it peace.[31] In early America, the experience of ancient Greece in the time of the Peloponnesian Wars had relevance because it suggested the vital necessity for union among the now independent American states. In the absence of union, the historical record suggested, America would fall prey to foreign ambition and conquest. That is a lesson not without relevance for our own day; for the internal division of Western civilization, especially if it were to lead to a fundamental split between Europe and America, does suggest an ominous future. But it is not that aspect of ancient history which excites the modern American imagination so much as the parallel between America and Athens. Athens secured its stature in the international system by virtue of its heroic victory over the Persian invader; it then established itself as the hegemonic leader of the Delian League – a sort of North Aegean Treaty Organization. Athens declared, as Americans have done, that by virtue of its power 'men in all places ... who either fear or plan aggression, from the near prospect before them, in the one case, of obtaining our intervention in their favor, in the other, of our arrival making the venture dangerous, find themselves constrained, respectively, to be moderate against their will, and to be preserved without effort of their own.'[32] With its rich cultural life and democratic institutions, Athens was the 'school of Hellas,' as Pericles said.[33] Of all the states of the ancient Greek world, it was Athens that most approximated modern ideas of liberty.[34] It was 'more like us' than any of the others, so the question arises: Are we on a similar path?

America, like Athens, established its legitimacy in the international system by virtue of heroic victories over despotic powers. Since then its conduct has suggested a shift – especially from the perspective of its

allies – from hegemonic leadership towards oppressive empire. At the very least, the Iraq War bears an uncomfortable resemblance to the ill-fated Sicilian expedition. Greed for resources,[35] underestimation of the enemy,[36] credulity before the tall tales of exiles 'whose interest it is to lie as well as they can,'[37] and divided counsels at home[38] were all part the story Thucydides related. After Iraq, we may easily recognize the truth of the observation that 'it is a common mistake in going to war to begin at the wrong end, to act first, and wait for disaster to discuss the matter.'[39] After Iraq we better understand the psychological appeal of the Athenians' complaint that they were subject to a double standard on the part of their allies, who unfairly held Athens to a legal standard that they did not apply to other imperial powers. Perhaps, say the Athenians, we would have done better 'if we had from the first cast law aside and openly gratified our covetousness.'[40] It is well that Thucydides wrote his book as a possession for all time, for our time has much to ponder as it reflects on the similarities between these two imperial powers and the misbegotten enterprises on which they waste their substance.

The lessons that Thucydides sought to convey in his great work are not immediately apparent and have of course been the subject of prolonged controversy. The conventional view sees him as a 'hard realist' and assumes that the speech delivered by the Athenian generals to the Melians reflected the sort of tough-minded view that was appropriate to the combatants in a life-and-death struggle.[41] 'The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.'[42] So say the Athenian generals. Yet there is little reason to assume that this view represents Thucydides' own, and much reason to think that it does not. The fact that the dialogue occurs at the end of book 5 and that book 6 opens with a consideration of the Sicilian expedition suggests a placement intended for dramatic effect, for much of what the Athenians dismiss as folly when it comes from the mouths of the Melians (we shall be saved by the gods, especially) they find themselves invoking as the Sicilian expedition turns disastrous. The reversal of fortune the Athenians experience looks suspiciously like a case of 'imperial comeuppance.'[43]

Instead of identifying Thucydides with one perspective in the eternal debate between power and justice, we might read him as saying instead that this argument between power and justice is a central and unending feature of political life and that one cannot make sense of statecraft without attending to both.[44] Certainly Thucydides recognizes that the love of power is deeply rooted in man, for in his depiction of the revolution in Corcyra he identifies that urge with the sheer anarchy of the moral life that develops as a consequence of the battles between oligarchs and

democrats throughout the Greek world.[45] There can, however, be no mistaking the horror with which he views this degeneration, which he treats as the political equivalent of the plague that ravaged Athens in the second year of the war.[46] There can also be no mistaking his negative portrait of Cleon, 'the most violent man in Athens,' who urges the slaughter of the Mytileneans for their revolt against the imperial city. That Cleon calls for justice in the course of his argument shows that the appeal to justice is as capable of abuse as the appeal to power. Neither appeal can be dispensed with, as both are fundamental and point to enduring features of political life, but both by the same token may be abused.

Thucydides' view of the Athenian Empire is more difficult to make out. It would not be implausible to identify his outlook with that of Pericles, who insisted that though it may have been wrong to take the empire, it would be dangerous to let it go.[47] Thucydides' judgement of Pericles and of the strategy he recommended for prosecuting the war is a favourable one. In peace, says Thucydides, Pericles pursued a 'moderate and conservative policy' and rightly gauged the power of his country at the outbreak of the war. 'He told them to wait quietly, to attempt no new conquests, and to expose the city to no hazards during the war, and doing this, promised them a favorable result.'[48] It may convey a lesson for the present day that the Athenian *demos* proved incapable of pursuing this restrained policy but instead did the very contrary. The temptations of inordinate power proved altogether too compelling.

At the end of the day, we do not know what the ancients would have thought of the American empire, such as it is. After recovering from the shock of learning that there were such things as jet airplanes, nuclear weapons, electricity, motion pictures, and the Internet, they would no doubt marvel at the amazing constancy of moral life over the millennia. To enter the world of Thucydides' speeches is to enter our own world as well, and we find in those dialogues the same appeals, subterfuges, rhetorical tricks, self-delusions, and deep convictions that mark the ideological combat of the present day. We have our cautious generals (like Nicias), our unsentimental but humane realists (like Diodotus), and our raving ideologues (like Cleon) who are lost to the last insanities of unforgiving passion. We even have our imperial position in Iraq, which was certainly wrong to take but would undoubtedly be dangerous to let go.[49] That from these unhealthy ingredients we are going to make a good meal I sincerely doubt, but we would do well to remember, in the heat of our battles, all those things that the democrats and the oligarchs of ancient Greece forgot

in prosecuting their hatreds. 'Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal supporter, prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question incapacity to act on any. Frantic violence became the attribute of manliness; cautious plotting a justifiable means of self-defense.'[50]

NOTES

1 See especially Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, *Athens on Trial: The Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); and J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion, vol. 3, The First Decline and Fall* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
2 Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan, 2004), 3.
3 Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 244.
4 Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 2.
5 An exception to this rule was George Liska, *Imperial America: The International Politics of Primacy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967).
6 Jonathan Schell, 'Tomgram: Jonathan Schell on the Empire That Fell as It Rose.' Accessed 19 August 2004 at http://www.tomdispatch.com/index.mhtml?pid=1691
7 Philip Zelikow, 'The Transformation of National Security: Five Redefinitions,' *National Interest* 71 (Spring 2003): 18–19.
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10 Ronald Steel, 'Totem and Taboo,' *The Nation*, 2 September 2004.
11 Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton, *The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500-2000* (New York: Viking, 2005).
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13 Cited in John Judis, *The Folly of Empire: What George W. Bush Could Learn from Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 41–2.
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15 Gregg Easterbrook, cited in Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1.
16 Charles Krauthammer, 'Universal Dominion,' in *America's Purpose: New Visions of U.S. Foreign Policy*, ed. Owen Harries (San Francisco: ICS, 1991), 13.
17 Frederick Gentz, *On the State of Europe Before and After the French Revolution* (London: Hatchard, 1802).
18 Mortimer N.S. Sellers, *American Republicanism: Roman Ideology in the United States Constitution* (New York: NYU Press, 1994), 6.
19 Fisher Ames, 'A Sketch of the Character of Alexander Hamilton,' in *The Works of Fisher Ames*, vol. 2, ed. Seth Ames (Boston: Little, Brown, 1854), 263.
20 Alexander Hamilton, 'Federalist no. 9,' in *The Federalist*, ed. Jacob E. Cooke (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), 50.
21 Alexander Hamilton, *Continentalist* no. 1, 12 July 1781, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold S. Syrett and Jacob E. Cooke (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), vol. 1, 651–2. In describing the movement towards the Philadelphia Convention, Jefferson noted that, were the American states to be 'sovereign and independent in all things, [these] separate independencies, like the petty States of Greece, would be eternally at war with each other, & would become at length the mere partisans & satellites of the leading powers of Europe. All then must have looked forward to some further bond of union, which would ensure internal peace, and a political system of our own, independent of that of Europe.' 'The Anas. 1791-1806,' 4 February 1818, in Merrill Peterson, ed., *Jefferson Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 663. The Founders, in the later summary of Rufus Choate, discerned 'perfectly that unless the doom of man was to be reserved for them, there was no alternative but to become dearest friends or bitterest enemies, – so much Thucydides and the historians of the beautiful and miserable Italian republics of the Middle Age had taught them.' See 'On the Preservation of the Union,' in *The Works of Rufus Choate*, ed. Samuel Gilman Brown (Boston: Little, Brown, 1862), vol. 2, 323.
22 John Witherspoon's Speech in Congress, in *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774–1789*, vol. 4, ed. Paul H. Smith (Washington: 1976–81), 585; David Hume, 'That Politics May be Reduced to a Science,' in *Essays and Treatise on several subjects* (printed for J. Jones, 1822), 14.
23 Brutus and other writers are cited in Sellers, *American Republicanism*, 156.
24 *Annals of Congress*, 16th Congress, 1st Session, Senate, 1 February 1820.
25 Jefferson to John Adams, 22 January 1821, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, ed. Lester J. Cappon (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 570.

26 Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.10.3. Cf. also 6.76.4.
27 Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. Henry Hart Milman (New York: Peter Fenelon Collier, 1900), vol. 1, 18.
28 This distinction is explored in Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
29 John C. Calhoun, 'Speech on Mexican Cession,' in *The Works of John C. Calhoun*, ed. Richard Crallé (New York: Appleton & Co., 1861), vol. 4, 411–12.
30 Emmanuel Todd, *After the Empire: The Breakdown of American Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 62.
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33 Ibid., 2.41.1.
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35 Thucydides, *History*, 6.24.
36 Ibid., 6.17.
37 Ibid., 6.12. Cf. 6.46.
38 Ibid., 2.65.
39 Ibid., 1.78.3. Cf. 6.24.4.
40 Ibid., 1.76.4 & 1.77.
41 See, for example, Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic, 1977).
42 Thucydides, *History*, 5.89.
43 Ibid., 5.104, 7.77.3–4. See further Daniel Mendelsohn, 'Theaters of War,' *The New Yorker*, 12 January 2004.
44 See the revealing discussion in Thomas Pangle and Peter Ahrensdorf, *Justice among Nation: On the Moral Basis of Power and Peace* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999).
45 Thucydides, *History*, 3.82.8.
46 Ibid. Cf. 3.82–4 with 2.53.
47 Ibid., 2.63.2.
48 Ibid., 2.65.5–7.
49 Cf. ibid., 2.63.2.
50 Ibid., 3.82.4.