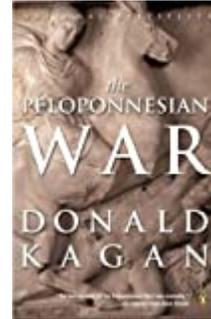




**Donald Kagan.** *The Peloponnesian War.* New York: Penguin Books, 2003. xxvii + 494 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-14-200437-1.



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## Inhuman Perfection

All human beings are imperfect, of course, but some attain near perfection in a particular endeavor. Thucydides, the Athenian general who wrote the history of the long war between Athens and Sparta, was such an individual. His approach to the writing of history is still the standard to which later writers aspire. Although his careful recounting of facts and astute analysis is indeed open to criticism or questioning in places, no modern historian would be insulted to be compared to him.

Donald Kagan, who has spent a good part of his adult life studying Thucydides, can be favorably compared to the ancient master. This book is as near a perfect recounting of the Peloponnesian War for a modern audience as can be had. It is derived from and is, in some sense, a summary of his masterful four volume scholarly treatment of the subject.[1] It also benefits from Kagan's more recent comparative study of wars in *The Origins of War* (1995), where he analyzes the similarities in the Peloponnesian War, World War I, the Second Punic War, World War II, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Obviously, Kagan is a historian without adjective, as well as an accomplished ancient historian.

Thucydides presents considerable difficulties for the modern reader. The first problem, especially for younger readers, is his formal and rhetorical writing style. Many a student has complained to me, "but his sentences are so long!" To which my initial riposte is "you ought to try him in the original Greek! The translator has broken most of them up for you!" Thucydides must be read more slowly and carefully than is the modern custom. His original audience was quite familiar with long, detailed argument.

The second and larger difficulty is the nature of the subject itself, which admits of no easy solution. The war broke out after several years of protracted threats, counter-threats, and diplomatic efforts to avoid it; it lasted for twenty-seven years, and a lot can happen in nearly three decades. Both Athens and Sparta were leaders of large alliances: the total number of allies on each side is not known, but there were at least thirty or forty Spartan allies and probably several hundred Athenian subjects/allies. Each of these had their own interests; some within each alliance did not like each other very much and were constantly seeking advantage over their

greater and lesser opponents. And some changed sides, or were encouraged to do so often. In addition, each city in this large cast of characters had two or more political factions within it which had different goals with regard to the war and against each other internally. Also, over the course of thirty years, the individuals in prominent positions in each city changed many times. It is complicated. In short, this is not a story which can be read quickly in one sitting, no matter who is writing it.

In this book, Kagan essentially has paraphrased and rewritten Thucydides, with commentary. The commentary is extremely valuable, and flows seamlessly with the narrative. He explicates parts of the story where Thucydides is terse, and he asks questions and provides analysis where appropriate. He is willing to make judgments, cautiously and fairly. It will be useful to quote from the preface of the fourth volume of his scholarly treatment of the subject: “no one who aims to write a history rather than a chronicle can avoid discussing what might have happened; ... historians interpret what they recount, that is, they make judgments about it. There is no way that the historian can judge that one action or policy was wise or foolish without saying, or implying, that it was better or worse than some other that might have been employed, which is, after all, ‘counterfactual history’.... I believe that there are important advantages in such explicitness: it puts the reader on notice that the statement in question is a judgment, an interpretation, rather than a fact, and ... [it makes] clear that what really occurred was not the inevitable outcome of superhuman forces but the result of decisions by human beings and suggesting that both the decisions and their outcomes could well have been different” (p. x).

Kagan tells the story chronologically; it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The book is divided into thirty-seven chapters, organized into seven parts. Coincidentally, the text of Thucydides is divided into eight books, with the last incomplete, but the division here is not exactly according to the books (scrolls) of Thucydides’ work. The treatment is thorough: the political, diplomatic, military, economic and social aspects of the war are all discussed, often in considerable detail. There are twenty-nine maps which are, for the most part, excellent and absolutely essential for most readers. The reader would be well advised to consult the maps carefully and often.

In his analysis of causes and motives, Kagan is not afraid to disagree with Thucydides, who rather admires

Nicias most of the time (Kagan is less impressed) and despises Cleon (who is somewhat rehabilitated by Kagan). We all like to play Monday morning quarterback or arm-chair general, to announce what they should have done (with hindsight which is 20/20) and Kagan is no exception; moreover, he does a very good job of it. Political and military strategy and tactics are critiqued thoroughly, to good effect, although the reader may not agree with all analyses. This is the value of a little judicious counterfactual history: what else could they have done? And why did they not? His dissection of the Sicilian Expedition is masterful, and the narration of the final disaster emotionally spellbinding.

There are a few imperfections. The maps do not include all that a reader might wish. The south Italian city of Sybaris is discussed in connection with the pre-war founding of the city of Thurii by the Athenians (p. 20). One can find Thurii on several maps, but not Sybaris (it was near Croton before it was destroyed). Map 19 elucidates the battle of Mantinea in 418, which is discussed at some length (p. 231). The map has seven boxes labeled *katavothra* and the word is nowhere translated or defined. It is a sinkhole. Although there is a four-page discussion of sources at the end, which mentions some modern works, there is no bibliography as such; the reader is referred to Kagan’s four-volume scholarly work for a full bibliography.

This book is written for the layman and can be read by non-experts, although it remains necessarily a complicated subject. It is extremely well written, even exciting in places, and as the author promised in the introduction, “a powerful tale”: “the story of the Peloponnesian War is a powerful tale that may be read as an extraordinary human tragedy, recounting the rise and fall of a great empire, the clash between two very different societies and ways of life, the interplay of intelligence and chance in human affairs, and the role of brilliantly gifted individuals as well as masses of people in determining the course of events while subject to the limitations imposed on them by nature, by fortune, and by one another” (p. xxvii).

#### Note

[1]. Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969); *The Archidamian War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974); *The Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981); and *The Fall of the Athenian Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

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