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Victor D. Hanson, *A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War*. New York: Random House, 2005. Pp. xviii, 397. ISBN 1400060958.

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There are two Victor Hansons, both prolific: (A) the distinguished historian of Greek warfare and (B) the hard-right political pundit widely known in print and internet publications.<sup>1</sup> Hanson A is the author of three or four major works<sup>2</sup> in the past couple decades that have had a strong and salutary influence on ancient military history. Hanson B, a darling of the neocons, habitually and facilely extrapolates “lessons” from ancient social, political, and military conditions to instruct or berate his readers about the “realities” of the western way of war as it is (or ought to be) prosecuted these days. Happily, Hanson A wrote the book reviewed here.

In *A War Like No Other*, Hanson attempts to write a history of the Peloponnesian War like no other and succeeds admirably. Eschewing a conventional (since Thucydides himself) chronologically consecutive narrative,<sup>3</sup> he adopts a thematic approach to his subject, like a photographer aiming his camera at the same landscape,<sup>4</sup> but attaching a succession of lens-filters that throw particular features or contours into stronger relief. He does nonetheless manage to convey the causal links in the flow of events and give the reader a good sense of the progression of the whole war. An overarching concern, as in most of his other work, is to recreate, in Gerald Linderman’s phrase,<sup>5</sup> the world within war, to see things from the perspective of the war’s actual participants: the infantryman and skirmishers, the cavalymen, the sailors and marines, the besiegers and the besieged, the terrorists and the terrorized: “my aim ... is to flesh out this three-decade fight of some twenty-four hundred years

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., the articles gathered at his website, *Private Papers* <<http://www.victorhanson.com>>. Latterly, Hanson, a senior fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution, has attempted to expand his range of expertise beyond the classical period in volumes marred by superficial comparisons of wars ancient and modern: see, on his *Culture and Carnage: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (NY: Doubleday, 2001), Robert Citino, “Military Histories Old and New: A Reintroduction,” forthcoming in the *American Historical Review*.

<sup>2</sup> See esp. *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: U California Pr, 1998; orig. 1988), *Warfare and Agriculture in Classical Greece*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: U California Pr, 1998; orig. 1983), *The Other Greeks: The Family Farm and the Agrarian Roots of Western Civilization* (1995; rpt. Berkeley: U California Pr, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Excellent modern accounts of the war in the conventional manner are readily available, as Hanson notes, including “fine narratives in English by George Grote, George Grundy, B.W. Henderson, Donald Kagan, John Lazenby, Anton Powell, Geoffrey de Ste. Croix, and others” (xiv).

<sup>4</sup> The “landscape” in this case is the extant body of source material: principally, besides Thucydides, Xenophon, *Hellenica*, and Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, the latter used to especially good effect by Hanson. Besides these major sources, available to scholars from the Renaissance onward, papyrology and epigraphy have made valuable additions to the record in the past century and a half: e.g., the *Constitution of the Athenians*, by an anonymous author traditionally dubbed The Old Oligarch; the fragmentary work of the “Oxyrhynchus Historian”; and the *Athenian Tribute Quota Lists*.

<sup>5</sup> Gerald F. Linderman, *The World within War: America’s Combat Experience in World War II* (NY: Free Press, 1997).

past as something very human and thus to allow the war to become more than a far-off struggle of a distant age” (xiv).

Thucydides’ history invites the reader to look both to the past and to the future. The title of Hanson’s book is Thucydides’ own characterization of the Peloponnesian War (I.23.1). The extended digression known as the “Archaeology” in Book I of Thucydides reviews major conflicts of the past in order to highlight the unprecedented scale and scope of his subject. But the Athenian historian also conjures up the future by calling his work “a possession for all time”—one that will enable its readers in after times to anticipate similarities in the cause, course, and outcome of war, given the persistent tendencies of human nature. Thus, as one historian has recently put it, “It is not surprising that in later times scholars and others have often looked at the Peloponnesian War as a paradigm of later wars and to Thucydides’ work for its lessons and parallels.”<sup>6</sup>

Hanson’s first chapter, “Fear: Why Sparta Fought Athens (480–431),” includes a section entitled “Athens as America,” in which he observes that

Our leaders and pundits are eager to learn from the Athenians’ mistakes and successes. They are unsure whether the fate of Athens is to be our own, or whether Americans can yet match the Athenians’ civilization and influence while avoiding their hubris. Perhaps never has the Peloponnesian War been more relevant to Americans than to us of the present age. (9)

This statement is not, however, a harbinger of things to come in *A War Like No Other*. As will be seen, the book bristles with parallels drawn between ancient and modern wars,<sup>7</sup> but the present conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are not among the comparison points. Instead we are left to draw our own conclusions.<sup>8</sup>

The “fear” in the chapter title is in part the one famously designated by Thucydides as the “truest cause” of the War: the growing Spartan fear of growing Athenian power over the fifty-year interval between the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars, the so-called “pentekontaetia.” Hanson stresses another potent stimulant of apprehension in the ultra-oligarchic Spartans: namely, the Athenians’ aggressive propagation of democratic institutions within the city-states they controlled or sought to control in the Greek world. The chapter concludes with a three-and-half-page synopsis of the war “that gives the reader a political and strategic context to the sometimes-confusing experience of battle that follows” (31).

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<sup>6</sup> Perez Zagorin, *Thucydides: An Introduction for the Common Reader* (Princeton: PUP, 2005) 2. See, e.g., Gilbert Murray, *Our Great War and the Great War of the Ancient Greeks* (NY: Seltzer, 1920) or D. McCann and Barry Strauss, eds., *War and Democracy: A Comparative Study of the Korean War and the Peloponnesian War* (NY: East Gate, 2001); and for many other examples, Richard N. Leblow and Barry Strauss, eds., *Hegemonic Rivalry from Thucydides to the Nuclear Age* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Hanson makes over 150 comparisons of persons and particulars of the Peloponnesian War to those of later conflicts, including World War II (35x), World War I (16x), the Napoleonic wars (12x), and the American Civil War (11x). Some of these amount to shooting from the hip, e.g., Brasidas = Che Guevara; Plataea caught between larger powers = Armenia, Cuba, Taiwan, Tibet, and Poland. Others are both more adroit and more thought-provoking, e.g., Thracians (massacring schoolboys at Mycalessus) = Chechnyan terrorists; the Theban admiral Erianos (planning to reduce Attica to pasture land) = Henry Morgenthau.

<sup>8</sup> “Hanson B” is far less subtle: see the essays archived at *Private Papers* (n. 1, supra), where a graphic at the head of the webpage shows Hanson against a backdrop of the Parthenon juxtaposed against an image of Muslims burning an American flag.

In chapter 2, “Fire: The War against the Land (431–425),” Hanson describes the failure of Spartan efforts to provoke the Athenians into a one-throw-of-the-dice battle in defense of their rural homes, grain crops, vineyards, and orchards. On the advice of Pericles, the Athenians refused to take the bait and face an overwhelmingly superior Peloponnesian infantry force. This meant that the war would not be a quick one, on the lines of past conflicts efficiently and definitively settled by the clash of phalanxes for an hour or two according to what Hanson calls the “protocols” of hoplite warfare as Greek agrarian societies had conducted it for over two centuries. Nor were retaliatory, fleet-borne ravaging expeditions by the Athenians in the Megarid or the Peloponnesus any more effective. The Spartans were in for a much more protracted war than they had anticipated. As he does throughout this book, Hanson makes fascinating use of telling statistics, here to convey the proportions of the problem confronting Spartan ravagers:

The hide of permanent plants is tougher than men’s ... as the Peloponnesians quickly learned when they crossed into Attica in May 431. Attica possessed more individual olive trees and grapevines than classical Greece did inhabitants. Anywhere from five to ten million olive trees and even more vines dotted the one-thousand-square-mile landscape. The city’s thousands of acres of Attic grain fields were augmented by far more farmland throughout the Aegean, southern Russia, and Asia Minor, whose harvests were only a few weeks’ sea transport away from Athens. (35)

Chapter 3, “Disease: The Ravages of the Plague at Athens (430–426),” is a clear account of the terrible pestilence that afflicted Athenians holed up in the overcrowded space inside Athens and Peiraeus and the corridor of Long Walls connecting them. To suggest the scale of this public health disaster, simply in terms of military manpower, Hanson writes that “if 4,400 hoplite fatalities ‘in the ranks’ refers only to losses from the 13,000 citizens who were prepared to go into battle, then over a third of all such infantrymen were killed within four years. In relative terms, the plague turned out to be the Athenians’ ancient equivalent of a Somme or Stalingrad” (79). The disease killed somewhere between a quarter and a third of the entire population, perhaps 70,000–80,000 people (82). This was, as Hanson points out, a devastating loss to Athens right at the outset of the long war, worse by far than the disastrous Sicilian expedition to which Thucydides devotes nearly a quarter of his narrative.

Chapter 4, “Terror: War in the Shadows (431–421),” describes how the supersession of the old protocols of heavy infantry warfare led to less conventional and more vicious styles of conflict. It became clear during the first decade of the Peloponnesian War that provocative attacks on crops and property could no longer precipitate the climactic pitched battle the Spartans so desired.

The Athenians avoided battling Spartan infantrymen, while Peloponnesian ships were usually not willing to meet the Athenian navy in any major engagement. The stage was set for “asymmetrical,” “fourth-dimensional” or “postmodern” war.... Some pretty uncouth killers would now step out of the shadows of the Greek world to do what traditional generals and admirals could not. (89)

Hanson identifies these “uncouth killers” as the light-armed warriors—peltasts, archers, slingers, javelin men—who grew in numbers and importance throughout the war, beginning with their decisive role in forcing the shocking Spartan surrender at Sphacteria. Despite their effectiveness, such irregulars, because they operated outside the old ethos of heavy-infantry combat, were looked on with disdain. Many were freed slaves, mercenaries, or “foreigners” like the Thracians who massacred the inhabitants of Mycalessus, including the children at a school for boys. “Unlike hoplites, ancient skirmishers, ... like modern insurgents, were more likely to target civilians, whether on Corcyra or in the small Boeotian hamlet of Mycalessus” (93). Thucydides’ personification of war as a “harsh teacher” was borne out in acts of “ethnic cleansing” and retaliation against recalcitrant allies. Hanson succeeds in illuminating the “atrocious combat in the shadows” (97) too often ignored by comparison with the major battles and sieges of the war.

Chapter 5, “Armor: Hoplite Pitched Battles (424–418),” following on from the previous chapter’s treatment of changing personnel types and styles of fighting, stresses the infrequency of major straight-up heavy-infantry clashes. In the twenty-seven years of the Peloponnesian War, only the battles of Delium in 424 and Mantinea in 418 conformed to some extent to the near ritualistic style of infantry fighting common within the agrarian culture of Greece over the preceding three centuries or so. To be sure, hoplites saw action in venues other than “regular battle,” as seaborne rapid deployment strike forces or providing cover for light-armed forces ravaging enemy crops or as marines aboard triremes. But for the most part, in the new conditions of warfare, “hoplites enjoyed a role similar to that of the majestic dreadnoughts of the First World War.... Highly prized and much touted even in their anachronism, such imposing ships could blast apart in minutes an entire fleet and thus change a war—and yet rarely got the chance to fight one. So it was too with a classical hoplite phalanx” (146). Even the two great pitched battles featured novel tactics, more diversified combatants in atypical formations, and the shrewd use of reserves, auguring things to come in the armies of Iphicrates, Epaminondas, Philip II, and Alexander. This chapter also contains extremely graphic descriptions of the horrors of hoplite battle—a strong point in all Hanson’s work on the combat experience in Greece.

Chapter 6, “Walls: Sieges (431–415),” is devoted to siege warfare, the frequency and duration of which were unprecedented in earlier Greek history. Many more lives were lost and much more property destroyed during the twenty-one sieges of the Peloponnesian War, against cities large (Potidaea, Athens, Syracuse) and small (Plataea, Melos). “With many more sieges than hoplite battles ... the practice of Greek warfare changed almost overnight. The inordinate wealth and manpower expended on sieges meant vicious reprisals against the citizens of captured cities: enslavement and executions en masse.” After a long litany of such actions against both soldiers and civilians, Hanson remarks that a better name for the war might be “Thirty Years of Slaughter” (191). Moreover, the besiegers often sustained heavier losses than defeated defenders.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In one of his more apt comparisons, Hanson notes that “throughout history attackers often paid the higher price. During the savage though unsuccessful siege of Malta in 1565, over 30,000 Ottomans perished, while killing only 7,000 of the defenders. At Vienna in 1683, the besieging Turks withdrew after suffering over 60,000 losses, twelve times the 5,000 deaths of the defending allied Christians. The Japanese took Port Arthur (1904–05) after a five-month siege, but only after suffering 90,000 dead and disabled from hunger, disease, and Russian fire—three

Chapter 7, “Horses: The Disaster at Sicily (415–413),” pinpoints lack of cavalry as the critical factor in Athenian failure. Had the invaders been better able to match the defenders in cavalry forces, they could more easily have secured links to possible allies on the island, protected foraging parties, and completed construction of siege works. But the Athenians had made two grievous and ultimately fatal strategic errors. First, the expedition’s planners had been wrong to think superiority in hoplites would make all the difference. Even Alcibiades, who, as an old cavalryman himself, should have known better, claimed that victory would be easily achieved because Syracuse and the other Sicilian states were deficient in infantry. “Yet almost immediately upon arrival, the Athenians discovered that their thousands of hoplites were mostly irrelevant for victory, and that they lacked the one resource—plentiful horsemen—that might have given the protection needed for a successful siege. There was little excuse other than hoplite chauvinism to account for such strategic naïveté” (208). At the conclusion of a dramatic thirty-page narrative of the Sicilian expedition, Hanson muses that “Gone ... was the parochial idea that aristocratic knights were to remain prancers on the flanks of the phalanx rather than packs of mounted killers who, if not met by like kind, could limit the operations of even the largest forces—and alter the very course of sieges and naval engagements” (232).

Chapters 8, “Ships: The War at Sea (431–404),” and 9, “Climax: Trireme Fighting in the Aegean (411–405),” both treat the nearly non-stop operations and clashes of navies. Chapter 8 parses the naval war at both the high level of the strategic and economic considerations of conducting wars at sea, and the more down to earth, or down to sea, level of the design, construction, speed, maneuverability, and tactics of battleships. Hanson again makes good on his promise to highlight the circumstances of the war’s actual participants, here those who manned the ships, as he had already done for the hoplites in the bloody-awful atom-smashing collisions of heavy infantry. Here, for example, he vividly recreates the painful conditions endured by the thalamites, the triremes’ lowest tier of rowers:

These poor crewmen rowed from deep in the hold (*thalamos*), crammed in a scant eighteen inches above the water.... Seawater always splashed in ... and bilge water also seeped through the planking near their feet. Sailors were probably soaked on and off throughout the entire voyage. As a rower pulled and leaned back and then pushed forward, his rear scooted to and fro along the bench, explaining why seamen considered seat cushions as important as good oars—and why rump blisters were a common complaint.

Because of the crossbeams and the other seamen rowing directly above their heads, the thalamites could see almost nothing. The sweat from the two superior banks of rowers—the posteriors of the seamen above were more or less in the thalamites’ faces—drenched them as well.... Aristophanes joked that the thalamites were often farted upon and even showered with excrement from the straining oarsmen above .... Sweat, thirst, blisters, exhaustion, urine, feces—all this was in addition to the billows of the sea and the iron of the enemy. (237–38)

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times the casualties of the defeated Russian garrison. For all the misery of being inside a trapped city, it was sometimes worse to be exposed outside without permanent shelter, secure walls, and stockpiled food” (195).

This chapter shows a close familiarity with recent research into trireme warfare, including the trial runs, since 1987, of the joint British-Greek reconstructed trireme, the *Olympias*.<sup>10</sup>

Chapter 9, focuses on the intensification of naval warfare in the period after the Sicilian expedition. In these years, the Athenians were fighting for their lives as the clamp closed on the crucial grain-supply lifeline that ran from the Crimean Peninsula through the Hellespont bottleneck. The Peloponnesians had by now acquired a fleet to match the Athenians', largely thanks to funding from the Persians. As both sides sustained heavy losses, they resorted to freeing slaves to man ships and hiring mercenaries, often away from each other. The mayhem at sea was appalling, rivaling even the horrific losses at Syracuse. In land battles, casualties, even on the side of the defeated, rarely ran higher than 15%. (At Delium, the Athenians lost 1000 of 7000 hoplites.) In big sea battles, because many more men participated (200 per ship) and death by drowning or being speared like fish was very common, casualties ran much higher. In three battles (Cynossema, Cyzicus, and Aegospotami) fought within a sixty-mile radius in the Hellespont and Propontis, the two sides lost some 50,000 men killed, missing, or taken captive. The Spartans and their allies, in the five years up to their defeat at the battle of the Arginusae Islands, lost 250 battleships and some 50,000 rowers and marines. For their part, the Athenians lost more men at the climactic battle of Aegospotami in 405 than they did during the battles of Delium and Mantinea. This marshalling of dramatic statistics is a (maybe *the*) distinctive strength of Hanson's book.<sup>11</sup>

Chapter 10, "Ruin? Winners and Losers (404-403)," begins with a question: "Was Athens—or Greece itself—destroyed by the war?" (289) The answer is both yes and no. Hanson cautions against seeing an artificial division between a glorious fifth century and a fourth century of lesser achievement in the aftermath of a civil war that crippled all its participants. The basis of agrarian life at Athens had not been removed, and the city would rebuild its walls and its fleet. Cultural life, too, which had never ceased or waned, continued to thrive. But the scars of the war were long-lasting, in terms of property destroyed and lives lost. "To imagine in contemporary terms the effect on Attica of losing an aggregate third of the population, assume that the United States suffered not a little over 400,000 combat dead in World War II ... but rather over one hundred times that figure—or some 44 million killed in combat in the European and Japanese theaters" (296). In addition, the conception of war and how it ought to be conducted was altered forever.

The Peloponnesian War introduced into Western philosophy the comprehensive idea that war was not always noble or patriotic but often nonsensical, suicidal, and perhaps intrinsically wrong, especially when it lasted twenty-seven years, not a few hours on a summer day.... Fourth-century Greeks ... realized that the Peloponnesian War had been something uniquely awful in the Hellenic experience. It destroyed the idealism and spirit of Panhellenic unity that was so critical to the defense of Greece against the Persian invader. (308)

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<sup>10</sup> See J.S. Morrison, J.F. Coates, and N.B. Rankov, *The Athenian Trireme: The History and Reconstruction of an Ancient Greek Warship*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge U Pr, 2000) and the highly informative website of the Trireme Trust: <<http://www.atm.ox.ac.uk/rowing/trireme>>.

<sup>11</sup> With the caveat that ancient historians, including one so seemingly careful as Thucydides, give statistics that are likely rough estimates.

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*A War Like No Other* does not break new ground—that would be a lot to ask today of any account of a war that has been analyzed so thoroughly for so long, especially in the absence of any earthshaking new source material. Even as regards Hanson’s own contributions to the study of Greek military history—and they are considerable—there is nothing new here. And, too, some readers may miss the stronger sense of cause and effect that a more strictly chronological record of the war provides. In that regard, Kagan’s one-volume history<sup>12</sup> is a better choice if one were to read only one thing on the war. But I would advise those coming from a reading of Kagan or, better yet, Thucydides himself, to make Hanson’s acute, lively, reliable,<sup>13</sup> and eminently readable re-presentation of the Peloponnesian War their very next book to read.

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<sup>12</sup> Donald Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War* (NY: Viking, 2003), reviewed in *MWSR* 2005.06.01.

<sup>13</sup> There are, however, occasional erroneous or misleading statements in the book: Hanson equates 6500 talents to “about \$3 billion in contemporary value” (16–17)—\$40 billion would be a better estimate. The claim that Pericles “was at heart an admiral” who had not “even led a hoplite army into pitched battle” (20) prior to the Peloponnesian War is a little misleading, since he had fought with great distinction at Tanagra in 457 (Plutarch, *Pericles* 10.2), probably as an officer (he was by then a leading democratic official at Athens). Hanson calls the Peloponnesian army of ca. 60,000 that invaded Attica in 431 “far larger than any commanded later by either Philip or Alexander” (50), but Alexander’s initial force in Asia Minor in 334 was 65,000. On page 66, he describes the Athenians as building walls around Athens and the Peiraeus as well as the Long Walls “in a fevered state of anxiety” (66) during “postbellum tensions with the Spartans” (i.e., in 479–478: Thuc. 1.90), but the Long Walls were not built till the 450s (Thuc. 1.107.1). On the map on p. 95, Methone [*sic*, read Methone] appears to be an island. The calculation that 2000 talents would build 2000 triremes and fund their operation for six months (97) is incorrect; the number should be 286 triremes (cf. 116). Hanson says on p. 124 that Herodotus called the hoplite pitched battle “a silly and most absurd” way of fighting (Hdt. 7.9), but these are words attributed to the Persian Mardonius. The claim on p. 142 that it was only during the Peloponnesian War that “the Greeks first began to explore the dilemma of proper depth versus width” overlooks Miltiades’ tactics at the battle of Marathon in 490. To say (203) that in 416 “Athens had not been in an active battle with Sparta in six years” neglects Mantinea just two years earlier. It is incorrect to say, p. 246, that those who manned the Persian fleet at Salamis were “unused to the water,” since many were Phoenicians, among the best sailors in the ancient world. Aegospotami is not “a few miles” north of the Arginusae Islands (283)—more like 100. On p. 295, the death dates for Cleon and Lamachus should be 422 and 414, not 423 and 413 (correct dates in Appendix II). Finally, the Spartiate population in 371 was 1200, not 1500 (299).