

**A WAR LIKE NO OTHER: HOW THE ATHENIANS AND
SPARTANS FOUGHT THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR¹**

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*There is a commonality to war, it being entirely human, that transcends time and space.*³

Over 2,000 years ago, the sight of massed Greek phalanxes likely inspired fear in their enemies in the same manner massed tank armies do today. What are phalanxes and how did they operate as such an effective and fearful battlefield formation? While various news networks and the Internet provide the modern world up-to-the minute pictures and visualizations of warfare and its toll on society, ancient warfare was not documented in the same vivid manner. Here is where *A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War* provides twenty-first century readers an inside look at Greek life and some of the best available “pictures” of the Peloponnesian War.

A War Like No Other is a contemporary perspective of the war between Athens and Sparta that occurred between 431 and 404 B.C. Victor Davis Hanson⁴ provides a richly depicted history of a war that “is now 2,436 years in the past.”⁵ Hanson’s extensive research and analysis of ancient Greek culture, society, and military capabilities ultimately provides a two-fold insight: first, that this ancient war resulted in a tragedy of then-previously unheard of human and economic destruction;

¹ VICTOR DAVIS HANSON, *A WAR LIKE NO OTHER: HOW THE ATHENIANS AND SPARTANS FOUGHT THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR* (2005).

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³ See HANSON, *supra* note 1, at XVI.

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⁵ HANSON, *supra* note 1, at 3.

second, that war's impact on society was as devastating then as it is today.

Early on, Hanson asks why “this rather obscure ancient war between miniscule Athens and Sparta [is] still so alive, and used and abused in ways that other ancient conflicts, such as the Persian Wars (490[B.C.], 480–79[B.C.]) and Alexander the Great's conquests (334–323[B.C.]), are not . . .”⁶ Hanson points out that the Peloponnesian War was the “first great instance” where what he terms “Western powers”—the city-states of Athens and Sparta—“squared off in mutual destruction.”⁷

So Athens versus Sparta serves as a warning . . . of what can happen when the Western way of war is unleashed upon its own. In modern terms, the Peloponnesian War was more like World War I, rather than the Second World War—the issues that divided the two sides likewise more complex, the warring parties themselves not so easily identifiable as good or evil, and the shock of thousands killed similarly grotesquely novel and marking a complete break with past experience.⁸

While he discusses the nature of Greek warfare before the Peloponnesian War, Hanson does so only to illustrate that it was a ritualized, seasonal event⁹ lacking the barbarism and terror that became the Peloponnesian War's norm. Hanson's primary focus is explaining how both Athens and Sparta were required to change their tactics and operational goals in order to wage protracted, total warfare. For example, whereas wealthy citizens, as well-armed and armored infantry, had previously defended their city-states, twenty-seven years of warfare quickly eroded this practice.¹⁰ Both Athens and Sparta came to rely on light cavalry, siege warfare, and even mercenaries to overcome heavy-laden and outdated infantry battles on open terrain.¹¹

⁶ *Id.* at 5.

⁷ *Id.* at 12.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *See id.* at 19. The normal conditions of warfare existing before 431 B.C. consisted of “brutal battles of an hour or so defining war between reluctant farmers with harvest responsibilities at home.” *Id.*

¹⁰ *See id.* at 143 (“In general, like everything in the Peloponnesian War, twenty-seven years of fighting finally eroded the strict correlation between status and military service.”).

¹¹ *See id.* at 134.

While Hanson is a noted historian who has written extensively of late about the U.S. military and political involvement in Iraq,¹² he discusses only generally the political reasons for the Peloponnesian War. Instead, he states that his real aim is to “flesh out this three-decade fight of some twenty-four hundred years past as something very human and thus to allow the war to become more than a far off struggle of a distant age.”¹³ The challenge for Hanson is explaining the horrors of the Peloponnesian War in a manner that people can relate to in the same way photography and video capture the horrors of modern conflicts. Hanson generally succeeds in this endeavor by relating the nature of ancient Greek combat to modern readers through numerous examples from recent conflicts.¹⁴ The result is that Hanson clearly conveys that the war’s participants, and victims, were not so different from people living today.¹⁵

Although he raises the question as to why the Peloponnesian War is still studied more than most other conflicts, Hanson unfortunately provides only cursory explanations. He discusses, with limited analysis, how such a long struggle destroyed “entire families across generations”¹⁶ and how the war ultimately began at the height of Greece’s “Golden Age”¹⁷ and ended in its demise. While Hanson mentions that the war was “assumed to be the final arbitrator of the contrasting values”¹⁸ of Athens and Sparta, he only references the economic, social, and political aspects of each city state to set the conditions for what he is really trying to convey: that the prolonged war eroded each city’s ideology and changed the nature of Greek warfare itself.

¹² See, e.g., Victor Davis Hanson, *Battles Change, Wars Don't: From Ancient Greece to Modern Iraq, History Shows Us That Fear, Honor, and Self-Interest Drive Hostilities Between the States*, L.A. TIMES, Oct. 23, 2005, available at <http://www.victorhanson.com/articles/hanson/102305.html>.

¹³ HANSON, *supra* note 1, at 3–4.

¹⁴ See *id.* at 60 (comparing the moral quandary of fighting not between armies but rather soldiers against civilian property to both Sherman’s burning estates and ruining property during the American Civil War and also to the allied fire-bombing of Japan in World War II).

¹⁵ William Grimes, *The Brutal War That Broke a Democratic Superpower*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 11, 2005, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/11/books/11grim.html?_r=1&n=Top/Features/Books/Book%20Reviews&oref=slogin (“In [Hanson’s] capable hands, the past, more often than not, seems almost painfully present.”).

¹⁶ HANSON, *supra* note 1, at 5.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.* at 6.

Hanson explains that his intent is not to address or answer the strategic reasons for the war's campaigns,¹⁹ which often challenges the reader's ability to place the lessons of *A War Like No Other* in context. Instead, Hanson provides extensive details when explaining the intricacies of Greek warfare. Readers wanting to know how, rather than why, this brutal conflict was waged will feel right at home with *A War Like No Other's* intimate insight into the human toll the war exacted, its impact on Greek society, and its relationship to more recent conflicts such as World War I, the Vietnam War, and even the current Global War on Terror.²⁰

Hanson's primary source for *A War Like No Other* is Thucydides, who Hanson describes as "not just an abstract theorist but a chief player in the war he wrote about."²¹ Although Hanson references works from other Greek authors such as Xenophon,²² he terms Thucydides "our chief source of knowledge about the Peloponnesian War, . . . [who] offers up exemplary snapshots that ground his entire narrative in the human experience of killing."²³ Thucydides' personal experiences as an Athenian general and observations of participants from both sides of the war led him to document the conflict between the years 431 B.C. to 411 B.C.²⁴ in his narrative *The History of the Peloponnesian War*.²⁵ Without Thucydides, Hanson would have been challenged to find another source that would give him the same insight into, and understanding of, ancient Greek warfare. As a result, *A War Like No Other* reads like a contemporary retelling of Thucydides' narrative with numerous injections and explanations relating his observations and experiences to modern audiences.

As Hanson analyzes Thucydides' own involvement in the war, he attempts to provide some objectivity to Thucydides' observations and relate how Thucydides tried to understand the conflict from each belligerent's perspective. For example, while accounting for how Thucydides spent his years in exile following his battlefield loss at

¹⁹ See *id.* at xiv.

²⁰ See *id.* at 3–4.

²¹ *Id.* at 7.

²² See *id.* at 30, 322. Hanson notes that Xenophon's *Hellinica* continues Thucydides' narrative where it left off in 411 B.C. to the end of the war in 404–403 B.C.

²³ *Id.* at xv.

²⁴ See *id.* at 30.

²⁵ THUCYDIDES, *THE HISTORY OF THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR* (Rex Warner trans., Penguin Group, rev. ed. 1972) (411 B.C.). There are several translations of Thucydides' narrative dating back to 1505 A.D.; one of the most commonly referenced is cited here.

Amphipolis, the author explains that Thucydides was an “embedded reporter of sorts”²⁶ who interviewed soldiers from both sides of the conflict in order to provide a “balanced treatment”²⁷ in his history of the conflict. Hanson, however, admits that although Thucydides is “our chief source of knowledge about the Peloponnesian War,”²⁸ there is limited documentation from other observers or participants remaining to counter Thucydides’ wartime observations and analyses. Without other historical sources to confirm or counter Thucydides’ writings, one may ask whether Thucydides was really as balanced as Hanson leads readers to believe. However, Hanson does grant that Thucydides is a “brilliant philosopher who tried to impart to the often obscure events of the war a value that transcended his age.”²⁹ By comparing Thucydides’ description of the horrors of the Peloponnesian War to more contemporary conflicts, such as World War I, Vietnam, or Operation Iraqi Freedom, Hanson shows how Thucydides’ writing transcends the ancient conflict in which he observed and participated. Hanson ultimately applies Thucydides’ lessons to other conflicts, resulting in a detailed understanding of the Peloponnesian War’s brutality from either the Spartan or Athenian side.

Hanson’s descriptive writing style brings the sights, smells, and sounds of ancient warfare alive for modern readers accustomed to colorful mass-media images. Vivid descriptions of close-order Greek infantry formations (hoplite phalanxes) and combat, early unconventional warfare, use of light cavalry, siege warfare, sea engagements, and even disease provide readers fairly clear pictures of the war. He discusses early Greek military transformation from one fighting method (phalanxes of hoplites) to another (“combined arms” warfare that could “win theaters of conflict on the basis of military efficacy rather than traditional protocol”),³⁰ and even describes in detail how the fighting ships (triremes) were built and functioned. Modern Soldiers will easily relate to Hanson’s descriptions of how personal body armor, while necessary, was heavy and cumbersome.³¹ Hanson also describes in detail the role and importance of early cavalry, and the key role of terrain and obstacles in determining the outcome of battles—lessons that remain essential to battlefield success even today. The highlight is Hanson’s ability to relate his descriptions to modern conflicts and technology, ultimately translating

²⁶ See HANSON, *supra* note 1, at 7.

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.* at xvi.

²⁹ *Id.* at 7.

³⁰ *Id.* at 141.

³¹ *Id.* at 136–37.

ancient Greek means and methods of warfare into twenty-first century understanding.

Modern military lawyers will easily understand Hanson's examples of early rules of engagement, then-accepted laws of war, and violations of those laws on both land and sea.³² Hanson describes the "morality of waging exhaustive war,"³³ as it developed after Sparta's initial invasion in 431 B.C., as a "new and unsettling enterprise for Athens and Sparta, as both sides lacked accessible hard targets and thus soon sought to prevail through ruining civilian resources and attacking third parties."³⁴ As Hanson puts it, the Peloponnesian War resulted in "fighting [becoming] far more deadly, amorphous, and concerned with the ends rather than the ethical means."³⁵

The law of war lessons in *A War Like No Other* regarding war crimes, fratricide, and treatment of those wounded and killed in battle could easily be compared with recent experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq. Hanson provides a valuable example for today's military lawyers to review: even in victory, Greek commanders were not excused from following the then-understood rules for war. Hanson explains that "[d]rowning was considered the most nightmarish of deaths in Greek popular religion. It was the angst over that dreaded end of hundreds of their comrades that led the Athenians to put their own generals on trial after the victory at Arginusae in 406" when those generals did not act to save the drowning sailors.³⁶ As America's current conflicts are well into their fifth year, *A War Like No Other* reminds modern military attorneys that legal and moral issues in war are not limited to recent conflicts. The lessons of the Peloponnesian War remain relevant for study today.³⁷

³² See *id.* at 299–301 (specifically discussing in detail the laws and accepted protocols of combat existing at the time the war started and how they changed over the course of the conflict).

³³ *Id.* at 61.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.* at 301. Hanson cites to one of his earlier works as well as other authors for "an enormous bibliography of the earlier 'rules of war' and their violation during the Peloponnesian War"; however, he does not discuss these rules in any significant detail in *A War Like No Other*. *Id.* at 378.

³⁶ *Id.* at 247.

³⁷ See *id.* at 377. For example, in endnote 14 to Chapter 10, Hanson states that "[i]t is a general law that an escalation of violence and an erosion of restraint are in direct proportion to the length of a struggle."

A War Like No Other provides all readers, especially military readers intent on professional development, a rich opportunity to “learn about the distant past by evoking subsequent wars in which soldiers were often confronted with the same fears and motivations, their officers struggling likewise with age-old dilemmas of strategy, logistics, and tactics.”³⁸ Although the war occurred long ago, Hanson articulates well that “how” the war was fought should continue to be studied; the lessons learned from it are valuable resources for today’s Soldiers and leaders.

Hanson asks early on, as the nature of Greek warfare changed from massed formations on open fields to unconventional warfare, which side is the “most resourceful in an asymmetrical war when both sides either cannot or will not face each other in conventional battle”³⁹ While similar questions are currently being raised and studied with regard to the on-going conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, Hanson only relates Thucydides’ position, rather than expanding upon his own position: that human nature remains unchanging and questions such as this will continue for as long as there is warfare.⁴⁰ Readers will quickly understand that as the war persisted, tactics and strategy changed as resources, both personnel and materiel, became scarce. As a result, *A War Like No Other* provides an early glimpse of the same challenges nations and armies face today.⁴¹

In order to relate ancient battlefields to readers who will likely never visit them, Hanson does not simply rely on a 2,000 year-old description of the terrain to explain his points. Rather, he takes the time (and personal effort) to describe in detail several of the battlefields as they are today. This provides insight into places significant in the course of history that might otherwise only appear now as overgrown lots, hills, and valleys.⁴² He also provides quality detail of the terrain as viewed by

³⁸ *Id.* at xvi.

³⁹ *Id.* at 6.

⁴⁰ *See id.* at 20. Hanson notes that “thousands were to die on both sides because their leaders took them to war without a real plan of how to defeat the enemy on the battlefield and destroy its power.” *Id.* Although Hanson leaves this comment untouched, today’s military readers will recognize the significance of warfare waged by unprepared armies and leaders lacking clear military and political objectives costing lives on the battlefield.

⁴¹ *See, e.g.,* Hanson, *supra* note 12. Here, Hanson notes that while current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq have been deemed to include “asymmetrical warfare,” such a term is misplaced as terrorism, roadside executions, kidnappings, fear of disease, and biological attack were also prevalent during the Peloponnesian War. *Id.*

⁴² *See* HANSON, *supra* note 1, at 154. Describing the battlefield at Mantinea, Hanson notes that few tourists visit it today and that it basically is comprised of a few country

the Greeks themselves: flat fields for fighting, hills for flank defense, strategic routes and roads, and choke points.⁴³ However, despite all of his detailed descriptions and travel, the maps used throughout this book are overly simple. For example, by not providing detailed maps of unit placements when describing land and naval battles as they occurred during the war, Hanson leaves readers to imagine rather than clearly visualize what he is trying to explain, albeit descriptively. Adding several additional diagrams and more detailed maps would enhance the overall “picture” that Hanson endeavors to create in the first place.

In perhaps a most unique perspective of the Greek landscape, Hanson relies on his own experience as a farmer while trying to convey the challenges and hardships faced by the opposing armies. This is especially true when he explains how the Greek practice of ravaging the land and burning crops was not always successful. Hanson notes that the nature of the crops likely found throughout the region—olive trees, fruit trees, grape vines, dry brush, and wheat fields—did not lend themselves to easy destruction. “[A] few years ago I tried to chop down several old walnut trees on my farm . . . [e]ven when the ax did not break, it sometimes took me hours to fell an individual tree.”⁴⁴ Hanson’s account of his own struggles to cut down a tree helps reiterate that this ancient war, and the people who fought it, were just like people of today.

Hanson has written a superb book on the war’s brutality and how it was fought. Nevertheless, other shortcomings, while not detracting significantly from the book’s quality, can challenge the reader’s understanding. First, it is not always easy to comprehend the sheer number of Greek and non-Greek participants, and who fought on which side at any given time. Although Hanson provides numerous regional names and various alliances formed during the war, he does not always clearly identify who, other than the main antagonists, are on each side. As Hanson uses the larger strategic picture to develop his theme throughout the book of how the war was fought, he appears to have overlooked that readers need to easily understand which historical figures fought for either side in order to best understand the points he is trying to make.

homes, an eccentric church, and “the traces of a vast lost city . . . peek[ing] out amid the weeds and wheat fields.” *Id.*

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 36.

Second, the book's organization creates confusion as the author revisits the same battles and events. By breaking down the chapters into various descriptive aspects of the war (such as "Fear," "Fire," "Disease," "Terror," and "Armor"), Hanson admits that he has "less opportunity for chronological continuity"⁴⁵ While he does provide a rudimentary timeline of events,⁴⁶ a chapter dedicated to the main strategic goals and significant events occurring during the war would provide readers a useful frame of reference to better understand the valuable points he makes throughout this book.

Overall, *A War Like No Other* provides an outlet for today's readers to visualize, and relate to, warfare from long ago. Victor Davis Hanson delivers a vividly written book with numerous ties to modern events and conflicts, and in doing so reminds modern readers that the face of war has changed little over time. Hanson remains true to his stated intent of providing readers an in-depth understanding of how the Peloponnesian War was fought. Above all, he ultimately succeeds in developing an intimate and detailed glimpse of the complexity and brutality of warfare from long ago that, as current conflicts remind us, continue to this day.

⁴⁵ *Id.* at xvi.

⁴⁶ *See id.* at 31–34.