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## Thucydides and Deterrence

RICHARD NED LEBOW

*Thucydides describes ten attempts at deterrence and compellence. With one partial exception, the use of these strategies fail and generally help to provoke the behavior they were meant to prevent. The narrative and speeches in Thucydides' text indicate that leaders everywhere rely on deterrence and compellence and expect them to succeed. Targets of these strategies nevertheless downplay risks and costs when it is contrary to their desires or needs. When motivated by appetite, actors not infrequently indulge in wishful thinking. When motivated by honor, actors are risk accepting and may welcome threats as a means of demonstrating their courage. When motivated by fear, actors worry about the consequences of compliance, which they reason may be more costly than resistance. Thucydides is the first person to frame deterrence and compellence as a strategic interaction problem and to emphasize the determining importance of motives for the strategic calculus of actors. His analysis has important implications for contemporary conflict management.*

Deterrence and compellence are workhorse strategies of conflict management and figure prominently in Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War. Surprisingly, the large literature on Thucydides in classics, history, and international relations largely ignores these strategies even though some fine work has been done on the origins of the Peloponnesian War, which can be described as a multiple failure of general and immediate deterrence and compellence. While Thucydides cannot be used to test deterrence and compellence strategies, his treatment of them is insightful and offers interesting

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insights into problems of conflict management. What Thucydides has to say about deterrence and compellence also tells us something interesting about his text and possible “lessons” he intends readers to draw from it.

One of the most striking features of Thucydides’ account of the Peloponnesian War is the unremitting failure of both deterrence and compellence. With one partial exception, all attempts at these strategies fail and generally help to provoke the behavior they were meant to prevent. The narrative and speeches nevertheless indicate that leaders everywhere rely on deterrence and compellence and expect them to succeed. Thucydides routinely employs tension (even contradictions) between words and deeds, expectations and outcomes, and authorial statements and his narrative, to flag important questions and encourage thoughtful readers to consider their complexities. If we consider his treatment of deterrence and compellence in this light, what does it tell us about his understanding of these strategies of conflict management and their relationship to his broader political-intellectual project?

We need to exercise considerable caution when analyzing ancient texts in terms of contemporary categories of analysis. Ancient Greeks did not explicitly employ any of social science’s conceptual categories, although, I will argue, they did conceive of coercive strategies in roughly similar ways. In the Mytilenean debate, Cleon sounds surprisingly like Thomas Schelling when he argues that the Athenian empire depends not only on superior strength, but on a demonstrable willingness to use that strength to punish those who rebel or resist. Diodotus, in turn, speaks like a contemporary critic of deterrence when he warns of the likelihood that people driven by need or hope will make irrational judgments and miscalculate the forces arrayed against them. Their respective arguments are based on assumptions about human behavior that they make explicit—unlike so many contemporary students of the subject. All controversies must be understood in context. In modern scholarly debates that context is almost invariably found outside the texts in question. In Thucydides, the context is provided by the text, and we must go beyond the words of the speakers to that setting to understand not only their words, but their broader goals. Only then can we make any inference about the lessons Thucydides might want us to draw from his account.

The similarities and differences between Thucydides and modern historical scholarship suggest a two-track approach. In the first instance, we can read Thucydides as a reasonably accurate account of twenty-four years (435–411 B.C.E.) of Greek international relations and use it to construct a data set of deterrence and compellence cases. The principal caveat here concerns the selectivity of the text; it is a spare and highly abstracted narrative in which debates and dialogues are inserted, conceived, and arranged by a masterful artist with the intent of leading readers to a set of lessons about politics and human nature.<sup>1</sup> To the best of our knowledge, Thucydides does not distort

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<sup>1</sup> W. Robert Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

events, but he does ignore or give short shrift to developments (for example, the Megarian Decree) that his contemporaries considered important. He puts words in the mouths of speakers making them say, by his own admission, what “was called for by each situation.”<sup>2</sup> His account has important omissions and ends abruptly seven years before Athens’ surrender, presumably due to his untimely death. The Peloponnesian War, moreover, is only one slice of fifth century Greek history and a contest that is atypical of inter-polis relations; it describes an internecine conflict that engulfed most of Hellas and was increasingly conducted in a manner at odds with previously honored norms. We have some additional sources on the period, but not enough of them to construct a comprehensive history. For all of these reasons, we must be careful about generalizing on the basis of his account.

The nature of Thucydides’ text suggests a second project: using it to infer Thucydides’ understanding of deterrence, compellence, and their consequences. He is universally acknowledged to be among the most astute observers of politics, and we can only benefit from a better grasp of his understanding of strategies of conflict management. I pursue both levels of inquiry. I begin by exploiting Thucydides’ account as a data set and use it to assess the efficacy of deterrence and compellence in late fifth-century Greece. I present this evidence in tabular form and discuss some of the cases in detail. I then attempt to infer Thucydides’ understanding of these strategies and of the problem of conflict management more generally. My principal sources here are Pericles’ speech to the Athenian assembly on the eve of war and the Mytilenean and Melian debates. Their participants make the case for and against general and immediate deterrence, although they never use these terms. In the process, they reveal some of the reasons why leaders put so much faith in coercive strategies of conflict management. Some of the arguments made by the speakers have an uncanny resemblance to arguments made for and against deterrence in our time. Proponents and critics alike go beyond the narrow, even technical, arguments that dominate so much of the contemporary literature and base their claims on a mix of rational and psychological assumptions. Their arguments encourage the reader to assess these strategies in terms of the different ends they are intended to serve. In the conclusion, I draw out what I believe to be the lessons of the text for conflict management. Thucydides also had broader philosophical goals, and I attempt to link his treatment of deterrence and compellence to his larger project. These strategies and their often unanticipated consequences provide a vehicle for him to explore some of the implications of reason and affect for collective behavior.

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<sup>2</sup> All English quotations from Thucydides are from Robert B. Strassler, ed., Richard Crawley, trans., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Free Press, 1996). Thucydides, 1.22.

## DETERRENCE AND COMPELLENCE IN THUCYDIDES

If we treat Thucydides' text as a data set, it is appropriate to use the analytical categories of modern political science. I accordingly combed his narrative for cases of general and immediate deterrence (direct and extended) and compellence. Contemporary analysts often view these categories as unproblematic, as they do the roles of challenger and defender around which deterrence encounters are structured.<sup>3</sup> Like modern critics of deterrence, Thucydides understood how differently antagonists understood their respective motives and behavior. Where relevant, I have introduced these subjective assessments into my discussion. I am not using this data set to make statistical inferences—although the fact that deterrence and compellence consistently fail is an interesting finding. I use these cases to explore why and how Thucydides thinks deterrence and compellence strategies fail. It is Thucydides' presentation of the cases that interests me, which obviates the concern that his account is the only one we have and may not reflect how someone else would describe these encounters.

Table 1 describes the ten deterrence and compellence encounters I could identify in the text. Only one of them—case number five—qualifies as even as partial success. The arrival of additional Athenian ships convinced the Corinthian fleet to break off its engagement against Corcyra (present-day Corfu) and Athens and to withdraw. This retreat was tactical; Corinth saved its fleet to fight another day. In the aftermath, it built additional ships, hired foreign rowers, and mobilized naval forces from other enemies of Athens. It also sought to convince Sparta to declare war against Athens. The Spartan assembly's vote that Athens had broken the Thirty Years' Truce led directly to the outbreak of the Archidamian War (the first phase of what we call the Peloponnesian War). A tactical deterrence success accordingly accelerated the failure of general deterrence between Athens and Sparta. The other nine cases are outright failures.

The ten cases consist of one case of general deterrence, four of immediate deterrence, one of combined general and immediate deterrence and four of compellence. The general deterrence failure (case 1) is the most interesting and important case because it was responsible for the outbreak of the Archidamian War (the first stage of the Peloponnesian War). The Corcyraean alliance was the catalyst for that deterrence failure, and it took place against a background of Athenian-Spartan hostility. Thucydides uses paired speeches by Corcyraean and Corinthian representatives to the Athenian assembly to explore the pros and cons of the proposed alliance. The Corcyraean envoy attempted to arouse and play off Athenian fears for their security. If Athens rejected the alliance, he warned, Corcyra could go down in defeat,

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, "Deterrence: The Elusive Dependent Variable," *World Politics* 42 (April 1990): 336–69.

**TABLE 1** Deterrence and Compellence

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Cases in Thucydides	
1.	<b>Failed General Deterrence:</b> Athenian and Spartan alliances and military buildups, which cause rather than prevent war. Both hegemons had numerous allies. Their respective alliance systems served multiple ends, one of which was to deter and intimidate each other. Thucydides appears to blame the war on the uneven growth of power, which significantly increased the relative economic and military strength of Athens. (1.23.6)
2.	<b>Failed Compellence:</b> Corcyra attempts to compel Epidamnus to reinstate the exiles (who had come to Corcyra) and expel the Corinthian troops and settlers. Epidamnus rejects both demands and Corcyra began operations against them with forty ships. This episode is as much a justification of hostility crisis—an attempt to provide justification for war—as it is a serious attempt at compellence. (1.26–27)
3.	<b>Failed Compellence:</b> Corcyraeans, accompanied by Spartan representatives, demand that Corinth withdraw its troops and colonists from Epidamnus. Corcyra is willing to entertain a counter claim or accept arbitration (by the oracle at Delphi or cities agreeable to both sides). Corinth rejects these demands and proposals, but agrees to talk if Corcyra withdraws her army and fleet from Epidamnus. Corcyra says it will do so if Corinth also withdraws its forces. They will also agree to arbitration following an armistice with both sides' forces left in place. Corinth rejects these demands and sends heralds to declare war. (1.27–29) This set of interactions is best coded as failed compellence. Corinth had already decided on war and made counter offers to avoid appearing responsible for the war.
4.	<b>Failed Extended Immediate Deterrence:</b> When negotiations fail, Corinth builds up its forces and mobilizes allies. Corcyra seeks alliance with Athens in the hope of deterring Corinth. (1.31–32) Athens agrees to a purely defensive alliance in the hope of deterring a Corinthian attack. (1.44) Athens sends ten ships to Corcyra—what we might call a “trip wire.” This is a force large enough to demonstrate its commitment, but not so large as to be seen as taking Corcyra's side. (1.45) Deterrence fails as the Athenian ships are drawn into the fray to defend Corcyra. (1.46–49)
5.	<b>Temporarily Successful Immediate Deterrence:</b> During the sea battle above, Athenian reinforcements arrive. They are spotted at a distance by the Corinthian fleet, whose leaders worry that there are more Athenian ships than those they can see. They accordingly retire (1.51), but only to mobilize additional allies for further warfare.
6.	<b>Failed Compellence:</b> Athens demands that Potidaea, a Corinthian colony and Athenian ally, tear down its fortifications, send hostages to Athens, and banish its Corinthian magistrates. (1.56–57) The Corinthians refuse, and Athens is forced to lay siege to the city.
7.	<b>Failed Immediate Deterrence:</b> Sparta promises to invade Attica if Athens attacks Potidaea. (1.58) Athens lays siege to Potidaea.
8.	<b>Failed Immediate Deterrence:</b> Athens attempts to deter Sparta from invading Attica by describing its capability and resolve to the Spartan assembly. (1.73–78) The Spartan assembly votes for war after King Archidamus fails to convince them to adopt a policy of general deterrence in lieu of war. (1.88) The following campaigning season, Sparta invades Attica.
9.	<b>Failed General and Immediate Deterrence:</b> In 428–72, Mytilene, with Spartan support, extended its control over the whole of Lesbos. Athens uses a show of force in an unsuccessful attempt to deter a Mytilene revolt. (3.1–35)
10.	<b>Failed Compellence:</b> In the Melian dialogue (5.84–116), Athens fails to compel Melos to join her alliance. Athenians have powerful forces on the spot, but the Melians oligarchs choose to resist rather than submit, although they also display an irrational hope that Sparta will come to their aid.

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and its fleet (the third largest in Hellas) would fall into Corinthian hands. The Corinthian spokesman made a counter-threat: an Athenian-Corcyraean alliance would lead to war with Corinth, and in all likelihood, to war with Sparta as well. Thucydides tells us that the assembly voted for the alliance because “it began now to be felt that the coming of the Peloponnesian War was only a question of time, and no one was willing to see a naval power of the magnitude of Corcyra sacrificed to Corinth.”<sup>4</sup> It nearly happened as the Athenian assembly initially rejected the Corcyraean plea for support.<sup>5</sup> We can surmise that Pericles was actively drumming up support behind the scenes and reconvened the assembly when he calculated he had the support to carry the day. Plutarch tells us that Pericles, presumably in a second meeting of the assembly, “persuaded the people to send aid” to Corcyra.<sup>6</sup>

Just as the Corinthians predicted, the alliance drew an Athenian naval squadron into a battle between the Corcyraean and Corinthian fleets. Corinth then appealed successfully to the Spartan assembly for military assistance against Athens. The Corcyraean alliance set in motion a chain of events that rapidly escalated into war between the Athenian and Spartan alliances. Ironically, the Corcyraean fleet was of no value to Athens in this conflict because Corcyra was consumed by a destructive civil war. At first reading, Athenian behavior appears to be an example of what John Herz came to call the security dilemma.<sup>7</sup>

Why did deterrence fail? To answer this question, I want to invoke the tri-partite understanding of the psyche shared by Plato and Aristotle. This may strike readers as odd because they wrote after Thucydides. I contend that the characterization of the psyche as harboring three distinct impulses—appetite, spirit, and reason—was common to fifth-century Greeks, at least Athenian Greeks. Appetite pertains to bodily needs like food, shelter, and sex. The spirit refers to the universal need for self-esteem. Reason seeks to discover what makes for a happy life and has the potential to constrain and educate the appetite and spirit to collaborate with it toward that end. Plato and Aristotle believe that self-esteem is achieved by excelling in competitive activities valued by one’s society and thereby gaining the respect of actors whose opinions matter. The spirit responds with anger to any restraint on its self-assertion in private or civic life. It wants to avenge all affronts to its honor and those against its friends and seeks immediate satisfaction when aroused. Road rage is a good contemporary example. Mature people, whose emotions are tempered by reason and experience, learn not to interpret all disrespectful behavior as personal challenges, not to respond to challenges

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<sup>4</sup> Thucydides, 1.32–44.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.44.

<sup>6</sup> Plutarch, *Pericles*, 29.

<sup>7</sup> Thucydides; *Ibid.*, 29; John Herz, “Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 2, no. 12 (1950): 157–80.

they cannot win, and to think carefully before acting in instances where they feel compelled to respond. Because disrespectful behavior or attempts at subordination are such affronts to self-esteem, the anger they arouse is more difficult to suppress than the frustrations arising from denial of appetite. Plato develops his arguments about the psyche and its implications for political order in Books V, VIII, and IX of his *Republic*, and Aristotle primarily in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. For both philosophers, the primacy of reason is a hope, not a reality, although all social orders depend on reason to restrain to some degree appetite and spirit. They recognize, of course, that reason can also have negative consequences, especially when it undermines respect for laws, rules, and conventions (*nomos*).

The tripartite psychological framework is implicit in Thucydides, as are all of his assumptions, including those concerning the relative importance of nature (*phusis*) and convention (*nomos*) and the positive and negative interactions between words (*logoi*) and deeds (*erga*). His account of the origins of the war, developed in Book I, appears to pit reason against appetite and spirit. Read this way, it suggests that the true underlying cause of war was reason's failure to constrain these impulses. In Athens, reason lost control of both appetite and honor as success led to hubris and policies based more on hope than reason. Pericles had previously exercised restraint and had adhered scrupulously to the Thirty Years' Truce. Corcyra was a neutral and technically could have joined the Athenian alliance without violating the truce. Now, he could not pass up the possibility of making a big strategic gain at seemingly low risk.

In Corinth and Sparta, reason lost control of the spirit. King Archidamus offered the Spartan assembly a sober account of Athenian power and urged his compatriots to reflect carefully before embarking on a war they were likely to pass on to their sons. His argument carried less weight than the emotional plea of the ephor Sthenelaïdas who insisted that the Athenians were wrong and deserved to be punished. The principle of majority rule failed to constrain demagogues in either polis and actually facilitated their triumph over more reasonable opponents. Sthenelaïdas appealed to his countrymen's spirit and yearning for honor and related desire to avoid shame by ignoring the pleas of their hard-pressed allies. In showing the disastrous consequences of the unrestrained pursuit of either appetite or spirit, Thucydides reaffirmed the importance of the traditional Greek value of the middle way (*mēden agan*).

From this reading it follows that Thucydides' account suggests that deterrence failed for two distinct but reinforcing reasons. The Athenians hoped to improve their strategic position. They "had no wish to see the strong navy of Corcyra pass into the hands of Corinth. At the same time [Athens] . . . was not averse from letting the two Powers weaken each other by fighting together; since in this way, if war did come Athens herself would be stronger in relation to Corinth and to the other naval Powers." Athenians also had their economic interests in mind as "Corcyra lay very conveniently on the coastal

route to Italy and Sicily.” With these concerns in mind, Thucydides tells us they made the alliance with Corcyra.<sup>8</sup>

In Athens, appetite led Pericles and those who followed him to minimize the risks associated with the gains they sought. They overvalued the benefits of alliance with Corcyra while downplaying the opposition of Corinth and Sparta. In the language of cognitive psychology, they refused to consider trade-offs between their conflicting values and goals. In Corinth, the Athenian-Corcyraean alliance further inflamed passions rather than restraining them, which made Corinth more, not less, aggressive. Corinthians may initially have been motivated by interest; for some decades they had been attempting to consolidate their influence in northwest Greece, along the coasting route to Italy. According to Thucydides, their principal motive for coming to the aid of Epidamnus was their hatred (*misei*) of Corcyraeans, who failed to show them the respect and honor due to a founding city.<sup>9</sup> Corinth sent a large force to Epidamnus, and Corcyra countered with a siege and a demand that the Corinthians withdraw (case 3). Corinth rejected Corcyra’s offer of arbitration and sent its fleet to relieve the siege, but it was defeated by Corcyra at Leucimme. Corinth now prepared for war in earnest, turning to various allies for ships and sailors, and Corcyra looked to Athens for support. Seeking revenge for their defeat, and with their honor at stake—both expressions of the spirit—Corinthians were relatively immune to threats (case 4). They convinced themselves that Athens would spurn Corcyra’s offer of alliance or, failing that, Sparta would enter the war on their side, which it did. When Athenian ships appeared in the midst of a Corcyraean-Corinthian naval encounter, the Corinthians withdrew at first (case 5), but only to prepare for another sea battle in which they engaged the Athenians and Corcyraeans.

Thucydides’ account directs our attention to two key features of conflicts in which deterrence or compellence is practiced: 1) the widespread belief that others can be dissuaded or persuaded by credible threats based on superior military capability; and 2) the propensity of people who are the targets of threats to downplay risks and costs when it is contrary to their desires or needs. In this instance, Athenian wishful thinking was largely a function of appetite and Corinthian impermeability to threats attributable to the spirit. If reason had prevailed in Corinth, they would have accepted the Corcyraean offer of arbitration, especially as Sparta (Corinth’s ally) was proposed as the mediator. The Corcyraeans were clearly offering mediation as a means of retreating without loss of honor, and the Corinthians rejected arbitration for precisely this reason. When the spirit is aroused and honor is at stake, deterrence and compellence are not only likely to fail but help provoke the behavior they are intended to prevent.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 1.44–45.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 1.25.3.

## HONOR, INTEREST, AND FEAR

Ancient Greeks generally understood people and *poleis* (city states) to be motivated by honor, interest, and fear. We have already encountered honor and interest. Plato and Aristotle describe the former as an expression of the spirit and the latter of the appetite. Fear enters into the picture when reason loses control of either and actors become unconstrained in their pursuit of honor, wealth, and women. They arouse concerns in others about their ability to satisfy their spirit and appetites, and in extreme cases about their survival of order. They are likely to consider and implement a range of precautions, which run the gamut from bolting their doors at night to acquiring allies and more and better arms.

Thucydides acknowledges all three motives early in his text. On the eve of war, he had the Athenians explain to the Spartan assembly that “the nature of the case first compelled us to advance our empire to its present height; fear being our principal motive, though honor and interest afterwards came in.”<sup>10</sup> They contended that their city’s recent actions that had so offended Sparta and its allies—the Corcyraean alliance, the Megarian decree and the siege of Potidaea—were fear-based necessary precautions to preserve their empire:

And at last, when almost all hated us, when some had already revolted and had been subdued, when you had ceased to be the friends that you once were, and had become objects of suspicion and dislike, it appeared no longer safe to give up our empire; especially as all who left us would fall to you. And none can quarrel with a people for making, in matters of tremendous risk, the best provision that it can for its interest.<sup>11</sup>

Potidaea was a Corinthian colony, but a member of the Athenian alliance. Pericles had doubts about its loyalty and demanded that it tear down its fortification, banish its Corinthian magistrates, and send hostages to Athens (case 6).<sup>12</sup> Potidaea rejected these demands, and with Corinth, appealed to Sparta for support. Sparta then threatened Athens with an invasion if it laid siege to Potidaea (case 7).<sup>13</sup> The Athenian speech to the Spartan assembly represents an attempt by Athens to deter this invasion by warning not only of its capability and resolve, but also of its fear for the security of its empire that motivated that resolve.

There is good reason to question—as most Spartiates did—the Athenian assertion that they were fearful and on the defensive. There is, after all, something of a contradiction between the Athenian pose as fearful and their attempt to convey their absolute confidence in their ability to defend

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 1.75.2–3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 1.75.4–5.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 1.56–57.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 1.58.

themselves. But there can be little doubt that as the Peloponnesian War progressed, fear became an increasingly important motive for Athens and Sparta alike and a principal incentive for deterrence and compellence. In advance of both Plato and Aristotle, Thucydides offers an account of the War that indicates that political order breaks down because key actors—individuals, factions, and cities—transgress *nomos* to satisfy their appetites or assuage their spirit. Other actors respond by using whatever means are available to them to weaken, divide, or isolate those who threaten them. As realists have long recognized, concern for security can rapidly be made self-fulfilling through a reciprocal process of escalation. Precautions are interpreted as indicative of intentions, which provoke further defensive measures, intensify conflict, and can lead to war through preemption, loss of control, or a decision to support a threatened third party.

Thucydides' take on fear-based worlds differs from that of contemporary realists in two important respects. He does not attribute fear-dominated worlds to anarchy, but to a breakdown in *nomos* caused by the lack of constraint of elite actors. The logic of anarchy assumes that those who are weak are the most threatened in a fear-based world and the most likely to balance or bandwagon. The breakdown of *nomos* thesis suggests that elite actors set this process in motion and are often the ones who feel most threatened. Thucydides offers his account of the slide to civil war and barbarism in Corcyra to be read as a parallel process to the spread of war throughout Hellas. Both outcomes are described by the Greek word *stasis*, translated as either civil war, acute conflict or the breakdown of order.

### THE MYTILENEAN DEBATE

Thucydides explores the appeal and consequences of deterrence fear-based worlds in the Mytilenean debate. Following the Peloponnesian invasion of Attica in the summer of 428, all the cities of Lesbos, with one exception, revolted from Athens. Mytilene attempted to persuade them to pool their forces in a defensive union. When the Athenians learned of these developments they sent forty ships, which surprised and scattered the Mytilenean fleet outside its harbor (case 9). The two sides agreed to an armistice, and Mytilene was allowed to send an envoy to Athens. The city also secretly sent envoys to Sparta in search of military support. The envoys returned from Athens without result, and the Mytileneans attacked the Athenian camp. The Athenians established a blockade of both Mytilenean harbors and laid siege to the city.<sup>14</sup>

Sparta invited the Mytilenean envoys to present themselves at Olympia so other members of the Spartan alliance could hear their plea and participate

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 3.1–6.

in the deliberations. The Mytileneans told the gathered allies they had become allies to help emancipate Greece from the Persians, but complained that the Delian League had become a tyranny. Mytilene was unusual in that it retained its fleet rather than paying tribute and had accordingly not yet been subjugated by Athens. “They courted us in time of war,” the Mytilenian envoys explain, “only because they were afraid of us, while we acted in the same manner toward them in time of peace; and good father, which in most cases is made steadfast by good will, was in our case made secure by fear.” The envoys explain that as the power of attack was in Athens’ hands, the right of acting in self-defense must have been in Mytilene’s hands. “We revolted while we had the opportunity, without waiting for Athens to attack us when the opportunity arose.” The Spartans and their allies voted to receive the Mytileneans and other Lesbians as allies.<sup>15</sup>

Toward the end of the winter of 428, the Spartans sent a trireme to Mytilene. Its captain, Salaethus, snuck past the besieging Athenian forces to enter Mytilene. He promised another invasion of Attica and help in the form of forty ships. The invasion took place as promised, but the Spartan ships never arrived, and the Mytileneans, who were exhausted, had also begun to run out of food. In desperation, Salaethus supplied the *dēmos* with heavy armor and urged a do-or-die sally against the Athenians. The people refused and the aristocrats, sensing they had no choice, sided with the people. Paches and his besieging army were let into the city and promised not to kill anyone but allow the Athenian assembly to decide upon the proper course of action. Mytilene was allowed to send envoys to make their case before the Athenians.<sup>16</sup>

When Salaethus and the Mytilenean envoys reached Athens, the Spartan captain was immediately executed. Acting out of anger, the assembly voted to put to death all adult Mytilenean males on the grounds they revolted despite their relative freedom. Thucydides tells us that the assembly was also enraged because the Peloponnesian fleet had ventured into the Ionian Sea to offer support, *prima facie* evidence that planning for the revolt had long been underway. A trireme was sent off to Mytilene to inform Paches of the assembly’s decision. The next day, many Athenians had second thoughts about their decision and began to feel that their decision to destroy an entire city, not only those responsible for the revolt, was cruel and unjust. The Mytilenean envoys and their Athenian supporters convinced those in authority to reopen the question. Several speakers addressed the assembly, including Cleon, son of Cleanetus.<sup>17</sup>

Cleon, whom Thucydides described as “the most violent of citizens,” had the most influence with the people and had urged them the day before

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 3.8–15.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 3.15, 25–28.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 3.36.

to execute all Mytilenean males.<sup>18</sup> He spoke in support of that decision and argued in favor of constancy on the grounds that cities whose laws are inviolate are stronger than those with better laws that lack authority. Change, he told the assembly, is the result of cleverness, recklessness, and specious oratory. Constancy is the product of ignorance and self-restraint, which is why “simpler people for the most part make better citizens than the shrewd.” The latter “always want to demonstrate that they are wiser than the laws, and to dominate public deliberations . . . and as a consequence, generally bring ruin to their cities.” Cleon is seemingly rejecting a core Athenian value—respect for clever and successful rhetoric—and, by implication, the wealth and education that enables it. By appealing to underlying jealousy of the masses, he attempted to arouse hostility to Diodotus, who followed him on the speaker’s platform, while simultaneously masking the cleverness and self-serving nature of his own speech. The jealousy of the *dēmos* is a form of envy, and Cleon played upon this ambiguity to undercut the appeal of the arguments he expected Diodotus to advance. He accused his audience of secretly thinking of themselves as would-be orators and thus all the more susceptible to fancy phrases and specious arguments. “You are in thrall to the pleasures of the ear and are more like men who sit as spectators at exhibitions of sophists than men who take counsel for the welfare of the state.”<sup>19</sup>

Cleon augmented his clever psychological appeal with emotional and substantive arguments about why the Mytileneans must be punished in full measure. His emotional appeals stressed the special circumstances of the case. Mytilene was treated better than most allies and better protected from attack. Its citizens did not revolt because they were oppressed, but entered into a conspiracy because they were excessively ambitious. As they acted duplicitously for the sake of gain, he insisted, “Let them be punished . . . in a manner befitting their crime.” This included the ordinary citizens, who were just as guilty as the oligarchs because they joined them in revolt. They did so, Cleon recognized, because they considered it the least risky course of action open to them.<sup>20</sup>

Mytilene’s oligarchs, Cleon continued, developed ambitions beyond their power, were overconfident, and put “might before right.” They ignored the calamities that befell other allies, some of them their neighbors, who had risen unsuccessfully against Athens. He attributed Mytilenean irrationality and insolence to the solicitude Athens had previously displayed toward the city. Human nature makes people “contemptuous of those who pay court (*therapeuō*) but in awe (*thaumazein*) of those who will not yield.” Cleon situated these psychological dynamics within the broader context of dependency. He thought the Athenian empire was admittedly a tyranny

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 3.33.6.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 3.38.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 3.39.

imposed on subjects who, for the most part, “submit to your rule against their will.” They were obedient, not because of any kindness a state shows toward them, but “because of such superiority you have established by reason of your strength rather than of their goodwill.” It was therefore essential to demonstrate resolve. Cleon said that if Athens inflicted no greater punishment on the Mytileneans than it would have on those who revolted under compulsion from their enemies, “which of them, do you think, will not rise up on the slightest pretext, when the alternatives are freedom if they succeed, or a fate not irreparable if they fail?”<sup>21</sup>

In closing, Cleon argued that executing Mytilenean males was both expedient (*ta sumphora*) and just (*ta dikaia*). They had to steel themselves and put aside any nagging doubts they had about the harshness of their retribution. “Tender-heartedness” would only encourage future discontent and allied rebellions. Resolution, by contrast, would give other allies “plain warning that whoever revolts shall be punished with death.”<sup>22</sup>

Diodotus, son of Eucrates, who had been the principal opponent of putting the Mytileneans to death in the earlier debate, came forward to address the assembly. Recognizing that appeals to justice were unlikely to be persuasive, he couched his argument in the language of self-interest. This move also allowed him to distinguish the assembly from a law court, where questions of “right and wrong” are all-important. Our task, he told the assembly, is to decide what treatment of the Mytileneans “will make them most useful to us.” He said they are not deliberating about the past, but about the future, and the consequences of their actions for the behavior of other allies.<sup>23</sup>

Diodotus challenged Cleon’s assertion that a communal death penalty would help deter future revolts. His argument, which drew heavily on his understanding of individual and group psychology, offered the outlines of a powerful critique of general and immediate deterrence. He observed that the death penalty was widespread in Greece, and frequently used for relatively minor offenses. This had not prevented men “inspired by hope” from taking risks. Nobody, he insisted, “has entered upon a perilous enterprise with the conviction that his plot was condemned to failure.” People are by their very nature, “prone to err, in private as well as public life, there is no law that will prevent them.” Societies have accordingly made penalties increasingly more severe in the hope of deterring transgressions. But transgressions still occur. We must recognize that “some terror more dreadful than death must be discovered, or we must own that death at least, is no prevention.” Men are enticed into transgressions by “the constraint of poverty which makes them bold, “the insolence and pride of affluence” which makes them greedy, and

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 3.40.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 3.44.

various other passions. Hope and desire are universal. “The one leads, the other attends.” Fortune also contributes to misjudgment, by “tempt[ing] men to take risks even when their resources are inadequate.” What is true of individuals is even truer of cities. They play for higher stakes—“their own freedom or empire over others,” and are accordingly more motivated to believe they will succeed. Citizens acting in groups are also more inclined to overestimate their strength. “It is a sign of extreme simplemindedness,” Diodotus maintained, “for anyone to imagine that when human nature is fully committed to any enterprise that it can be deterred from it by rigorous laws or any other terror.”<sup>24</sup>

Having made the general case against the death penalty, Diodotus now turned to Mytilene. If a city revolted against us and failed, he argued, it would be likely to seek terms in the form of an indemnity and future tribute. If capitulation leads to certain destruction—which everyone would believe if Cleon’s motion passed—a city will “prepare itself more thoroughly, and hold out in siege to the last extremity.” We cannot fail to suffer loss “by incurring the expense of besieging a city because it will not surrender, and, if we capture it, recovering one that is ruined, and accordingly losing it tribute ever afterwards.” Draconian measures will almost certainly backfire. Moderate punishment will, at the very least, make it easier to subjugate cities that revolt.<sup>25</sup>

Diodotus expanded upon his last point. The *dēmos* of most cities, he observed, is well disposed to Athens, and either does not support oligarchs who rebel, or, if compelled to join them, is deeply resentful of being put into this position. Diodotus continued that when we go to war against such cities, we can consider the ordinary people our allies. If we destroyed Mytilene, as Cleon urged, we would be killing people who “took no part in the revolt, and who put the city in your hands as soon as they received arms.” You would be guilty of killing your benefactors and benefiting the oligarchs who everywhere opposed you. The next time they fomented a revolt they would “immediately gain the support of the demos, because you will make everyone aware that the same punishment lies in store for the innocent and for the guilty.” Even if they were guilty, Diodotus suggested, we “should pretend they are not.” Contrary to Cleon’s claims, justice and expediency could not both be served by executing all Mytilenean males.<sup>26</sup>

A show of hands revealed the assembly to be divided, but with a narrow majority in favor of Diodotus. A second trireme was immediately dispatched to overtake the earlier trireme which had a day and night head start. The Mytilenean envoys pressed wine and barley into the arms of the crew and promised a large reward if they were successful. The crew ate their meals

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 3.45.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 3.46.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 3.47–48.

on their benches and took turns rowing and sleeping. The first ship was in no rush, given the nature of their mission, but still arrived first. The second trireme pulled into port just as Paches had read aloud the decree, but before he could carry out any executions. Mytilene escaped destruction by a matter of minutes.<sup>27</sup>

This debate tells us something about Thucydides' views about deterrence. The first inference is that deterrence can also fail against actors motivated by interest (the Mytilenean aristocracy) and for much the same reason. The aristocrats convinced themselves they would succeed in proportion to their desire to do so. Deterrence is even less likely to succeed when employed against actors motivated by fear, a case persuasively advanced by Diodotus. In this circumstance, target actors would be acting rationally in their resistance if compliance means certain death.

The Mytilenean debate offers Thucydides the opportunity to explore deterrence in the broader relationship between the deterrer and its target state. The sentence early on in Cleon's speech, in which he acknowledges that Athenian rule (*archē*) is a tyranny (*turannis*) whose power rests entirely on strength and the obedience that fear inspires, is set up as a parallel construction in which this kind of rule is contrasted to loyalty based on rewards.<sup>28</sup> Cleon is implicitly contrasting what he regards as the reality of the Athenian empire with Pericles' more idealistic description of Athens in his funeral oration as a city that acquired friends by acting out of a sense of generosity (*charis*) and conferring rewards instead of receiving them.<sup>29</sup> More fundamentally, his juxtaposition reflects a generic distinction made by fifth-century Greeks between *hēgemonia* and *archē*. The former was regarded as a form of legitimate authority and was associated with *timē*—the gift of honor. Sparta and Athens earned *timē* by virtue of their contributions to Greece during the Persian Wars. *Timē* was also conferred on Athens in recognition of its literary, artistic, intellectual, political, and commercial accomplishments that had made it, in the words of Pericles, the "school of Hellas."<sup>30</sup> *Archē* means control—initially applied to authority within a city state and later to rule or influence over other city states. Thucydides' history tracks the transformation of the Athenian empire from a *hēgemonia* into an *archē*. The Mytilenean debate represents a halfway point, and the later Melian dialogue (which takes place on the eve of the Sicilian expedition) marks the emergence of Athens as a true *archē* or tyranny. The Mytilenean debate was triggered by second thoughts about executing so many people, many of them innocent boys. By the time of the Melian dialogue, Athenians had become hardened, and there

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 3.49.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 3.37.2.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 2.41.4.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 2.4.

was no sign of remorse when all surviving Melian males were executed and the women and children sold into slavery.

The Mytilenean dialogue also marks a transition in the sense that deterrence was recognized as the principal prop of the Athenian empire. The real disagreement between Cleon and Diodotus was about how it should be applied. Cleon believed that only the most extreme forms of intimidation, verging on and including the use of terror, are likely to dissuade recalcitrant allies from contemplating revolt. Diodotus was not convinced that deterrence would succeed because those who seek freedom or dominion are motivated to misjudge the odds of success in their favor. Extreme forms of punishment only make it more likely that they will fight to the finish, making suppression of revolt more costly and difficult. Diodotus favored moderate chastisement together with better administration and greater surveillance to prevent allies "from even entertaining the idea" of revolt.<sup>31</sup> Such a policy would involve punishing people before they acted, which seems to represent exactly the kind of injustice Diodotus is railing against. It is also unrealistic, judging from historical experience of other empires and occupiers. To the extent that their rule is resented and opposed, they are sooner or later forced to withdraw or use increasingly violent and arbitrary methods to maintain their authority. Thucydides appears to be telling us that deterrence, while applicable to the world of *archē*, is rarely an effective strategy in the long-term.

Diodotus' critique of deterrence relates directly to the two principal bodies of modern literature about deterrence: that based on strategic interaction (usually favorably disposed to deterrence) and that based on political psychological (on the whole critical). His psychological arguments sound very much like those Janice Gross Stein and I have made in our studies of conventional and nuclear deterrence.<sup>32</sup> We distinguish between challenges of deterrence commitments motivated primarily by need versus opportunity and have found motivated bias to be most pronounced in the former. To the extent leaders felt compelled to challenge an adversarial commitment to ward off a combination of strategic and domestic threats, they convinced themselves they would succeed. Once committed to a challenge, they became increasingly insensitive to information suggesting that they had miscalculated, that their adversaries had the capability and resolve to resist. Diodotus uses different categories, based on the traditional Greek division of the psyche into three parts: appetite, spirit, and reason. These categories are implicit in Thucydides and made explicit by Plato in Book IV of his *Republic*. In another

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 3.46.6.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), chaps. 4–6; Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984); Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, "Deterrence: A Political and Psychological Critique," in Robert Axelrod, Robert Jervis, Roy Radner, and Paul Stern, eds., *Perspectives in Deterrence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

one of his many parallel constructions, Thucydides has Diodotus contrast the two principal motives for revolts: poverty and other passions (which derive from the appetite) and insolence and pride (which are an expression of the spirit).<sup>33</sup> For Thucydides and Plato, the happy individual or city is one in which reason constrains and educates appetite and spirit alike. When reason loses control of either, judgment becomes impaired. As Diodotus notes, hope (*elpis*), combined with greed (*pleonexia*), lead to wishful thinking.<sup>34</sup> This is the kind of wishful thinking that modern psychology associates with motivated bias.<sup>35</sup> Stein and I were able to document it in numerous cases of deterrence challenges (including Germany in 1914, India in 1962, and Egypt in 1973) where leaders constructed a reality to suit their objectives.<sup>36</sup>

Thucydides, speaking through Diodotus, may be the first person to frame deterrence as a strategic interaction problem. Modern deterrence theorists routinely approach conflict management from this perspective. Such an approach seems particularly apt to deterrence and compellence as both strategies seek to manipulate the cost-calculus of their targets and specifically to raise the costs of non-compliance. They do so by making threats, on the assumption that rational actors will revise their cost-calculus if the threats are credible and effectively communicated. Deterrence is expected to succeed when these threats raise the cost of non-compliance to make them outweigh any expected benefits in the mind of a would-be challenger. Diodotus suggests even for rational actors the consequences of threats are not necessarily uni-directional, (that is, do not always raise the perceived costs of action) but can actually make some proscribed behavior more attractive. If Mytilene was destroyed, he argued, other cities would be less inclined to surrender when defeat appears likely. Here too, his argument presages the Lebow-Stein critique of deterrence. We found numerous examples (for example, Spain in 1898, Japan in 1941, and Khrushchev and the Cuban missile deployment), where threats intended to moderate the foreign policy of an adversary provoked more aggressive behavior by reason of how they influenced their leaders' cost-calculus. They convinced the leaders in question that compliance was likely to invite additional and more serious threats and demands.<sup>37</sup>

The deterrence literature routinely analyzes the strategies of deterrence and compellence independently from the goals for which they are being used. Schelling, especially, treats them as neutral instruments, which they assuredly are not.<sup>38</sup> Neither Cleon nor Diodotus do this. Cleon recognized

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<sup>33</sup> Thucydides, 3.45.4.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.45.5.

<sup>35</sup> Irving L. Janis and Leon Mann, *Decision-Making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, Choice and Commitment* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 74–95.

<sup>36</sup> Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, chaps. 4–6; Jervis, Lebow and Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence*; Lebow and Stein, "Deterrence: A Political and Psychological Critique."

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964).

his audience was having moral qualms about the extreme measure he was defending and needs to make it appear to be just as well. Diodotus, convinced that appeals to justice will fall on deaf ears, framed his arguments in the language of expediency. He was nevertheless motivated by concerns for justice, which implicitly informed his arguments. Both speakers were right in the sense that the assembly was uneasy about destroying Mytilene, but intensely fearful for their security. They wanted both concerns addressed, which was all but impossible. Athenians had to jump one way or the other, and this is perhaps why Thucydides tells us that the vote was close to evenly split between Cleon and Diodotus.

Implicit in both their arguments is the assumption that deterrence in support of a just *status quo*—one widely perceived as legitimate by others—would have a greater chance of success than the same strategy used to deny freedom to others. In contrast, to so many modern students of deterrence, Thucydides understood that context is all important. In the connection, he puts some very revealing words in the mouth of Cleon, who observed about the Mytileneans, that “their own prosperity could not deter them from embracing danger; but blindly confident about the future, and full of hopes beyond their power, though not beyond their ambition, they declared war and decided to honor might over right, their attack being determined not by provocation but by the moment which seemed to them propitious.”<sup>39</sup> These same words apply to Athens with even more justice, and Thucydides may well have intended Cleon’s observation to be read this way. It would fit with his portrayal of Athens as a city, seduced by its own wealth and power, whose citizens embraced risky adventures that put that wealth and power at unnecessary risk. The first critical turning point was the alliance with Corcyra that set in motion the chain of events that led to war with Sparta. That decision, attributable to Pericles’ rhetoric, was also the result of a second assembly called to reverse an earlier decision. The second turning point (and more fateful miscalculation) was the Sicilian Expedition, where the assembly, motivated by greed and trusting in hope, spurned reasoned argument in favor of Alcibiades’ emotional appeal.<sup>40</sup>

## THE MELIAN DIALOGUE

Our final case (case 10) is Athens’ failure to compel the officially neutral Spartan colony of Melos to join its alliance. Thucydides devotes a dialogue to this encounter, which is arguably the most famous and widely read book of his text. For our purposes, it is interesting because it pits a mix of interest and fear against honor as motives. The Melian dialogue took place in

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<sup>39</sup> Thucydides, 3.39.3.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 6.9–24.

the summer of 416, approximately six months before the Athenian assembly voted to invade Sicily. In that debate, which follows in Book Six, Alcibiades won the support of the assembly for the ill-considered and disastrous expedition to Sicily by arousing fears for security and appetites for material aggrandizement.<sup>41</sup> Melos was a precursor to that operation and motivated by the strategic goal of forestalling any revolts by allies while the major part of Athens' naval forces was engaged in Sicily. Melos was an aristocracy or oligarchy, and its magistrates refused to allow the Athenian generals to address the *dēmos*. The dialogue was held out of public view, where the Melian magistrates defended their decision to resist Athens rather than ally on the grounds of honor.

When read against the Mytilenean debate, the Melian Dialogue reveals how much more reconciled Athenians had become in understanding their empire was a tyranny and how correspondingly more committed they were to the extreme forms of compellence and punishment earlier advocated by Cleon. The structure and language of the dialogue further revealed how much the political culture of Athens had changed. It consisted of brachylogies: short, blunt, alternating verbal thrusts, suggestive of the lunge and parry of a duel. The Athenian generals, Cleomedes and Tisias, dispensed with all pretense. They acknowledged that their invasion cannot be justified on the basis of their right to rule or as a response to provocations. They denied the relevance of justice, which they asserted only comes into play between equals. They acknowledged two classes of actors: those who exercise rule (*archē*) and those who are ruled (*hupēkooi*). "The strong do what their power allows (*dunata*) and the weak suffer what they must." The Melians should have put their survival above other goals and submitted.<sup>42</sup>

The Melians warned that the Athenian empire would not last forever, and if they violated the established norms of justice and decency their fall "would be a signal for the most extreme vengeance and an example for the world to contemplate." The Athenians insisted that they live in the present and must do what is necessary to preserve their empire. The Melians countered with the argument that the Athenian empire was best served by a neutral and friendly Melos. The generals explained that their empire is held together by power (*dunamis*, power in action) and the fear it inspired. Other island states would interpret Melian neutrality as a sign of Athenian weakness, and it would therefore serve as a stimulus for revolt. "The fact that you are islanders and weaker than others make it all the more imperative that you should not defy the masters of the sea."<sup>43</sup> Contemporary Greeks would have been shocked by Athens' rejection of the Melian offer of neutrality on the grounds that "your hostility (*echthra*) cannot so hurt us as your friendship

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 6.16–19.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 5.89.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 5.91–99.

(*philia*).<sup>44</sup> Friendship was widely recognized as the cement that held the polis together. Fifteen years into the war, the Athenians had inverted a core Greek value.

The Melian refusal to submit led to a siege of the town by a rump force the departing Athenians left behind. Melian attempts to break out were unsuccessful, and the following winter they surrendered. The Athenians put all the men to the sword and sold the women and children into slavery. They repopulated the city with their own colonists.<sup>45</sup>

Melian refusal to submit to Athenian demands offers considerable empirical support for Diodotus' arguments about why deterrence fails. It also suggests another set of reasons why neither deterrence nor compulsion are likely to succeed in cases where honor is at stake. The Melian encounter is quite different from the other cases in which the spirit was the primary motivator of the target city: Corcyra's failure to compel Corinth to withdraw from Epidamnus (case 3) and Athens' failure to deter Corinth by allying with Corcyra (case 4). Thucydides tells us that the Corinthians were motivated by hatred and that their "tempers were running high" over the war with Corcyra.<sup>46</sup> The Greeks had a far more restricted and specific understanding of anger than we do.<sup>47</sup> For the Greeks, Aristotle observes, anger is "a desire, accompanied by pain, for a perceived revenge, on account of a perceived slight on the part of people who are not fit to slight one or one's own."<sup>48</sup> Anger also involves pleasure, which derives from contemplating the satisfaction that avenging the slight will provide. Such pleasure is associated with a sense of superiority, not with gain.<sup>49</sup> Without this expectation, which often rests on nothing more than hope (*elpis*), we would not allow ourselves to experience anger. To do so in circumstances where we are powerless, Aristotle contends, would only enhance our sense of humiliation, which is why women and slaves must control their tempers. Pain and pleasure, and even more, the combination of the two, obfuscate (*episkotein*) our judgments because "we do not render judgments in the same way when we are suffering and rejoicing, or loving and hating."<sup>50</sup> Thucydides appears to share this understanding of anger. His Athenians told the Spartan assembly on the eve of war that people who are accustomed to being treated as equals take more umbrage at small sleights, real or imagined, than they do at being

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 5.95.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 5.115.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 1.25.3, 1.31.

<sup>47</sup> David Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 41–76.

<sup>48</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 2.2 (1378a31–33), in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2152–69; David Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 41–76.

<sup>49</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 2.2 (1378b23–25); *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.8 (1117a5–15).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 1.1 (1354b8–13), 1.2 (1356a15–1676).

openly robbed.<sup>51</sup> Later in the history he observes that “it seems that men are more angry when they are wronged than when they suffer violence.”<sup>52</sup> The Corinthians were emotionally aroused because of their anger and accordingly engaged in wishful thinking and sought a goal that by definition was not amenable to compromise.

In contrast to the Corinthians, the Melian commissioners were cool but committed. They raised the prospect of Sparta coming to their aid, but seemed to realize that this was unlikely as the retribution they warned Athens about was in the indefinite future when it had succumbed to unnamed superior forces. The commissioners, and the aristocrats they represent, would rather have died fighting—and fully expected to—than renounce their independence, because in their scheme of things it was what makes life worth living. People who unafraid of death cannot effectively be compelled to give up their autonomy.

As with the Mytilenean debate, the Melian dialogue must be read in political context. What is relevant here is the striking contrast between Athens in 416 and at the outset of the war. In 431, Pericles understood that the overriding foreign policy interest of Athens was preservation of its empire and this was based on naval power *and* legitimacy. To maintain *hēgemonia*, Athens had to act in accord with the principles and values that it espoused and offer positive political and economic benefits to allies. Post-Periclean leaders consistently chose power over principle, and by doing so, alienated allies and third parties, lost *hēgemonia*, and weakened Athens' power base. Viewed in this light, the Melian dialogue and the Sicilian expedition are not only radical departures from rational self-interest, but the almost inevitable result of the shift in the basis of Athenian authority and influence from *hēgemonia* to *archē*.

Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War is rich in irony. Athens, the tyrant, jettisoned the traditional bonds and obligations of reciprocity in expectation of greater freedom and rewards only to become trapped by a new set of more onerous obligations. The post-Periclean empire had to maintain its *archē* by constantly demonstrating its power and will to use it. Toward this end, it had to keep expanding, a requirement beyond the capabilities of any state. The Melian operation was part of the run-up to the invasion of Sicily, where the Athenians would be defeated, and most of the survivors reduced to the status of Syracusan slaves.

Another irony surrounds the failure of compellence at Melos. To the extent the Athenians expected their compellence threats to succeed—and their commissioners seemed surprised by the Melian decision to resist—they had not made the connection between the Melian arguments and their own response to Persia. Twice, they resisted the Persians against overwhelming

<sup>51</sup> Thucydides, 1.77.4.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.46.5.

odds, trusting in hope and luck, and were moved to do so by their spirit; they preferred to die than to surrender. Athenian failure to understand this most relevant of precedents is another indication of how far they had moved from core values that constitute Greekness. They had become like the Persians. They made the same arguments—resistance is futile—that the Persians made to them (at least in Herodotus's account), while the Melians parrot back the rebuttals the Athenians made to the Persians.<sup>53</sup>

For Thucydides, Athens' great mistake was to remove itself from the web of reciprocal obligations that bound individuals and poleis to one another. It might be said to have rebelled against the community of Greeks. It did so for the same reasons that tyrants did: ambition fueled by power and reluctance to be constrained by norms in the pursuit of further wealth and power. Once outside this community, it had no choice but to trust in displays of power (*dunamis*) and threat-based strategies of conflict management (in the form of alliances, deterrence, and compellence). The former compelled Athens to expand beyond its capabilities, while the latter proved relatively ineffective. The problem was not Athenian strategies of conflict management but the inappropriate nature of Athenian goals.

## CONCLUSIONS

Plato and Aristotle emphasize the beneficial consequences of reason. It has the power to restrain appetite and spirit and to educate them to cooperate with it toward the end of a happy life. Reason works by reflecting on one's life experiences and inferring general lessons from them. For this process to work properly, individuals must be trained from childhood to exercise their reason and be exposed to good role models to start them down the appropriate paths. Reason and example lead to more sophisticated appetites and deeper understandings of how the spirit is best expressed and satisfied. Reason and the self-control it can impose are clearly envisaged by Plato and Aristotle as elite attributes. Ordinary people lack the leisure, education, and other advantages that might allow them to develop an interest in a higher form of life and the self-control it requires. Both philosophers recognize this problem and (in part for this reason) neither favors democratic regimes. Aristotle's preferred government is the polity, in which aristocrats rule, but are to some extent constrained by public opinion. Plato wants philosophers to rule and everyone else to be socialized into accepting lesser roles. His *Republic* and *Laws* are thought experiments because he recognizes that such regimes are impossible to create and would be short-lived if they ever could be brought into being.

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<sup>53</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories of Herodotus*, George Rawlinson, trans., (New York: Knopf, 1997), 5.96–97, 8.133, 14–144.

Plato and Aristotle write about a very sophisticated kind of reason that they envisage as a fundamental human impulse, but one that requires special conditions and training to properly exercise its power. Aristotle also allows for a somewhat less elevated form of reason (*phrōnesis*), often translated as practical wisdom or prudence. It encompasses what we moderns call strategic reason because it teaches us the most efficacious and likely ways of achieving our goals. It transcends strategic reason, because it also allows—indeed, requires—us to reflect upon our experiences to help formulate reasonable and attainable goals.<sup>54</sup> By doing so, it habituates us to the kind of self-reflection and behavioral change that is associated with the higher form of reason.

Plato (427–347) and Aristotle (384–322) attempt to mobilize reason—or reason and habit, in the case of Aristotle—as the foundation for durable political orders. Plato’s attempt is entirely utopian, while Aristotle’s is more practical, but limited to the elite in largely aristocratic regimes. Plato and Aristotle were both aware of the downside of reason: in their view, a major reason why traditional orders collapsed in Greece had to do with the tendency of intellectuals to interrogate the customs of their cities in light of their growing experience with the practices of other Greek and non-Greek societies. Sophists in particular took a special pleasure in exposing *nomos* (rules, laws, conventions, and practices) as man-made, arbitrary, and used by elites to justify their special privileges. When *nomos* lost its gods-given character, people of all classes felt less constrained by it. Through a negative, reinforcing cycle of deeds (*erga*) and words (*logoi*)—that Thucydides describes in conjunction with his depiction of the civil war in Corcyra—words and conventions alike lost their meaning or were so twisted to justify the most destructive kinds of behavior.<sup>55</sup> Unlike Thucydides, Plato and Aristotle hoped that higher forms of reason might provide a way out of this impasse.<sup>56</sup>

Sophocles and Thucydides were more in tune with practical realities and very aware of the potential that reason had to undermine order. They recognize that too much trust in the power of reason leads to hubris and tragedy. Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannis* is a cautionary tale about reason.<sup>57</sup> Oedipus used his powerful intellect to benefit Thebes by answering the riddle of the Sphinx. Despite dire warnings (from his wife and the seer Teresias) about the consequences of his quest, Oedipus continued his quest to explain the cause of the plague afflicting his city. This brought death to his wife and blinding and the life of a beggar upon himself. Bernard Knox contends that Oedipus, performed in the late 420s, is a thinly-veiled portrayal of Periclean and

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<sup>54</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in J. Barnes, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. I, 1729–1921 (1142a).

<sup>55</sup> Thucydides, 3.82.

<sup>56</sup> For a discussion, see Lebow, *Tragic Vision of Politics*, 293–300.

<sup>57</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, R. D. Daw, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

post-Periclean Athens. Oedipus' intellectual prowess became impulsiveness, his decisiveness thoughtlessness, and his sense of mastery finds expression as intolerance to opposition. Oedipus' fall may be intended to presage that of Athens and for the same reasons. Victor Ehrenberg's suggestion argues that Oedipus offered an even broader warning about the consequences of Periclean rationalism.<sup>58</sup>

Thucydides offers a parallel account to Sophocles. He describes Pericles as the very exemplar of a good leader, calling him *dunatōtatos*, (literally, the most able man) who won the support of the *dēmos* because he put the city's interest above his own.<sup>59</sup> His narrative of the war nevertheless makes it apparent that Pericles made a grievous miscalculation. He welcomed the Corinthian-Corcyraean conflict as a low-cost opportunity to enhance Athenian power. He appears to have reasoned that Athenian support of Corcyra would deter Corinth from attacking, but if deterrence failed, Sparta would nevertheless remain neutral. A thoughtful planner, he had a fall-back strategy to cope with his worst-case outcome of war with Sparta. He would not oppose the expected invasion of Attica, but conduct a low-key campaign of naval harassment in and around the Peloponnese. Spartiates would become increasingly frustrated at their inability to engage Athens and tire of war and the peace party would return to power.<sup>60</sup> Pericles miscalculated every step of his elaborate scenario and his alliance with Corcyra was the initial *hamartia* of the Athenian tragedy. A careful reading of Thucydides indicates that he was not blind to Pericles' failing and understood that his hubris was emblematic of Athens.

Reason is a dangerous thing when it allows leaders to construct elaborate scenarios leading to favorable outcomes that ignore chance and the ways in which emotions are likely to influence the calculations of other actors. It leads to *hubris*, which the Greeks considered a category error, because those who suffer from it compare themselves to gods in their ability to predict and control the future. It is not a problem unique to Greeks. One need only think of the striking similarities between Athenian calculations in 431 and those of the Germans in 1914. The German leadership relied on an equal complex scenario with all sorts of fall-back positions. Russia was expected to remain neutral, but if not, France would surely stand aside. If not, Britain would remain neutral and the Schlieffen Plan would allow Germany to occupy Paris before the Russian steamroller could threaten Berlin. None of these expectations were realized—and other events, not envisaged, occurred—including

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<sup>58</sup> Bernard Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes* (New York: Norton, 1970), 61–106; Segal, *Oedipus Tyrannus: Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge* (New York: Twayne, 1993), 11–13; Victor Ehrenberg, *Sophocles and Pericles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1954), 67–69.

<sup>59</sup> Thucydides, 2.34.6, 2.65.8.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.139–45.

the plague, the death of Pericles in Athens, and a prolonged war of attrition, in both cases with disastrous consequences for Athens and Germany.

Thucydides' treat of deterrence and compellence encourages a number of propositions and related policy lessons:

- 1) There is not much convincing evidence of general and immediate deterrence success. Policy makers nevertheless put considerable faith in deterrence, routinely expecting it to prevent challenges and revolts. One reason they do this is their overvaluation of reason, both as a source of comforting scenarios and with it, their belief that others are not only rational, but understand reason and its strategic implications the same way they do.
- 2) Reason leads analysts, strategists, and academics to increasingly complex and abstruse calculations of the military balance and tactics for demonstrating resolve on the assumption that signals of this kind significantly affect the cost-calculus of those whom deterrence and compellence are practiced against. There is little evidence—not only in Thucydides, but in modern critiques of deterrence—that these factors are nearly as critical as supposed.<sup>61</sup> They do, however, delude policy makers who practice threat-based strategies by leading them to overvalue the probability of success when their calculations of the balance of power and resolve come out favorably.
- 3) Like any other strategy of conflict management, deterrence, and compellence only take on meaning in context. Abstract universal models have little applicability to individual cases where idiosyncratic factors can, and often do, prove decisive. This said, there are effective ways of conceptualizing context and perhaps the most important pertains to the motives of the target state or leaders. Deterrence and compellence probably have their greatest likelihood of success against targets motivated by appetite—that is, attempting to make material gains. Leaders in these circumstances are more likely to make rational calculations of cost and gain and might be persuaded to limit their demands or goals to the extent that they see them as too costly and are offered some support in achieving at least some of their objectives.
- 4) Deterrence and compellence are least successful against leaders who are responding largely to the spirit. To the extent that the concessions demanded by compellence are considered more intolerable than defeat or

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<sup>61</sup> For example, see Lebow, *Between Peace and War*; Jervis, Lebow, and Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence*; William C. Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions During the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Ted Hopf, *Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and American Policy in the Third World, 1965–1990* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Eric Herring, *Danger and Opportunity: Explaining International Crisis Outcomes* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1995); James W. Davis, Jr., *Threats and Promises: The Pursuit of International Influence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

death, threats of force cannot possibly succeed. When leaders are angry because of perceived slights, deterrence, and compellence are likely to make matters worse because of the additional humiliation associated with compliance. This is all the more likely when deterrence is accompanied by bellicose rhetoric, forward deployments, and other measures that many deterrence theorists consider essential to demonstrating capability and resolve. Corinth's response to Corcyra and Athens illustrates this phenomenon in Thucydides, and the practice of Soviet-American deterrence in the late 1950s and early 1960s had similar effects for much the same reason.<sup>62</sup>

- 5) Deterrence is also a difficult, perhaps even an inappropriate, strategy to use against targets who are motivated by fear. It is likely to confirm their worse suspicions and intensify conflict by convincing them that unless they stand firm or even issue counter-challenges, they will be perceived as weak and subject to greater threats and demands. Soviet-American relations once again offer an illustration of the counterproductive nature of threats in this situation; they were responsible for a cycle of escalation that led to two Berlin crises and the Cuban missile crisis. Diodotus' argument is relevant to this situation; restraint and concession can be more effective than confrontation and draconian punishment. In our era, there is compelling evidence that John Kennedy's willingness to compromise in the missile crisis reassured Khrushchev and paved the way for a subsequent détente.<sup>63</sup>

For Greeks, the anonym and antidote to hubris is *sōphrosunē*. It is often translated as self-control, but has a wide lexical field that encompasses common sense, self-restraint, self-control, prudence, and balanced judgment. It is a state of mind, not a course of conduct, and was considered the highest form of wisdom. Like *phrōnesis*, it is the product of reason and experience. It leads people to recognize that too much faith in reason or power is more likely to lead to, rather than ward off, tragedy. Put succinctly, it suggests that less may be more. Some self-restraint in goals and efforts to advance them at the expense of others may bring more rewards and security in the longer term. *Sōphrosunē* encourages recognition that strategies like deterrence and compellence are fraught with unforeseen consequences and must be used with extreme caution, and in combination with other strategies that might reduce their counterproductive potential. Such a mindset is sorely missing among those responsible for American foreign policy.

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<sup>62</sup> Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), chaps. 2–4.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, chaps. 2–4, 6, 13–14.