

The Peloponnesian War: Continuous War and Corrosive Effects on Democracy

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ABSTRACT: The article examines the corrosive effects on democracy stem from protracted war by examining the Peloponnesian War paradigm.

Key Words: protracted war, Peloponnesian War, Thucydides.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Peloponnesian War provides a number of lessons on the corrosive effects of long wars on the democratic governance of nation-states. The present article examines some key issues and consequences of protracted wars on the viability and functioning of democratic systems of government and the ability of such systems to overcome challenges. Democracies can learn from Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War and profit by the experience of the ancient Athenians and the Spartans.

II. DISCUSSION

Democracy is a system of government in which all people of a state decide collectively about its affairs. In a war, democracies have to deal with multiple, difficult, and competing choices that can have a corrosive effect on their institutions and governance. Such an effect becomes stronger when a war becomes a protracted conflict.

First, democracies should learn that a protracted conflict usually has a negative impact on an economy and undermines state's prosperity and people's happiness. For example, the Sicilian Expedition not only resulted in a strategic military defeat for Athens during the Peloponnesian War, but it also exhausted its treasury. At the end, both exhausted opponents became vulnerable to the Persians and Macedonians. Democracies, in peacetime, usually accumulate public wealth while wars usually destroy state's resources and infrastructure. One way to protect democracies from this type of erosion is by establishing deterrence strategies or defensive positions to avoid war in order to cope with potential enemies. However, if the conflict breaks out, democracies should be prepared for peace settlements whenever possible, as a prolonged war usually leads a democratic society into economic retardation or decline.

Democracies should make "efforts to help build democracies" as a coalition of democratic states can secure prosperity and international cooperation. Through such efforts as well as by participating in international institutions to avoid war, democracies can ensure fairness not simply imposing their own self-interest. Rather, compromise decisions should be reached in favor of common international objectives. Thus, justice can enable continuous security and prosperity among nations, while injustice cannot serve individual national interests forever. Such evidence stems from the Peloponnesian War. The Athenians twice interpreted justice differently when addressing people in Mytilene and Melos. In the latter case, the Athenians acted against their own democratic ethos and used their power unjustly by attacking Melos and executing prisoners of war for gaining temporary objectives. However, such a decision did not help them to win the war.

Second, democracies should learn that entering in a war, the public opinion matters as the war's struggle challenges the popular will to fight and win. In a protracted war this issue worsens as people confront mounting casualties and economic impacts for a long period; facts that can have negative effects on their courage, patriotic spirit and willingness to fight. A democratic government has to communicate effectively the purpose of a continuing war instead of confining civil liberties. The experience of history shows that wars were lost and nation-states succumbed to external enemies not from the actual military engagements with the enemy but primarily from internal decline due to the lack of enthusiasm, faith, general temperament and skill of the nation's leadership, combined with the negative effects of exhaustion in war. In order to cope with this reality, democracies need to proactively work to inform both foreign and domestic audiences for the purpose of the war and the need to maintain the necessary will to prevail. Democracies should act as Pericles who in the second

year of the Peloponnesian War called and inspired the Athenians to hold the good of the state above private concerns, when their morale plummeted by the Spartans' second raid on their lands.

Third, democratic nation-states should become involved in war on the basis of need or calculated ends and interest and not because of emotion. Democracies have no other choice than to respond when they engage in self-defense against external aggression (a war of necessity). But, the strategic decision for a war of choice requires clear and sustainable goals and objectives, more complex calculations, the exercise of all elements of national power, and a willingness to end the armed conflict once the goals have been achieved. In contrast, recounting from Thucydides that the Athenians, driven by their emotions, refused Sparta's offer of peace and alliance after the tactical defeat of the Spartan contingent at the island of Pylos and wanted to gain something more. This decision differed dramatically from the initial Athenians' defensive strategy that introduced justifiable ends, ways and means. But, it was the success of this strategy that falsely emboldened them to seek total victory over Sparta and not agree to the peace.

Finally, democracies that are involved in a prolonged war need to maintain strong leadership and a consistent, but sufficiently adaptable strategy for winning. This must take place even if the political leadership may change because of domestic political developments. Such consistency in strategic goals is a challenge in the context of protracted symmetric and asymmetric conflicts. Thucydides explains how the change of leadership in Athens affected the war after Pericles' death. Pericles had set a winning strategy for the Athenians. According to this strategy, the Athenians should have primarily relied on their naval power. They should not have attempted new land conquests endangering the city of Athens itself, whatever the length of the war. The Athenians did exactly the opposite with the disastrous Sicilian Expedition.

The great Chinese philosopher of war Sun Tzu agrees with this notions. He teach us all toy avoid protracted operations by saying that "we have heard of stupid haste in war, cleverness has never been seen associatedwith long delays, there is no instance of a country having benefited from prolonged warfare.In war, then, let your great object be victory, not lengthy campaigns."

III. CONCLUSION

Protracted wars can and do have corrosive effects on the functioning of democratic systems of government in nation-states. These effects include negative economic and sociopolitical impacts. Thucydides describes how the collective strategic decision-making by the democratic system of Athens led to its eventual defeat by the oligarchic regime of Sparta in a protracted Greek war. The experience of the Peloponnesian War teaches the importance of sound strategic decision making for both large and smaller nation-states when they engage in war and, especially, in-protracted war. Such armed conflicts can affect not only the existing system of democratic governance for a nation-state but it's very national survival.

ENDNOTES

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