

# The pursuit of virtue over strength in history of the peloponnesian war



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In *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides claims that his account of the Peloponnesian war, “ is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public but was done to last for ever” (Brown, Nardin, & Rengger, 2014, p. 35). This statement is correct, as different interpretations of his work are being discussed thousands of years later. The current Trump Administration, for instance, seems to prefer the realist interpretation of Thucydides, where international relations are defined through raw strength and power. However, this interpretation lacks an understanding of the fundamental message of Thucydides’ work. This paper argues that, Thucydides’ reveals that when a state’s interests are pursued outside of the confines of virtue and morality, it can result in the destruction of a state. As a result, it is within a state’s self-interest to pursue virtue over strength. First, this paper will examine how the power of a state must be attained and maintained through virtue, as it provides a state with the moral authority to build an empire. Then, this paper will discuss how the pursuit of strength results in destruction, which are contrary to the interests of the state.

To begin, it is important to understand the different perceptions of self-interest between the Trump administration and Thucydides. The Trump team’s interpretation of Thucydides is based on the assumption that it is within a state’s self-interest to act in accordance with their strength. When a state is powerful enough, it is within their self-interest to continue to use that strength to maintain their power. As such, weaker states must adapt to the decisions made by stronger states. This is embodied in the Athenian argument in the Melian dialogue that “ the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in the fact the strong do what they

have to do and the weak accept what they have to accept” (Brown et al., 2014, p. 55). Given that Melos was a smaller and weaker state, the Athenians argued that they had the power to conquer the island and thus, the Melians should surrender. Despite this, when one considers the entirety of *History*, Thucydides presents a different definition of self-interest, where it is within a state’s self-interest to act virtuously.

The power of a state is gained and maintained through virtuous actions, as it gives a state the moral authority required for leadership.

The Athenians gained the authority to lead the Greek world, by meeting a high moral standard through their virtuous actions. Throughout his funeral oration, Pericles presents Athens as an “ education to Greece”, as it is the model free and tolerant society (Brown et al., 2014, p. 38-39). This is evident in their system of democracy where “ power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people” (Brown et al., 2014, p. 37). Additionally, Pericles emphasizes how “ everyone is equal before the law” and “ no one [...] is kept in political obscurity because of poverty” (Brown et al., 2014, p. 38).

Furthermore, Pericles maintains that Athens “ make[s] friends by doing good to others”, which makes “[their] friendship all the more reliable, since [they] want to keep alive the gratitude of those who are in our debt by showing continued good will to them” (Brown et al., 2014, p. 39). Altogether, Athens is respected in the Greek World because they “ are free and tolerant in [their] private lives; but in public affairs they keep to the law” (Brown et al., 2014, 38). As a result of these actions, Athens had gained moral authority in the eyes of smaller city-states, and consequently, the Athenians were able to build their empire through the creation of the Delian League. This helped the <https://assignbuster.com/the-pursuit-of-virtue-over-strength-in-history-of-the-peloponnesian-war/>

Athenian empire grow in its strength as allies “ were to pay a [...] sum of money” and the “ Athenian navy grew strong at their expense” (Thucydides, 1972, I. 93). In order to gain the power to build an empire, a state needs to act virtuously to build up their moral authority, so that smaller states are inclined to support them.

In contrast, when a state abuses their power by not acting virtuously, it reduces the power of the state as it undermines credibility and moral authority.

As the Athenians begin to abuse their power, they slowly lose their moral authority. This was the warning issued to the Athenians during the Melian Dialogue. In response to the Athenian threat to invade the island of Melos, the Melians implore the Athenians to treat other states with moderation and with fairness. The Melians insist that, virtue is “ a principle that is to the general good of all men [...] in the case of all who fall into danger there should be a thing as fair play and just dealing [...] this is a principle which affects you as much as anybody” (Brown et al., 2014, p. 55). This moment served as a turning point for the Athenians in the war, as it was a reminder of how the Athenians previously benefitted from acting virtuously. If the Athenians were to abandon these principles, it could hurt the foundation of their empire. As such it was within their interests to continue this behaviour, rather than abusing their power in the pursuit of strength.

In order to maintain power, it is within a state’s self-interest to pursue virtuous actions, as these actions solidify the moral authority required in leadership. However, when a state defines their self-interest as pursuing

their strength at the expense of other states, they lose the ability to maintain their political legitimacy. As such, while the Athenian conquest of Melos is a demonstration of their strength, it also undermines the key principles that allowed them to build their empire. Consequently, this is seen as the beginning of the end for Athens as, over the course of the war, they slowly lose the moral authority to maintain their power. Although states, may have the strength to grow their power through the subjection of others, that does not mean that this is the rational approach. Rather, it is within a state's interest to act virtuously in the pursuit and maintenance of power.

Furthermore, the pursuit of self-interest through strength comes at the expense of an orderly society. When states perceive their interests to be aligned with the pursuit of strength, they are more likely to go to war, which comes with catastrophic results.

When states perceive their interests to be aligned with their strength, they are more likely to go to war to diffuse any threat to their strength. In this context, war is perceived as a rational action that can maintain national interests. For instance, as Athenian strength became dominant, it was perceived as a threat to the Spartans, who pursued war in response. As Thucydides outlines in the beginning, " what made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this instilled in Sparta" (Brown et al., 2014, p. 36). Following the events of the Persian War, the Athenians were gaining both diplomatic and militaristic strength, which was perceived as a threat to Spartan interests. The Athenians extended their influence in the Greek World through the formation of the Delian League, where

member-states would provide a tribute to Athens in exchange for its  
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protection. The tributes paid by the Delian League to Athens helped with the growth of the Athenian Navy, bolstering its military strength.

In response to this growth of Athenian strength, Spartans felt as if their position in the Greek World were being threatened, and pursued war. As highlighted by the Corinthians during the Debate at Sparta, the Athenians were perceived as the innovative leaders of the Greek World. While “[Sparta was] hanging back, [the Athenians] never hesitate; while [Spartans] stay at home, they are always abroad” (I. 76). Moreover, the Athenian “is always an innovator, quick to form a resolution and quick at carrying it out” (I. 75). The growth of Athenian strength threatened Sparta’s place in the Greek World as it became clear that the Athenian Empire was the dominant city-state in the Peloponnese. In order to prevent Athenian strength from eclipsing the strength of Sparta, it was believed to be in the Spartans best interest to go to war, despite the warnings of King Archidamus. As a result, from perceiving self-interest to be defined by pursuing strength, Sparta and her allies were willing to go to war, to preserve Spartan interests.

Although it was perceived to be within the state’s interest to pursue war, Thucydides’ reveals how this interpretation of self-interest came at the expense of good and orderly society, as it results in a disregard for the conventions that govern society.

For instance, the events of the Corcyra Civil War reveal the worst of human nature, as war disregarded the rules that governed society. The Corcyreans massacred their own citizens, as they were accused “of conspiring to overthrow the democracy” and “men were often killed on grounds of

personal hatred of by [...] their debtors” (III. 241). Furthermore, “ there were fathers who killed their sons; men were dragged from the temples or butchered on the very altars” (III. 241).

Moreover, the Athenian defeat at Sicily resulted in a complete disregard for the traditional customs that are observed during times of war. For instance, traditionally it was an “ annual custom [to] give a public funeral for those who had [...] died in the war” (Brown et al., 2014, p. 36). In contrast, due to the detrimental effects of the battle on Athenian morale, they “ were so oppressed by the present weight of their misfortune that they never even thought of asking for permission to take up their dead or the wreckage” (VII. 526). So “ the dead were unburied, and when any man recognized one of his friends lying among them, he was filled with grief and fear” (VII. 528).

Both the Civil War at Corcyra and the Athenian Expedition reveal that war, although pursued with the intention of gaining strength, is not necessarily an honourable pursuit. It results in a disregard for the basic conventions that govern society and immense human misery.

Though the Spartans pursued their interests by challenging the strength of the Athenian Empire, the war had resulted in a complete breakdown of the customs and traditions that defined good and orderly societies. As a result, the Spartans and the rest of the Greek world, would have been better off if the Spartans had perceived their interests to be in accordance with virtue as opposed to strength.

Overall, Thucydides’ work reveals that it is not within a state’s interest to pursue strength. Rather, states are better off pursuing their interests within <https://assignbuster.com/the-pursuit-of-virtue-over-strength-in-history-of-the-peloponnesian-war/>

the confines of virtue and morality. This is because power is gained through virtuous actions, as outlined in Pericles Funeral Oration. The Athenians were able to build their empire due to the moral authority that was produced through their virtuous actions. However, when that power is abused, states risk losing their moral authority and thus, their power. Furthermore, when states perceive their interests to be defined through strength, they are more likely to go to war, resulting in the destruction of society. Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War reveals the disadvantages of raw strength, and the benefits of virtuous actions. As a result, states in the modern era should act accordingly.

## References

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