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Donald Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War*. New York: Viking, 2003. Pp. xxvii, 511. ISBN 0670032115.

Review by James P. Holoka, Eastern Michigan University (jholoka@emich.edu)

Donald Kagan is the dean of American ancient historians.<sup>1</sup> As a professor at Yale for many years<sup>2</sup> and the lead author of a textbook, *The Western Heritage*, now in its eighth edition, he knows how to explain the complexities of Greek and Roman history in a palatable manner to an undergraduate audience—probably the entry-level readership for the book under review. Not surprisingly, then, this 500-page book, an epitome of his earlier four-volume *magnum opus* on the Peloponnesian War,<sup>3</sup> features clear, workmanlike prose undisfigured by footnotes<sup>4</sup> and parceled in small units easily surveyed in a nine-page table of contents. Seven parts comprise thirty-seven chapters, with an average of five subsections per chapter. A helpful array of twenty-nine maps is a further enhancement.<sup>5</sup>

One may imagine three categories of readers for this book: (A) those with no familiarity with Thucydides; (B) those with a passing acquaintance dating, say, to a college-level Great Books course; and (C) those with a more intimate knowledge, such as graduate students and professional historians. I will specify the value of Kagan's book for members of each group.

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(A) Readers in the first category will get from Kagan's history both more and less than they might by reading Thucydides himself: to start with, an account of the entire war. Thucydides' narrative breaks off after autumn 411, likely because death supervened (ca. 397) before he could complete his history. Events of the last six and a half years of the war must be cobbled together, as Kagan skillfully does, from the works of later, lesser writers, principally Xenophon's *Hellenica* and Plutarch's *Lives*. Thucydides' and Xenophon's account of the war—in virtually all its details—is enriched by Kagan's thorough knowledge of other relevant ancient sources and his exhaustive command of modern scholarship. By no mean

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<sup>1</sup> Among other honors, he was chosen to deliver the National Endowment for the Humanities Jefferson Lecture for 2005: "In Defense of History" <[www.neh.gov/whoweare/kagan/lecture.html](http://www.neh.gov/whoweare/kagan/lecture.html)>.

<sup>2</sup> On his brilliance as a teacher, see Barry Strauss's appreciation, "The Scholar and Teacher" <[www.neh.gov/whoweare/kagan/appreciation.html](http://www.neh.gov/whoweare/kagan/appreciation.html)>

<sup>3</sup> *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, The Archidamian War, The Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition, and The Fall of the Athenian Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 1969/1974/1981/1987).

<sup>4</sup> There are, however, frequent parenthetical citations of passages in Thucydides and a few other ancient authors. An appendix on "Sources for the History of the Peloponnesian War" offers a succinct review of the ancient sources and landmarks in nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship.

<sup>5</sup> These are mostly newly drawn and represent an improvement over those in the four-volume version (where vol. I has none at all). Note these *corrigenda*: on Map 4, for "Oenos" read "Oenoe"; on Map 25, for "Chios" (just SE of Attica) read "Ceos" and for "Carysus" read "Carystus"; on Map 28, strike the reference to "note 59" and note that the compass symbol is erroneous (north being in fact west) and that the indication of Pericles' position at the battle is correct (i.e. reflects Xenophon), despite the text on p. 456. Among a half dozen or so errors in the text, only one could lead to confusion: on p. 151, line 8, for "as the Athenians had been" read "as the Ambracians had been."

feat of compression and synthesis, Kagan steers safely between the Scylla of overwhelming detail<sup>6</sup> and the Charybdis of oversimplification.<sup>7</sup>

Kagan provides a comprehensive, nuanced history of the Peloponnesian War that corrects Thucydides' biases against Cleon and others, blind spots, e.g., regarding economic factors,<sup>8</sup> and distortions, especially in reporting speeches. Though all this is to the good, the reader will miss the unique character of the ancient historian's account, with its distinctive prejudices, anti-Herodotean aspirations to strict rationality, and thrilling portrayals of major figures through such tour-de-force renditions as Pericles' *Epitaphios*, the debate over Mytilene, or the "Melian Dialogue." The bottom line: those desiring to experience "Thucydides" as a giant in the western historiographical tradition must, naturally, read him in his own words (or translated words). But those who seek simply an accessible, reliable, and thorough description of the Peloponnesian War based on a lifetime of research will be well served by Kagan's book.

(B) Readers who have encountered Thucydides directly or in textbook chapters based on him will remember certain elements of a "common knowledge" tradition: the sharp distinction between short-fuse precipitants (the Athenian alliance with Corcyra, the revolt of Potidaea, the Megarian decree) and the longer-fuse "true cause"—growing Spartan fear of growing Athenian power since the end of the Persian Wars; the faith that Pericles' contemplated war of attrition could have brought ultimate victory and that later leaders, like Cleon and Alcibiades, were to blame for ruinous decisions that he would have avoided—to reject the Spartan peace offer after the battle of Pylos/Sphacteria in 425 and to mount the ill-fated Sicilian expedition in 415.

Kagan problematizes much of this historical *fable convenue* by stressing the financial limitations on any protracted war and the difficulty of holding the Athenian populace to an unprecedented strategy of defensive warfare. In addition, he amplifies two important motifs in the ancient sources: the shifting and decisive role of the Persians in the latter stages of the war, and the trumping of city-state patriotism throughout the war by allegiance to oligarchic or democratic political factions. He also clarifies the logic of decisions often facilely dismissed as foolhardy, showing that there were sensible justifications even for the expedition against Syracuse, *as it was initially conceived*:

The growth of Syracusan power since 424, however, may well have increased their [*sic*] scope of Athenian goals. Unchecked, Syracuse might gain control of much of

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<sup>6</sup> Thucydides certainly can overwhelm, assuming as he does an audience fascinated with the myriad details of his subject. Further, on the level of word-choice and syntax, he writes a singularly dense and intricate prose. The degree of difficulty in reading his history may be gauged from the scale of modern commentaries devoted to it: e.g., E.F. Poppo and I.F. Stahl, ed., *Thucydidis de Bello Peloponnesiaco libri octo*, 4 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1875–1889), A.W. Gomme, A. Andrewes, and K.J. Dover, ed., *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Pr, 1945–1981), and S. Hornblower, ed., *A Commentary on Thucydides*, 2 vols. [of a projected three] (Oxford: OUP, 1997/2005).

<sup>7</sup> In my view, Kagan sometimes tacks a bit close to Scylla, e.g., in retailing the intentions and machinations of participants in the Argive alliance after the signing of the Peace of Nicias or the oligarchic reaction of 411–410. But these are quibbles.

<sup>8</sup> Thanks chiefly to B.D. Meritt, H.T. Wade-Gery, and M.F. McGregor, *The Athenian Tribute Lists*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 1939), vols. 2–4 (Princeton, NJ: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1949/1950/1953).

Sicily and tip the balance in the Greek world in favor of the Peloponnesians. Many or most of the Athenians ... might have believed that settling affairs in the Athenian interest demanded the defeat or even the conquest of Syracuse. A surprise attack directly on the city from the sea might succeed with only sixty ships, as might an attempt to recruit Sicilian allies who could overawe or defeat the Syracusans. In either case, the risk to Athens would be low (255–56).<sup>9</sup>

One cannot in a brief review convey the scope and cogency of Kagan's analyses of the Thucydidean presentation of the war and the decision-making of the parties to it. His re-evaluation does not only, or even mainly, debunk our principal ancient source: it improves our understanding of the war through judicious supplementation and refinement of that source. Kagan's guiding principle may be seen in this telling remark in a discussion of the oligarchic revolution of 411: "If Thucydides is mistaken or misinformed about motives in this instance, he may be equally wrong in other cases, so we must not simply accept his opinions without question but examine each case on its own merits" (365).

(C) Serious students of Thucydides or the military history of ancient Greece generally will discover little new here; rather they will value Kagan's book as a handy précis of his four-volume masterwork, to which they may return for details of the scholarly argumentation and the perceptive engagement with modern historians that underlies all his writing.

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Donald Kagan has distilled his enviable erudition in a dependable and approachable history of the Peloponnesian War. That his book has attracted attention even in the popular press is most encouraging, for the war's lessons speak to many later conflicts, as Thucydides presciently claimed they would (1.22). Consider Kagan on the Athenians' fatally misguided prolongation of the Sicilian expedition:

Their error, in fact, is one common to powerful states, regardless of their constitutions, when they are unexpectedly thwarted by an opponent they anticipated would be weak and easily defeated. Such states are likely to view retreat as a blow to their prestige, and while unwelcome in itself, it is also an option that puts into question their strength and determination and with it their security. Support for ventures such as the Sicilian campaign generally remains strong until the prospect of victory disappears. (296)

Who cannot perceive the relevance of this to our own world?

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<sup>9</sup> Similarly, though the source in this case is Xenophon, Kagan explains the urgent "on-site" tactical and strategic considerations behind the decisions of the eight *strategoí* who failed to retrieve survivors and corpses from the sea after the battle of the Arginusae Islands in 406 (459–61).