5. What is Thucydides’ opinion of the effectiveness of democracies to fight wars?

In his classic narrative, Thucydides presents the Peloponnesian War as a cycle of violence continuously propelled by the decisions of the Spartan oligarchy and the Athenian assembly. His presentation and analysis of the conduct of Athens clearly demonstrates that he is highly skeptical of democracies’ ability to effectively fight wars. By making speeches and counter-speeches the core of his work, Thucydides emphasizes the centrality of rhetoric to decision-making and purports to show how easily self-interested demagogues convince crowds to accept hasty, unwise, and imprudent actions.

At the outbreak of war, Thucydides portrays Athens is at the height of its power. Its greatness is personified in Pericles, who Thucydides credits with wisely leading and firmly guarding the city in peace and with having great foresight in his plans for prosecuting the war. He urged the Athenians to take advantage of their navy, to keep away from the main Spartan army, and to avoid attempting to expand the empire. But once the great general died of plague only two and a half years into the war, Thucydides laments, “his successors did the exact opposite.” Adopting “methods of demagoguery,” they convinced the assembly to pursue policies that, “when successful, only brought credit and advantage to individuals, and when they failed, the whole war potential of the state was impaired” (Book II, 65). Despite his admiration for Pericles, Thucydides’ interpretation contradicts the Athenian statesman’s claim that Athenians were “capable at the same time of taking risks and of estimating them beforehand” (Book II, 40). On the contrary, demagogues like Cleon and Alcibiades appealed to the prejudices of the people for their own self-aggrandizement at the expense of the city.
As the war dragged on, some members of the Athenian Empire attempted to win their independence from the metropole. When a revolt on Lesbos was crushed in 427, Cleon convinced the assembly that it was necessary to slaughter or enslave the entire population of the chief Lesbian city of Mytilene in order to deter future rebellions. After the assembly began to have doubts, Cleon defended his position again in a second debate. In this speech he casts himself as a man of the people. Flattering his audience, he declares, “States are better governed by the man in the street than by intellectuals.” The only reason the assembly questioned the original and correct decision, he continues, is because people with “the kind of cleverness that gets out of hand” overlooked “sound common sense” and took advantage of the people’s compassion to convince them to change their minds (Book III, 37). He chides the people for listening to his opponents, who he compares to “professional lecturers,” but only because they led to people to “be traitors to your own selves” (Book III, 38; 40). After this appeal to the peoples’ anti-intellectualism, he attempts to reignite the intense emotion the Athenians felt after first learning of the revolt. “Now pay them back for it,” he urges, “and do not grow soft just at this present moment, forgetting meanwhile the danger that hung over your head then” (Book III, 40). Cleon’s motion was defeated, but Thucydides suggests his speech had a strong impact nonetheless. While “most of the citizens” wanted to reconsider their decision before the debate, after the two speeches, “the Athenians, in spite of the recent change of feeling, still held conflicting opinions, and at the show of hands were nearly equal” (Book III, 49). This was no doubt because Cleon “exercised far the greatest influence over the people” (Book III, 36).

The peoples’ susceptibility to leaders like Cleon stemmed from the ambiguity of language and the ability of sophists and demagogue to manipulate words to serve their own ends. In Thucydides’ famous analysis of the Corcyran Civil War, he explained, “To fit in with the
change of events, words, too, had to change their usual meanings.” Aggression became courage; caution became cowardice; moderation became unmanliness; and the “ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action” (Book III, 82). This distortion of language negatively impacts a democracy’s ability to wage war because it reduces debate about strategy to a combination ad-hominem attacks and fear mongering. Under such conditions the Athenians decided to invade Sicily.

The Sicilian expedition represents the antithesis of Periclean strategy. Pericles urged the Athenians to take great care of their navy. But at Sicily they risked the majority of their fleet, and ended up losing the entire armada. Pericles urged the Athenians to keep their greed under control and resist at all costs the temptation to try to expand their empire. But the Sicilian expedition was a thinly veiled attempt to conquer the whole of the island. And, according to Thucydides, this radical change in strategy was not made with proper deliberation. On the contrary, “there was a passion for the expedition which affected everyone alike.” The young dreamed of adventure in a faraway land. The old thought that at worst no harm could come to such a great force. Soldiers saw the prospect of good pay and future employment. “The result of this excessive enthusiasm of the majority,” writes Thucydides, “was that the few who actually were opposed to the expedition were afraid of being thought unpatriotic if they voted against it, and therefore kept quiet” (Book, VI, 24).

Almost immediately things began to go wrong. Alcibiades, the chief advocate of the expedition, was soon accused of vandalism and his political opponents jumped at the chance to destroy him. Alcibiades wanted to face the charges right away so he would not be sent out “in command of such a large army with such serious accusations still hanging over his head.” His enemies, however, had no such concern for the success of the operation. They “were afraid that,
if the case was brought on at once, he would have the goodwill of the army and that the people
would be lenient to him because of the popularity he had won” (Book VI, 29). It would be far
better, they reasoned, to strengthen their case in his absence.

The first bad news from the expedition inflamed public opinion. Thucydides explains
how the Athenians became paranoid, and “everything that happened was, they thought, part of a
plot aiming at setting up an oligarchy or a dictatorship.” In this “angry and suspicious mood,” the
Athenians imprisoned worthy citizens under the slightest suspicion. “Every day,” he writes,
“showed an increase in savagery and led to more arrests” (Book VI, 60). In this atmosphere, the
Athenians convinced themselves that Alcibiades was a Spartan agent and sent a trireme to
retrieve him to stand trial. Fearing for his life, Alcibiades defected to the Spartans. This left the
cautious Nicias, who had argued against the invasion, in command. He was not up to the task,
and as the Athenian situation deteriorated, he sent a letter to Athens asking for either permission
to withdraw or massive reinforcements. The Athenians sent reinforcements, but this only delayed
the defeat while increasing its scope.

The mistakes of the Athenian assembly are plain enough in Thucydides’ account, but his
analysis of Syracusan conduct further shows the historian’s skepticism of democracy. Not once
does Thucydides credit Syracusan democracy with contributing towards the city’s victory.
Instead, he stresses the importance of Athenian mistakes, Syracusan cavalry, and the Spartan and
Corinthian intervention. In fact, Syracuse’s democratic demagogue, Athenagoras, who “had very
great influence with the people,” tried to convince his listeners that any talk of Athenian invasion
was vicious and stupid hearsay (Book VI, 39). It was one of Syracuse’s generals who stood up to
Athenagoras, criticized him for making attacks on his political opponents, and advocated taking
preliminary defensive precautions and following up on the intelligence reports on the Athenian plans.

All of this is not to say that Thucydides was in favor of oligarchy or tyranny. His ideal constitution blended elements of oligarchy and democracy to check the irrational extremes that, in his view, had caused Athens so much misfortune. When, in June 411 a new oligarchical government—known as the Four Hundred—was established in Athens, Thucydides argues that before long, “it was for motives of personal ambition that most of them were following the line that is most disastrous to oligarchies when they take over from democracies…every single man, not content with being the equal of others, regards himself as greatly superior to everyone else.” The result was disagreement, discord, and suspicion in the highest reaches of government, and in the aftermath of the loss of Euboea, the Athenians ousted the Four Hundred and instituted a government that came to be known as the Five Thousand. This new constitution established a limited democratic assembly, which Thucydides praised as “a better government than ever before, at least in my time.” He praised it for having “a reasonable and moderate blending of the few and the many, and it was in this, in the first place, that made it possible for the city to recover from the bad state into which her affairs had fallen” (Book VIII, 97). Thucydides’ account breaks off abruptly soon after, but it is clear that he credited this mixed government with the recovery of the polis in the aftermath of the Sicilian disaster, which allowed the Athenians to hold out for several more years. But, from Thucydides’ view, Athens’ repeated failure to secure ultimate victory or even a favorable peace in the first decades of the war can be directly traced to the failure of democracy.