

Spring 2016

# A War Like No Other, Victor Davis Hanson

Marcus D. McCormick

*Harding University*, [mmccormick@harding.edu](mailto:mmccormick@harding.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor>

 Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

McCormick, Marcus D. (Spring 2016) "A War Like No Other, Victor Davis Hanson," *Tenor of Our Times*: Vol. 5, Article 10.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor/vol5/iss1/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Humanities at Scholar Works at Harding. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Tenor of Our Times* by an authorized editor of Scholar Works at Harding. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@harding.edu](mailto:scholarworks@harding.edu).



**A WAR LIKE NO OTHER,  
VICTOR DAVIS HANSON**

---

**By Marcus D. McCormick**

In *A War Like No Other*, Victor Davis Hanson attempts to answer the age old questions of the Peloponnesian war—Why did the war begin? What is the nature of empire? What caused Athens to fall, and the Peloponnesian coalition to prevail? Hanson posits that the war was revolutionary, and redefined Greek understanding of the world. *A War Like No Other* is topical in nature. Each section describes a certain element in the war, and how that particular element continued to shape the mind of the late 5<sup>th</sup> century Greeks. However, the true value of *A War Like No Other*, just as Thucydides intended for his history of the war to be, lies in Hanson’s grasp of the past as a tool for interpreting and understanding the present. Hanson’s comparison of the successes and blunders of the classical archetype to modern iterations enables a more complete appreciation of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* has been and is the primary source for knowledge of the conflict of Sparta and imperial Athens in the late 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Thucydides gives some biographical detail through the course of his work, and recounts his experience as the plague ravaged Periclean Athens (430 BC), his commission that he served at Amphipolis (424 BC), and the resulting exile after his he failed in delivering the besieged Athenians and allies there before the counter-attack of Brasidas.<sup>1</sup> From then on, Thucydides wandered through his time in exile, and thereby compiled his work with the purpose of it being “a possession for all time.”<sup>2</sup> The *History of the Peloponnesian War* ends abruptly with Thucydides’ death (411 BC), but Xenophon resumes the narrative in his *Hellenica*.

*A War Like No Other* divides easily into two parts—the first part is the intellectual frame of the work, whereas the second is thematic analysis of the war. In the introduction and conclusion to the work, Hanson frames the

---

<sup>1</sup> In regards to the plague and Thucydides’ experience, see Thucydides, *History of The Peloponnesian War*, Finley Jr., John H., ed. (New York: Random House, 1951): 110-113; Thucydides describes his exile and command later on 264-266.

<sup>2</sup> Thucydides, 14-15; “In fine, I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time.”

body of his work with his overarching aim of answering the deeper questions about the nature of the Peloponnesian war, why the war occurred, and what outcomes the war provided. Hanson renames the “Peloponnesian War” as the “Great Ancient Greek Civil War,” with the reason that the conflict was not merely an Athenian war against the Peloponnesians. Instead, Hanson argues the conflict was an engagement between two differing views for the future of the Hellenic people. The first chapter of the book, entitled “Fear,” discusses the reasons for which the Peloponnesians and their allies felt compelled to take up arms, and how Athens, from the end of the Persian wars, had established itself as the antithesis to an older and more conservative mode of Greek thinking. Athens had moved beyond existing as an individual and independent city state—the Peloponnesian ideal of Hellenic existence—and had chosen to “grasp continually after something further”, thereby ascertaining dominion over others following the Persian invasions, as well as imperial power.<sup>3</sup> The final chapters review the fatal “Climax” and “Ruin?” and follow the occupation of Athens and the establishment of the Thirty Tyrants—the dissolution of the Athenian empire. Hanson reflects on the final days, and concludes that while the end of the war and the close of the 5<sup>th</sup> century both were a substantiation of much loss, ruin, and bloodshed, the legacy of the war is the precedent of imperial warfare rather than the end of imperial splendor.

The second part of *A War Like No Other* is a thematic presentation of the Peloponnesian war, describing how the war played out. Hanson describes in seven chapters the elements which he believes to be unique in their manifestation in the war. This method of recounting the war focus less on narrative and instead on the cultural, tactical, and strategic elements which span the course of the conflict. Hanson’s first chapters, “Fire,” “Disease,” and “Terror” recount the war in a more chronological way, similar to the sequence of summer and winter campaigns that one becomes familiar with when reading Thucydides by describing elements that are prominent as the war begins. The later chapters, “Armor,” “Walls,” “Horses,” and “Ships,” describe more the ubiquitous characteristics of the war, drawing elements from the early stages and final stages alike. To Hanson, the cataclysmic effect of these elements on the Greeks was akin to the way in which the First World War transformed the nations of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The technology and means of making war in 1914 were not entirely novel, but the already

---

<sup>3</sup> Thucydides, 118.

## *A War Like No Other*

familiar means evolved significantly throughout the war. They not only changed the way that the war manifested on the ground, but also the way that the war lasted in the memories of its combatants. The horrible images of trenches and long drawn out sieges and battles, of terrifying ravages of trench-born disease and unconventional weapons, all reflect events such as the plague in Athens, or the quagmire at Potidaea and Amphipolis, or familiarity with mass death during the Peloponnesian War.

This benefit of tangible modern application is the most apparent benefit of *A War Like No Other*. Hanson draws comparisons to the Cold War specifically, for its lessened amount of decisive and conventional warfare, and for the importance of proxies, allies, and extended conflict over strategic points for either side. Hanson's comparison to the Cold War is particularly potent as he underscores the divide between the two political factions in Greece—the oligarchic Spartans and democratic Athenians as compared to the antithetical powers of the Soviet and American states.<sup>4</sup> However, the comparison does not stand true in all cases. Hanson acknowledges that wars like the Second World War are not quite as comparable due to their direct action and decisive battles<sup>5</sup>.

Another strength which Hanson uses to his advantage is his understanding of the actual setting of the war. The sites of the battles, sieges, or cities, which Hanson has visited himself imbues his description with greater vibrancy. The chapter entitled “Horses,” would be left sorrowfully unsupported if not supplemented with a comparative knowledge of the topography of mainland Greece and the Sicilian plains. Sicily, instead of being a mountainous landscape similar to Boeotia, Epirus, or the Peloponnesus, was an “island whose wide plains and greenery were more like the landscape of Thessaly.”<sup>6</sup> As the Athenians embarked on their expedition, their commander, Nicias, understood that horsemen would be needed for the campaign. However, upon arrival in Sicily, the Athenians discovered that it was not enough to field horsemen—mounted supremacy was essential to keeping open lines of communication and conduct a successful siege. In the same way, passages which deal with specific events like Delium and Mantinea are enhanced beyond the detail provided by Thucydides when Hanson compares and contrasts the battlefield with the modern Greek

---

<sup>4</sup> Victor Davis Hanson, *A War Like No Other* (New York: Random House, 2005), 90-91.

<sup>5</sup> Hanson, 4-6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

landscape. At Mantinea Hanson describes the modern freeway that reflects the importance of the valley as a north-south highway in ancient times.

Killing fields... surrounded by mountains that provide both defense for the flanks of heavy infantrymen and a refuge after defeat... Mantinea served as a choke point where the grand routes from southern Greece constrict to a mile or so—before opening up again to flatland and various roads that branch out northward to Argos, Corinth, and Athens.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, Hanson's agricultural knowledge enhances especially the chapter entitle "Fire."<sup>8</sup> When the Spartans first marched their grand coalition army into Attica in attempts to resolve the war by conventional means, they burnt and pillaged many of the surrounding estates in order to bring out the Athenians. Alongside telling the narrative, Hanson adds considerable commentary on why the tactic fails by explaining how very difficult it is to obliterate hinterland farms—particularly ones that are primarily devoted to the growing of olive trees, which are known for their regenerative powers—based on his own experience in clearing land.<sup>9</sup>

One of the drawbacks to Hanson's unique style is that, in giving the account of the Peloponnesian war in thematic segments, the chronology of the war becomes convoluted. Each of the chapters tends to run chronologically within themselves, but the cohesion between the events underscored in one chapter are often left unassociated with the others. For example, when in "Terror" numerous occasions of slaughter like after the sieges of Plataea and Mytilene are recorded from the beginning to the end of the war, they are repeated in a different order in chapters like "Walls" which deals with siegecraft. Because of the thematic organization of the work, the situations are sometimes inorganically separated events that follow them chronologically. However, the benefit of depth the thematic view offers outweighs this confusion.

Hanson consults a healthy variety of sources that range from others' chronological histories of the war to works like his own which compare the past to the modern. The works of Herman, McCann, and Strauss deal with the idea of western military tradition and the cycles of empire within Western

---

<sup>7</sup> Hanson, 154.

<sup>8</sup> See also Hanson's *Warfare and Agriculture in Classical Greece*, and *Fields Without Dreams: Defending the Agrarian Idea*.

<sup>9</sup> Hanson, 35-37; 55-57.

## *A War Like No Other*

society, as well as the history of terror and violence in the history of the West. Hanson's strengths lie mainly in his gritty and detailed understanding of the warfare of the Greek world and thereby bringing to life the ancient narrative. The list of historiographic and surrounding ancient sources is rather thin, which reviewers like Paul Johnson have commented on and found somewhat distasteful—Hanson mentions this in the beginning portion of this book, stating that “straying from the strict protocols of classical scholarship may bother professional historians.”<sup>10</sup>

*A War Like No Other* also connects the classical age with the post 9/11 world. The chapter entitled “Fear” includes some explicit references to the event, but the true indicator is within the section entitled “Terror.”<sup>11</sup> In “Fear,” the ways in which the Spartans regarded the Long Walls which Athens had constructed between its acropolis and the port city of Piraeus is similar to the way in which outsiders to the United States view the symbols of wealth and power within it—the World Trade Centers.<sup>12</sup> However, Hanson uses “Terror” to describe the nature of atrocity in an increasingly globalized society. In the Peloponnesian War, Greece had begun a journey towards becoming a civilization with extended influence beyond just their own mainland in the Mediterranean, something that they had watched the Persian Empire stop just short of earlier that century. As the war carried on in earnest, acts of mass murder, looting, and terror became commonplace, and disoriented the Greek mind calmed itself by idealizing more ancient times when disputes were straightforward and settled through an honorable hoplite collision. Not only did these events occur, but they effected nearly all of the Hellenic world, everywhere to the sacred places, the major players, and, in Hanson's terms, the “Greek Third World.” This sort of terror, known and heard of across the entire Greek world, reflects the modern situation with acts of terror.

*A War Like No Other* presents itself well as an alternative thematic interpretation of the Peloponnesian War. The work could be well used in a Western Civilization or World Literature course in order to supplement either selected readings of Thucydides, accompany his work, or stand alone as a substitute. The real value of *A War Like No Other* is that it concerns itself

---

<sup>10</sup> Johnson, Paul, “Review: *A War Like No Other*,” *New York Times Book Review* 110, no. 43 (October, 2005): 15; Hanson, XVI.

<sup>11</sup> For the direct reference in “Fear” to the terrorist attacks on America on September 11, see Hanson, 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> Hanson, 26; 267.

with the idea that past history is important to the understanding of the present, and is a solid basis for the tracing of themes of warfare, empire, and politics in the Western world.