

## One Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

reviewed by Williamson Murray

**THE LANDMARK THUCYDIDES: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War.** Edited by Robert B. Strassler; Introduction by Victor Hanson. The Free Press, New York, 1996, 711 pp., \$45.00. (Member \$41.50)

Of all the vast number of works about the favorite human preoccupation after sex—namely war—Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* has the justifiable reputation as the greatest book on that subject. But unless one has a greater teacher, Thucydides can be an extraordinarily difficult author with whom to come to grips. As Thucydides himself admits:

The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest . . . 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.

He has thus made no compromise to earn the plaudits of the idle and intellectually incurious; his work is only for those willing to grapple with war as it really is at every level—complex, uncertain, and ambiguous.

But beyond the difficulties of examining war in all its complexities, Thucydides presents the modern reader with two formidable challenges. Few of us possess a geographic knowledge of the Greek world in the fifth century B.C., and geographic knowledge is a prerequisite to the understanding of any war. Even fewer of us are prepared to handle the political, strategic, and military framework within which *The History of the Peloponnesian War* unfolds. This author, whose admiration for Thucydides has increased every time he has read the work, must admit that it was not until he had completed graduate school in the mid-1970s that he finally forced himself to read the work for the first time. Even then he had an advantage that few others have;

he was able to sit in on a graduate research seminar at Yale taught by the dean of Thucydidean scholars in the United States, Donald Kagan.

It is with great pleasure that I can report that a substantial portion of the difficulties involved in reading Thucydides for the first time have been addressed by *The Landmark Thucydides*. Robert Strassler, described in the book's blurb as "an unaffiliated scholar," has taken what is generally regarded as the finest literary translation of Thucydides (by Richard Crawley, published in 1874), updated and revised portions of that translation, and then placed the entire translation in an extraordinarily handsome, easy-to-read format, with clear textual notations at the bottom of each page. But what makes this an extraordinary contribution is the fact that the editor (and the publisher) have placed

maps of every significant episode . . . in the text within that episode. Thus, every city, town, river, mountain, or other geographic feature that is important to the narrative and mentioned in a given episode is referenced to a location on a map found nearby in the text.

These small-scale maps not only locate particular geographic features, but they are then referenced to accompanying larger-scale maps so that one can, for example, locate Oenoe as not only being on the frontier between Attica and Boetia, but where Attica and Boetia are on a map of Greece as a whole. The result is that without flipping across the entire book the reader can follow the various locations described in Thucydides' account on maps that are either on the same or next page. Thus, in

Book One alone there are 14 specific maps, accompanied by 12 orientation maps. In Book Two there are 13 specific maps, accompanied by 15 orientation maps. The end result is that in a fashion that is true for no other military history of which I am cognizant, the reader is able to relate the action to the actual geographic position. That fact alone makes *The Landmark Thucydides* worth its price.

But there are other factors that add to the worth of the edition. The Crawley translation is intelligent and eloquent. Moreover, the editor has gathered together a group of intelligent and sophisticated historians to extend and explicate Thucydides' text. Victor Hanson, who has already emerged as a major military historian of the ancient world, provides a clear, literate introduction as well as an imaginative summation of his work on the world of the Greek hoplite. There are a number of other short, trenchant essays on the Athenian government, the Athenian empire, Spartan institutions, the Peloponnesian League, Trireme Warfare, the Persians, and several other more academic essays probably of less interest to Marines.

*The History of the Peloponnesian War*, as this author has argued elsewhere in this issue (see pp. 54-69), is the greatest book on war, strategy, and the moral factors that govern the conduct of men under the pressures of war. It has been at the center of the "Strategy and Policy" curriculum at the Naval War College—in my opinion the finest course on the process of strategy ever taught anywhere, anytime. Thus, if you want to understand war in the 21st century, read Thucydides. And now *The History of the Peloponnesian War* is accessible in a fashion that has never been true before. Other than a personal tutorial from Donald Kagan or Victor Hanson, Marines who want to really understand that war and war in general can start with this edition and find as a reward a lifetime of wisdom.

US  MC

>See author's bio, p. 69.