
Thucydides' Melian Dialogue

How Athens Became An Empire, and Fell

From a presentation by Helga Zepp-LaRouche on Sept. 3, 2002, to the Labor Day Conference of the Schiller Institute.

We know a lot about how the beautiful, ancient Classical Greece collapsed, especially from the writings of the founder of scientific history-writing, Thucydides of Athens, who lived from 460 to approximately 404 B.C. Now, he describes also the pre-history of the Peloponnesian Wars—the wars of Greece, and especially Athens, against the Persians, which lasted from 500-479, and then from 470-448 B.C., ending in the Kallias peace between Athens and Persia. Now, in these wars, Athens—which, after all, is the cradle of European, and therefore, also, of American civilization—had to assert itself in many ways. For example, in September 490, there occurred the famous Battle of Marathon, where the military reformer, Miltiades, defeated the Persian army that was three times more numerous, through a double-flanking operation. And then, the famous story was, that one soldier ran all the way from Marathon to Athens to report the victory. And still, nowadays, people commemorate this with the marathon runs.

Athens became the pioneer for all Hellas after the victory over the as-yet unconquered Persians, and was on its way to becoming a political superpower. In 483, it engaged in the construction of a large fleet of 200 ships, and there especially Themistocles, who also was involved in the port of Piraeus, was instrumental. In September 480 B.C., came the victory of the Greeks over the Persians in the naval battle of Salamis.

On the advice of Themistocles, Athens did not take revenge against those Greek states which had cooperated with the Persians. This was a very wise decision, because that is how you get peace—that eventually, you have a peace plan like that.

The result of the Persian wars was that the Persians gave up their intention to conquer, and this gave Greece the political and spiritual freedom to save their mental life. In 478, Athens was asked by the Ionians to become their protector against the Persians. In 477, they founded the Attic Maritime League against the danger of the Persians. This was basically an alliance between Athens and the Ionian cities, which then had to pay tribute. Delos became the seat of that league, and all members had equal voting rights.

From the League to the Empire

In the meantime, Athens became the strongest economic power, and that led to an increasing alienation between Athens and Sparta, which also was manipulated by the Persians. In 470, the son of Miltiades, Cimon, continued the war against the Persians, as the head of the fleet of the Maritime League. And in 467-465, there was a double victory by Cimon in Eurymedon in southern Asia Minor, over the fleet and the army of the Persians. The tensions with Sparta grew.

And in Athens, the process of democratization continued, because Athens was the birthplace of the famous democracy. In 462, Pericles and Elphaeates made a motion that all political decisions and powers should be given to the council, the commissions, the jury courts, and the people's representatives. In 458, you had the completion of democracy, because the so-called third class could participate in the political process, and there was the stripping of the power of the oligarchy. In 460-457, there was the construction of the long wall in Athens, and Athens became the largest fortress of Greece.

Sparta got involved in various alliances, for example, with Thebes. And Athens continued to annex Boetia, Locris, and Phocis, and eventually became hegemonic in central Greece.

In 456, there was the relocation of the bank of the alliance to Athens.

In 444 B.C., at the already-mentioned Peace of Kallias between Athens and Persia, they then moved to the transformation of the Attic Maritime League, into the Attic Empire. As a matter of fact, after the peace with Persia had been concluded, this military alliance had become, actually, superfluous. So, at that point, they should have just abandoned it. But they transformed it into the Attic Empire, and from then on the allies had to pay tribute, as before. Under Pericles, who was annually elected as the strategist, which was an important position, Athens continued on its way to democracy. But, as Thucydides wrote in his book, in reality, Athens was only a democracy in name: In reality, it was the Monarchy of the First Man.

However, it was a mixed situation, because, on the one hand, you had this transformation of Greece into an empire; but, you had, at the same time, this beautiful evolution of thought and Classical culture. For example, in the cultural circles around Pericles, were Herodotus, Anaxagoras, Hippodamus, Sophocles, Phidias, and others.

But, in the meantime, the members of the Attic Empire got reduced to subjects. In 425, more than 400 city-states were members. The big problem was, that the wars against the Persians had gotten more and more under the total leadership of Athens, and the Athenian Empire, and Athenian imperialism emerged.

At the moment of the collapse of the Soviet Union, between 1989-91, George Bush senior declared the New World Order, and basically, the point was to redefine the East-West relationship, and not to just continue with the policy, when there was no longer any enemy. And, then they decided that



“Mr. Bush, beware the Athenians!” In the Athens of Pericles (left) in the mid-5th Century B.C., classical beauty and science contrasted with the turning of political power into empire, as “sole superpower” Athens began dealing with its allies on the basis of might makes right. The Athenian war against Melos was the sign of the imperial disease; the disastrous invasion of Sicily led by Alcibiades (dying, right) sealed Athens’ downfall.

they needed an enemy, for empire controls, and that Islam should be that new enemy.

Now, the allies, whom Athens had been the protector of against the Persians, became the subjects, and had to continue to pay tribute. The Gulf War, which took the momentum away from German unification, cost \$60 billion, most of which the allies had to pay.

There was a reversal of the relationship of the protection and the faithfulness, and Athens developed the reputation of a tyranny. Sparta, which never had any democratic reforms, and where mainly an oligarchical system remained continuously, pursued any alliance to break this power. Thucydides, in his book about the Peloponnesian War—which lasted from 431-404—describes how, out of a limited war, beginning between Athens and Corinth, it became a big war between Athens and the Peloponnesian alliance.

The Melian Dialogue

The island of Melos had remained neutral for several years; and then, Athens demanded that Melos should become an ally. In reality, they wanted it to become a vassal, and Thucydides gives a very fascinating account of this.

The Athenians sent negotiators to Melos, and the Melians said, “Well, you say we can have a calm discussion; that is fine. But, why do you then immediately go to war with us? You obviously insist on having the last word, anyway. If we don’t capitulate, it means war. If we capitulate, it means slavery.”

The Athenians said, “Don’t speculate about the future. We could make the point, but we don’t, that our victory over the Persians has given us the right to rule. But the point is, that only among people with the same power, is there right and law. But the powerful does what he wants, and the weak has to obey.”

The Melians said, “Since you don’t want to listen to law, and [you] argue with utilitarian arguments, consider this: You could be defeated some time, and then your brutality could be taken as a model, and you could be treated in the same way.”

The Athenians said: “What we have to fear much more, is a rebellion of the underlings in our own country. We are here to subjugate you, and discuss how this can be done to the advantage of both of us.”

The Melians said, “How can slavery be as advantageous for us, as for you, the rulers?”

The Athenians said, “For you, it is more advantageous to become a subject, than to die; and for us, it is a plus, that we don’t have to kill you.”

The Melians said, “Can we not stay neutral?”

The Athenians said, “No, because your adversity damages us less than your friendship. Because this would make us, in the eyes of our subjects, weak. And your hostility, on the other hand, is a sign of our power.”

The Melians said, “Since you seem not to hesitate in the face of anything, to impose your power, and are willing to throw the independent countries into danger, would it not be

the greatest shame to capitulate, rather than do everything to resist?”

The Athenians said, “Not if you think. The point is not to prove your bravery, but to exist or not. And not to approve someone who has so much more power than you.”

The Melians said, “But there is hope, that luck is sometimes on the side of the weaker.”

The Athenians said, “Yeah, sure. Hope! But if it promises golden mountains, you only realize through damage, how treacherous it is. Your fate hangs by one hair, so don’t believe in wonder-cures.”

The Melians said, “But God will not let us down, since we are fighting for a just cause and the Lacedaemonians will help us.”

The Athenians said, “Ha! God and the whole world is on the side of the strongest. This is a universal law for all times. And you would act in the same way, if you had the power.”

Melians: “But we can count on the Lacedaemonians, since they can count on our friendly attitude.”

Athenians: “In war, what counts is not attitude, but power! The Lacedaemonians see that more than others. Your forces are too weak to resist. Don’t fall into the trap of honor, which so often has brought ruin to people. Many have been seduced by the nice sound of the word ‘honor,’ and have thrown themselves into self-destruction, through their own stupidity. Be reasonable! Don’t think your honor is at stake, if you give up resistance against a superpower. You still have the choice between war and security: Don’t let your ambition let you take the wrong choice.”

And with that, the Athenians left.

The Melians had a meeting among themselves and discussed that they could not give up their community, which had lasted for 700 years. “We trust in the gods, who have protected us, so far; and in the help of man, the Lacedaemonians; that we can stay neutral. And we will ask you Athenians, now, to retire from our country.”

The Athenians said, “You alone seem to regard the future as more important than what is front of your eyes.”

And they immediately began to launch hostilities against the Melians. After several military operations, the Melians had to surrender to the Athenians, who immediately put to death all the grown men whom they took, and sold the women and children for slaves, and subsequently brought in their 500 colonists and inhabited the place themselves.

Thucydides then describes how, after the death of Pericles, the demagogues Cleon and Alcibiades changed from a defensive strategy, to offensive operations—a kind of early “pre-emptive war” conception—which he characterizes as one of the reasons for the catastrophic development of the [Peloponnesian] war, from an Athenian point of view. The description of the campaign against Sicily is one of the high-points of Thucydides’ book. Supposedly, the Athenians came to the help of the allied city of Segesta against Selinus, which was allied with Syracuse. In reality, they just wanted to make

Sicily a colony. They lost both the fleet and the army, and the surviving Athenians became slaves.

This defeat marked the decisive change in the whole war. In 405 B.C., the Spartan military commander Lysander was able to defeat the last Athenian fleet. The power of Athens completely collapsed and Lysander moved, in 404, into Athens.

‘Beware of the Athenians, Mr. Bush’

So, the famous democracy in Athens was completely imperial. It had a system based on slavery, and Plato was completely critical of it, and said that democracy is just the other side of the coin of tyranny. And, it is very interesting, that the famous tragedian Euripides wrote a play, *The Trojan Women*, which he performed, in essence, at the height of the Peloponnesian War . . . with the launching of the Sicilian campaign in 415. Euripides was completely against this war, and portrayed the war in its full horror, from the point of view of those who were defeated. Already, in earlier years, he had warned: If, in any decision to go to war, everybody had the image of their own death before their eyes, Hellas would not be torn apart by the insanity of war. And maybe that should be given as advice to some of these “chicken-hawks,” today.

It was a tragedy that Classical Greece destroyed itself, by becoming an imperial power. And would it not be a total tragedy, if the United States, which once was “the beacon of hope, and the temple of liberty,” should go the same way? And, is it not alarming, that elder statesmen make this parallel: They say that the Peloponnesian War ruined, first, Athens, and then all of Greece. Today, the danger is that the United States, as the only remaining superpower, is creating the impression with China, with Russia, and other nations, that nothing is more important than military power.

So, that is where we are at, and people in the whole world know it. People know that the United States is becoming an empire. And they also know, that what is at stake is the entire body of international law, as it developed since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Bush, the President of the United States, said, explicitly, that he is *for* international law, *if* it is appropriate for our time, and *if* it is in the interest of the United States. Beware of the Athenians, Mr. Bush!

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