

The 'Surge': Tragedy Replayed as Farce

by David Shavin

Frederick Kagan's power-point paper on victory in Iraq, a sort of Viagra-driven two-year surge of troops, presented at the American Enterprise Institute Dec. 14, proves nothing about war-fighting or strategy—though it does lend credence to the theory that the nuts don't fall far from the tree.

As *EIR* reported in "'Chickenhawk Down': The Real Target Is Iran," by Jeffrey Steinberg (Jan. 5), President Bush and Vice President Cheney, in response to the Baker-Hamilton report, "turned to their chickenhawk allies at the American Enterprise Institute to craft a counter-plan, based on the fantasy premise that a 'surge' of American troops could secure victory in Iraq before the next Presidential election in November 2008."

The father of neo-cons Frederick and Robert Kagan is Donald Kagan, a supposed expert on the Peloponnesian War. Papa Kagan argues that war is the natural condition of man, and that the real mistake in Athens' disastrous Sicilian adventure of 415 B.C., was that the realist, General Nicias, advised against the adventure! By doing so, and by stating how much greater forces would actually be needed for victory, he turned the youthful Alcibiades' modest adventure, with limited lia-

bility, into a monumental disaster.

In 2000, Frederick and Donald combined to write their *While America Sleeps: Self-Delusion, Military Weakness and the Threat to Peace Today*, described as a fervent call to arms, which required increased military preparedness, so that the United States could fulfill its mission as the world's policeman. On Feb. 27, 2003, three weeks before the bombing of Baghdad, Donald was at the White House to receive a National Humanities Medal from George W. Bush, for his ability to draw lessons from Greek history for modern strategic planning.

The Peloponnesian War

The elder Kagan wrote, in his 2003 *The Peloponnesian War*: "The Athenian expedition to Sicily in 415 has been compared with the British attempt to seize the Dardanelles in 1915 or the American war in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, undertakings whose purposes and feasibility remain controversial, and which ended in defeat and different degrees of disaster." Rather than identifying the underlying cause of these disasters as the attempt to impose imperial policy around the globe, the Yale professor, instead, proceeded to "correct" the famous account of the Peloponnesian War, by the Greek general Thucydides.

General Nicias had led the effort to end the disastrous Greek civil war, also known as the Peloponnesian War, after a decade of useless bloodshed. An unstable peace found Nicias and Alcibiades in conflict over Athenian policy. Under the influence of Alcibiades, in March of 415 B.C., the Athenian Assembly voted for 60 ships to be sent to Sicily. Thucydides identified the flight-forward nature of Alcibiades' adventure.

However, Kagan thinks he knows better: that there were local conflicts in Sicily that Athens needed to police. Athens had to fight Syracuse there, said Kagan, before Syracuse could come and attack Athens.

General Nicias, the author of the Peace of Nicias that had quelled the recent Greek civil wars, appeared before the Assembly a few days after the vote for the invasion of Sicily, to throw cold water on the proceedings. He recalled the weakness and instability on the Greek mainland in the uncertain armistice. Or, as Kagan put it, "Nicias offered a grim evaluation of Athens' current diplomatic and military situation, one that raises serious questions about the wisdom of his policy in making the peace that bears his name." Kagan discounts any reality orientation, implying that a military leader who is interested in peace is not competent.

Thucydides recounted Nicias' reasoning: that Athens "must not reach out for another empire" when Athens' affairs were



White House photo/Eric Draper

President Bush (left) congratulates neo-con Donald Kagan for winning the 2002 National Humanities Medal. He and his son Frederick Kagan are pushing a disastrous "Peloponnesian War" in Southwest Asia.



The Greek historian Thucydides (shown here in a 16th-Century fresco, with his famous History of the Peloponnesian War, tried to warn the Athenian Assembly against an imperial adventure in Sicily.

not secure; and that a Syracuse running a stable Sicily was much less a threat to Athens than one of constant strife. Kagan calls these arguments by Thucydides, “vain and specious rebuttals.”

Kagan then hones in on what Thucydides’ account left out: “The most striking aspect of Nicias’ speech is what it omitted, for it made no clear reference to any proposal to conquer and annex the island. Instead, he launched a personal attack on the main architect of the plan. Alcibiades, he said, was a member of a dangerously ambitious younger generation, and sought to endanger the state for his own glory and profit.” In other words, one need not hear Nicias’ warning, because he failed to offer the “conquer and annex” plan that he was arguing against! (It seems that the only purpose of such sophistry is to so disorient the reader, so that the next wild assertion can be swallowed.) In fact, the “personal attack” was the most useful part of Nicias’ speech, targetting Alcibiades’ drive for “glory and profit,” which was supported by a section of the Athenian population. Or, as Thucydides put it: “It was just this, that later on, did most to destroy the Athenian state. For the many were afraid of the extent of his [Alcibiades’] lawless self-indulgence in his way of life and also of his purpose in each and every affair in which he became involved.”

But, Kagan writes, Alcibiades had better arguments than

Nicias. Athens would have little opposition: “Sicily’s Greek cities [were] seriously unstable and lacking patriotic determination. [T]he Spartans [were] without hope or initiative.” And to maintain her empire, Athens must actively intervene as the world’s policeman. According to Kagan: A “peaceful policy of limited ambition [with] arbitrary parameters for the boundaries” would be disastrous. Alcibiades concludes that: “A city that is active would quickly be destroyed by a change to passivity, and those people find the greatest safety who conduct their affairs in the greatest harmony with their existing character and customs.” In short, there is no safety or stability outside of permanent war.

Kagan identifies this last argument as a “remarkable rhetorical trick, lending a conservative coloration to what was in fact a daring departure.” He suggests that Alcibiades might have learned this from the Sophists. Unfortunately, it would appear that he and his sons don’t condemn, but admire this trick.

Nicias Warns the Assembly

After the Assembly voted to back Alcibiades, General Nicias appeared before them, and laid out the cold facts as to what increased level of ships and forces were necessary from a military standpoint, to succeed in Sicily, based on its size and population. Thucydides assumed that Nicias’ hope was to dissuade the Assembly by presenting it with the formidable numbers required. But Alcibiades’ oligarchic colleagues, led by Demostratus, instead of heeding Nicias’ warning, launched a massive expedition. Kagan concludes that Athens could have survived a military defeat which would have resulted from the original, smaller expedition, but because the Assembly took Nicias’ “advice, it suffered a major disaster. Hence, according to Kagan, Nicias never should have presented such realities to the Assembly.

Such Classical scholarship has earned Kagan the Sidney Hook Memorial Award for Distinguished Contributions to the Freedom and Integrity of the Academy, given by the National Association of Scholars.

Finally, Kagan credits Prof. John R. Hale, a former student, for the inspiration for his 2003 *The Peloponnesian War*. It turns out that Hale is best-known for his role in originating the 1996 study of the Oracle of Delphi, to provide a defense of Plutarch’s theory that the secret of the Oracle stems from gaseous emissions. The oracles still came from Apollo, but the god worked through pedestrian causes; and that today, Hale argues that we should appreciate Plutarch’s approach for combining religion and science. His teacher, Donald Kagan, as judged by his work, evidently approves of the gaseous emissions approach.

Kagan’s acknowledgment for his *The Peloponnesian War* is extended “to my sons Fred and Bob, historians both, who have taught me so much in their written work and in countless wonderful conversations.” Clearly, they did not fall far from the tree.