



## TEN THINGS I LEARNED BY SKIMMING THUCYDIDES

By [John Nagl](#) and [Matthew Woessner](#), January 26, 2023

**Authors' Note:** One of the hallowed rites of passage each year at the Army War College is reading portions of Thucydides' 2500-year-old *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Most students find it extremely worthwhile, some to their surprise. Many scholars regard *The Peloponnesian War* as the first work of international relations since it attributes agency to human actions rather than to the will of the gods. A deep reading of Thucydides also requires students to navigate between the opposing pitfalls of the use of history: cherry-picking evidence to come to simplistic "lessons" or giving up any hope of drawing insights from such a distant time. Of course, every year there are always one or two students who do not make the effort. The following is a satirical portrait of one such student's not-so-careful read of history. The full version of the text with the response of a more discerning classmate can be found at <https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/articles/skimming-thucydides>. (All citations come from Robert B. Strassler's translation [The Landmark Thucydides](#).)

The following list was found on the backside of a stained [Redd's Barbeque](#) take-out menu a day before oral comprehensive exams at the Army War College.

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**It's the day before oral comp exams. While my gullible classmates have been busy rereading Thucydides, I skimmed the text (It's only a lot of reading if you do it!) and to be on the safe side, rewatched the movie *300*. From what I could gather by flipping through the book, these are the top ten lessons I'm taking into oral comprehensive exams from *The History of the Peloponnesian War*:**

- 1. War is predictable, and anyone paying attention can see how it will turn out.**
- 2. When a war is going your way, press your advantage to absolute victory.**
- 3. If you experience a tactical setback, send more troops until your policy is inevitably vindicated.**
- 4. Democracies are particularly good at formulating and implementing long term strategy.**
- 5. There is no downside to fighting a war of attrition.**
- 6. Political infighting can only make a civilization stronger.**
- 7. Multiple commanders of a single military operation will smooth everything out.**
- 8. If you have control of the sea, victory in a land war is assured.**
- 9. The moral rightness of your cause is more important than your military strength in war.**
- 10. There are no enduring principles of international relations, and we have nothing to learn from the ancient past.**

**My faculty advisor assures me that citing these lessons during oral comp exams will make an indelible impression on the evaluation board and perhaps even alter the trajectory of my career. While those who have carefully read Thucydides may take issue with one or two of the above assertions, history is subjective, and my take on the text is just as valid as that of every other reader. Yeah, I'm going to crush these comps. Much like attacking Syracuse, what could go wrong?**