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“Hope, Danger’s Comforter”: Thucydides, Hope, Politics

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With its ascendancy in American political discourse during the past few years, hope has become a watchword of politics, yet the rhetoric has failed to inquire into the actual function of hope in political life. This essay examines elpis, the Greek word for “hope,” in Thucydides’ History and offers a theoretical account of this concept and its connection to successful political action. I suggest that a complex understanding of hope structures Thucydides’ narrative: Hope counts as among the most dangerous political delusions, yet it also offers the only possible response to despair. Thucydides’ text educates the judgment of his readers, chastening hope while showing its importance despite its flaws. The History thus offers an alternative for considering the politics of hope, one that challenges hope’s ardent proponents today.

In the midst of Thucydides’ infamous “Melian Dialogue,” hope is characterized as “danger’s comforter.” The Athenians tell the Melians:

Hope, danger’s comforter, may be indulged in by those who have abundant resources, if not without loss at all events without ruin; but its nature is to be extravagant, and those who go so far as to put their all upon the venture see it in its true colours only when they are ruined. (5.103)¹

There is a remarkable ambiguity in *elpis kindunōi paramuthion*, the Greek here translated as “hope, danger’s comforter.” This begins with “*elpis*,” which can mean “expectation” as well as “hope,” suggesting that hope can come in degrees of strength, ranging from distant, forlorn hopes to reasonable confidence (Myres 1949). This ambiguity is borne out by Thucydides’ treatment, where *elpis* vacillates between the well-grounded hopes of the Peloponnesians in their navy (2.89) to the fanciful, ridiculous hopes of Nicias for victory in Sicily when his forces lie in shambles (7.77). *Paramuthion*, moreover, doubles down on this ambiguity: it can take the sense of an exhortation or stimulant as well as an assuagement or abatement. Thus Lattimore (1998) translates this passage as “incitement to danger” (297) while Jowett

(1881) offers “good comforter in the hour of danger.” The rest of this passage conveys the multiple meanings of hope in “danger’s comforter”: hope appears as a comfort and as an indulgence, as potentially dangerous even to the powerful, as a cause of loss, and as by its very nature extravagant such that it inevitably leads to ruin.

Despite the rich ambiguities of *elpis* and its role in Thucydides’ *History*,² scholars have paid scant attention to its overarching significance. Over a century ago, Cornford ([1907] 1969) offered the most thorough account of *elpis* in the *History*, arguing that Thucydides abandoned Aeschylean theology but retained this theology’s moral elements by conferring “supernatural powers” to entities such as Elpis. On Cornford’s account, then, *Elpis* has a life independent from the actors she influences; standing apart from human concerns, *Elpis* can delude or appropriately encourage. A few generations later, Stahl countered Cornford’s reading by maintaining that Thucydides approaches these matters not from the divine but from the human angle: “Unlike these earlier, myth-related approaches, Thucydides analyzes the old problem in exclusively human terms” ([1966] 2003, 190). Since Stahl’s shift to a human-focused reading,

¹Crawley translation, revised by Strassler in Strassler (1996). All quotations of Thucydides comes from this edition unless otherwise indicated. All Greek citations come from the Oxford Classical Text (Jones and Powell 1942).

²I will refer to Thucydides’ text by its conventional name of the *History*.

elpis has gone largely unnoticed in the literature on Thucydides.³

Returning to the grounds for Cornford and Stahl's differences, this essay argues that the ambiguity of Thucydides' richly complex account of *elpis* does not preclude bringing together the two poles of previous interpretation but rather suggests a way of viewing the work of the *History* as a whole. Moreover, I argue that this examination of *elpis* in the *History* can inform reflection about hope's place in political theory and hope's significance for politics more generally. Today, hope has become a nearly unquestioned ideal for many political commentators and actors from all parts of the political spectrum in the United States, ranging from Ayn Rand to Christopher Lasch to Richard Rorty to President Barack Obama (Rand [1957] 1996; Lasch 1991; Rorty 1999; Obama 2006).⁴ As Delbanco has shown, much of this discourse of hope dates from the Christian stories used to interpret the founding of the American republic. While its transcendent sources have arguably disappeared, hope remains a powerful and yet rarely questioned stimulus for political life, the source of "the real American dream" (Delbanco 1999).

At a time when hope is ascendant and admired in political discourse, then, this essay is offered as an intervention: Thucydides' strangely ambivalent account presents a counterpoint to the infrequently qualified embrace of hope today.⁵ Tracing hope in Thucydides' text reveals bases for both Cornford and Stahl's accounts of hope as, at turns, delusive and dangerous as well as constructive and necessary. The *History* thus offers grounds for criticizing hope while also delineating its positive and constructive side. After detailing hope in the *History*, I contrast its account of hope with the recent arguments of Jonathan Lear, showing how hope deludes political leaders and communities into destructive behavior even while it provides the ultimate bulwark against despair—and thus often the basis for a community's

³More recent studies have largely ignored hope, although with favorable citations of Stahl (see, e.g., Connor 1984 and Orwin 1998). The present essay owes its inspiration to the provocative paragraph on hope in Geuss (2005, 224).

⁴In addition to Christianity, hope in American pragmatism has influenced contemporary discourse (Westbrook 2005); according to Kloppenber (2011), Barack Obama's hope combines elements from both pragmatism and Christianity.

⁵The account of hope in the *History* is cogent on its own, but it also offers a noneschatological treatment of hope absent from traditions of hope within both Christianity and Marxism. Thucydides' *History* can thus lay a groundwork for reconstructing hope without such a philosophy undergirding it. For a metaphysical and religious reconstruction of hope with some critical treatment of Thucydides' "negation" of hope, see Mittleman (2009).

survival. Thucydides goes farther than Lear, moreover, by taking up the text's ambiguous account of hope and educating judgments about any politics informed or inspired by hope. A politics reconsidered in light of Thucydides' treatment of hope, in contrast to today's political valorization, chastens any hopeful politics, facing hope with the stark reality of the *History's* narrative even while showing the enduring need and value for hope in times of despair and crisis. The resulting hope allows for and even demands dark and difficult conclusions; Thucydides' *History* suggests how we might nonetheless bear up, with appropriate judgment and hope for change and survival.⁶

Hopeful Delusions

In recent American political discourse, hope has been only rarely criticized; in contrast, Thucydides' account of the rise and fall of Athens presents an argument against hopeful politics that spans the entire book.⁷ Crane (1998) has suggested that Thucydides' text seeks to replace the older heroic ethic with a rationalized version of "ancient simplicity," and examining *elpis*⁸ in the *History* suggests that taken in the terms of this project, hope is on its way out. To put the apparent argument briefly: as an individual and collective phenomenon, hope can serve to blind human beings to reality, deluding them into believing that their wildest fantasies might come true and that what lies beyond reach is easily attainable. Hope comforts danger in the sense that it attends it; a hope-fueled politics is a dangerous and self-destructive politics.

From the beginning of the *History*, hope appears in descriptions of the Athenians; the critique of hope focuses above all on their conduct during the conflict.⁹

⁶In addition to the literature mentioned above, three useful and recent studies of Thucydides have informed the present essay, although none discusses hope: Zagorin (2008); Zumbunnen (2008); and Mara (2009).

⁷This reading of hope largely corresponds to Orwin's (1998, 201) infrequent treatment of the concept, arguing as he does that hope and longing mediate human experience, shrinking the realm of choice and free action.

⁸For ease of reading, I will refer to *elpis* as hope in the rest of this essay. It is important to note, however, that *elpis* imbues a meaning to hope different from the familiar and conventional sense in English.

⁹In what follows, I focus on hope in the case of the Athenians as contrasted primarily with their subject allies. There are other worthwhile non-Athenian discussions of hope, such as that of Hermocrates and the Syracusans, but for reasons of length I will have to treat these examples elsewhere.

Here are the Corinthians describing the Athenians in Book I:

And again, they are adventurous beyond their power, and daring beyond their judgment, and in danger they are sanguine, . . . The deficiency created by the miscarriage of an undertaking is soon filled up by fresh hopes; for they alone are enabled to call a thing hoped for a thing got, by the speed with which they act upon their resolutions. (1.70)

The Athenians, in other words, live in constant hope because they can achieve everything they hope for. Unlike the plodding Spartans, the Athenians leap forward with their ingenuity, innovation, and constant activity. They have, as Pericles puts it in his first speech, many reasons to hope for favorable outcomes (1.144).

This passage also anticipates the important ambivalence about hope that pervades Thucydides' *History*, presaging the critique of hope as well as a second, constructive account of hope that I discuss below. Seeking to persuade the Spartans to ally against the Athenians, the Corinthians emphasize the power of hope and how, when matched by capabilities, hope can lead to great success. Directly addressing the Spartans, the Corinthians contrast the Spartans' procrastination with the Athenians' promptitude, saying that "they [the Athenians] hope by their absence to extend their acquisitions, [while] you fear by your advance to endanger what you have left behind" (1.70). Hope drives the Athenians to overlook pragmatic considerations while their constant activity makes up for these speculative excesses. In other words, the Corinthians' praise for Athens includes an appreciation of how effective hope is for the Athenians and how harmful to their enemies.

On the other hand, the Corinthians' account of the hopeful Athenians also foreshadows the conflict to which Thucydides devotes the *History*, and in retrospect the arc of the *History* casts these depictions in a much more negative light. While the narrative of the Athenians' own hopes does not peak until Melos and the Sicilian Expedition, the problems of hope appear earlier, enunciated by Diodotus in the Mytilenian Debate. The Athenians have questioned their earlier resolution to execute the whole adult male population of Mytilene, making slaves of the women and children, and Thucydides has given us the speeches of Cleon and Diodotus as contrasting arguments against and for a change in decision. Cleon argues that the Athenians must hold out "no hope" (*oukoun* . . . *elpida*, 3.40) to the Mytilenians; however, Diodotus responds with a more complex point that the hope of allies and confederates against the

Athenians will always remain, contradicting Cleon's insistence on the deterrent power of punishment. Diodotus claims that "hope leads men to venture; and no one ever yet put himself in peril without the inward conviction that he would succeed in his design" (3.45). He continues:

Hope also and love [*erōs*], the one leading and the other following, the one [*erōs*] conceiving the attempt, the other [*elpis*] suggesting the facility of succeeding, cause the widest ruin, and, although invisible agents, are far stronger than the dangers seen. (Ibid.)¹⁰

As Stahl comments, the blindness of hope does not describe an isolated phenomenon, but "a universal (if regrettable) fact about the human condition," a constant of inconstancy created by hope's suggestions to erotic desire ([1966] 2003, 186).

The appearance of *erōs* is important here and suggests how passions serve to foment the pathologies of hope that Thucydides' *History* criticizes. While hope leads, making success seem easy, *erōs* conceives the attempt, inflaming hope, one might say, by seeding it with erotic energy. This idea that hopes become delusional when twinned with passions reappears in the Pylos episode, which occurs the year after Mytilene. Here a desire for more (*pleonexia*) accompanies hope, creating a destructive and ravenous hope in the Athenians, one that is reinforced as ruinous in the narrative.¹¹ After the Spartans suffer a surprising defeat at Pylos, they approach the Athenians seeking to settle the war. Warning against one possible response, the Spartans presage the Athenians' eventual path, declaring that they are "led on by hope to grasp continually at something further, through having already succeeded without expecting it" (4.17). While the Spartans point to their own fall from greatness, which has led to the reversal at Pylos, the Athenians fail to recognize themselves in the travails of their enemy and thus to countenance the contingency of their present successes. Instead, the Spartan diagnosis of the Athenians' hopeful grasping after more proves accurate when the Athenians reject the Spartan requests for peace (4.21). *Pleonexia* inflates the Athenians' hopes and beclouds their judgment,

¹⁰Here I modify the Crawley/Strassler translation, which translates *erōs* as "greed." "Greed" may call attention to the inflationary pressures exerted by human passions more generally, connecting *erōs* to the use of *pleonexia* that follows.

¹¹Balot (2001) defines *pleonexia* as "an excessive desire to get more, not simply acquisitiveness as such, which, depending on how 'acquisitiveness' is understood, might refer merely to natural or necessary desires to get more" (28, n. 16).

deluding the Athenians about the reality of the situation. To underscore the point, a similar motif appears at the end of the episode when the Athenians refuse the Spartans' requests to recover their prisoners: "The Athenians, however, kept grasping for more, and dismissed envoy after envoy without their having effected anything" (4.41).

Hope, "danger's comforter," can operate to deceive the powerful, even those like the Athenians who once thrived upon well-grounded hopes. In the eighth year of the war, another incident underscores the destructive power of hope, connecting the Mytilenian episode with the Athenians after Pylos. Sparta has just captured Amphipolis, an Athenian colony. The tides of the conflict have begun to shift. Other cities subject to Athens, hearing of the capture and of the generous terms given to the city, feel strongly encouraged to change their condition and revolt. The narrator comments on the episode that "it is a habit of mankind to entrust to careless hope what they long for, and to use sovereign reason to thrust aside what they do not want" (4.108).¹² Here the subject allies of Athens fall prey to hope's deceptions, stoked by their longing for freedom: wanting to escape subjection to the Athenians, desire deludes these cities into believing that they could resist, if not defeat the Athenians. As Stahl puts it: "Even in the face of his own destruction, man refuses to recognize the reality of the situation . . . instead he flees into unreality, or better: into a world of fantasy produced by his own wishes" ([1966] 2003, 166). The subsequent massacre of the Melians shows just how deadly such fantasies—the lethal wages of hope—can be.

While the *History* illuminates the widely destructive consequences of hope, Athens remains the representative case. As the conflict continues, the course of the Athenians' hopes becomes clearer, and these hopes facilitate the catastrophe of Sicily; hope's inexorable logic appears most strikingly in Books VI and VII, dedicated almost entirely to activities around the Athenian expedition to Sicily.¹³ The *History* had already prepared its readers to associate excessive hope with this expedition during an earlier Athenian sally to Sicily. When that misadventure failed and the Athenians banished two of its unsuccessful generals, Pythodorus and Sophocles, while fining a third, Eurymedon, the narrator remarks that

¹²I modify the Crawley/Strassler here by rendering *epithumousin* as "want" in the second instance instead of "desire." (There is one Greek verb of wanting in this sentence, but because of a parallel formation Crawley/Strassler translates it twice.)

¹³On hope in Books VI and VII, see Avery (1973).

the "extraordinary success" in the past led the Athenians to "confuse their strengths with their hopes" (4.65). The Corinthians had characterized the Athenians as always achieving what they hoped for, but the very success of their hopefulness now leads to a confusion between what was possible on the basis of their strengths and what was impracticable and exceeded their means. Hope becomes the basis for all future calculations, enlisting "sovereign reason" as its handmaid. These hopes bear bitter fruit in the Sicilian Expedition.

The Sicilian Expedition begins and ends with hope, and Thucydides' chronicle of these years illuminates what makes the Athenians' hope pathological. Once the Athenians resolve to sail to Sicily, first enraptured by the tales of wealth and power spun by envoys from Egesta, the preparations grow to epic proportions. Nicias' strategy to exaggerate the expedition's size results in even more accumulation, and the vastness and magnificence of the mission make everyone "fall in love with the enterprise." This desire in place, hopes reach beyond their grounds, as the Athenians regard their navy before embarking:

Indeed the expedition became not less famous for its wonderful boldness and for the splendor of its appearance, than for its overwhelming strength as compared with the peoples against whom it was directed, and for the fact that this was the longest passage from home hitherto attempted, and the most ambitious in its objectives considering the resources of those who undertook it [*epi megistēi elpidi tōn mellontōn pros ta huparchonta epecheirēthē*]. (6.31)

Here the Crawley/Strassler translation obscures the hopes of the passage. As Thomas Hobbes translates the final phrase: "for that it was undertaken with so vast future hopes in respect of their present power" (Hobbes 1975, 406). These "vast hopes" (*megistēi elpidi*) assure the Athenians of their success despite the magnitude of the undertaking or their ignorance of Sicily; inflated to grand proportions by erotic desire, their hopes exceed the Athenians' resources. As Parry comments, this passage emphasizes "the divergence between perception and reality" characterizing Athenian policy after Pericles (1981, 18). Their delusive hope blinds them to the perils of the enterprise; hope comforts its dangers, not inciting but smothering them so that these lovers can forget the dangerous path they have chosen.

Hope also accompanies the Athenians to Sicily, where its deceptions become ever clearer. Once the expedition begins to sour, hope reappears—but now divorced from the erotic or pleonectic passions that had invigorated it earlier. Nicias sees the strength of the enemy and his own difficulties increasing daily

(7.8). He writes a letter to Athens, wishing to report the truth and insure that the Athenians should know his opinion and the real facts. Yet his letter brings unhappy news: “the besieger in name has become . . . the besieged in reality” (7.11). The Syracusans and their allies soon defeat the Athenians, destroying those “great hopes” (7.75) and forcing the Athenians to confront an unkind reality. The dead unburied, the army in shambles, the dreams deflated: the Athenians, once high on hope, have now ridden it to its nadir.

But hope does not entirely disappear, and soon we see that Nicias’ foolish hopes are tied to an inflexible piety that deludes his hopes. As the situation worsens, Nicias tells the Athenians to “hope on” as they attempt to retreat; his words sound much like the Melians’:

I have . . . still a strong hope for the future, and our misfortunes do not terrify me as much as they might. Indeed we may hope that they will be lightened: our enemies have had good fortune enough; and if any of the gods was offended at our expedition, we have already been amply punished. (7.77)

Now piety inflames the hopes of Athens’ leaders, as Nicias has no place to put his hopes but in the justice of the gods. Like *erōs* and *pleonexia* before, piety diverts hope from its connection to reality, placing hope’s object beyond the next horizon. The underlying logic remains the same: hopes thus inflated prove delusive, and Nicias’ undoing clearly stems from his ill-conceived hope. As if to echo the Melians’ fate, the hopes of Nicias and the Athenians will come to naught. Some will be butchered in the Assinarus River as they try to escape while others will die of exposure in the quarries of Syracuse. Nicias and his fellow general Demosthenes will be summarily executed.

When news reaches Athens of the disaster in Sicily the Athenians react with anger and rage at the orators, reciters of oracles, and soothsayers, all of whom “encouraged them to hope that they should conquer Sicily” (8.1). Fear and consternation follow, and the disorder of Book VIII charts the hapless course of a city where hope has crashed against reality’s shoals. While the Athenians live on, eventually finding some moderate course in the mixed regime (8.97), they are changed—hope does not return, and one wonders if the Corinthians’ praise of successful Athenian hopefulness in Book I could ever be heard again.¹⁴

¹⁴Book VIII presents an interesting case study of how the Athenians proceed once disabused of their hopes, that is, how a polity proceeds once hope appears to be totally crushed. As I note, they survive, but it’s not clear that the Athenian vitality that led to their stunning achievements persists. I hope to address these questions in future work.

Desperate Hope

This critique of hope would seem to point to an outright rejection of hope. Indeed, Ehrenreich (2007) has recently identified the “pathologies of hope” along very similar lines precisely in order to dismiss hope entirely. Because hope so quickly becomes a kind of delusional positive thinking, one that clings to illusions of redemption while implicitly denying a solution to the original problem, Ehrenreich argues that we would do better without hope. Situations of crisis in particular, Ehrenreich points out, are better faced without the potentially delusive power of hope: cancer patients (like herself) cannot let hope fool them just as airplane pilots must prepare for the worst when an engine malfunctions; hope alone will save neither. In response to Jesse Jackson’s “keep hope alive,” Ehrenreich responds: “Fuck hope. Keep us alive.”

Unlike Ehrenreich’s polemic, however, Thucydides’ *History* does not reject hope. While readers of Thucydides have almost all followed Stahl’s account of a Thucydidean critique of hope, this reading risks missing the constructive aspect of hope in the *History*. I will focus on three moments suggesting a second story for hope in the *History*: first, the hopes of Nicias, prior to their inflammation with piety; second, the hopes of the Melians as they faced the Athenians; and third, the hopes of the Athenians a generation before in their conflict with the Persians. While the story of hope in the *History* thus far illuminates its destructive comfort in political projects of overreaching, these moments suggest a second account of hope that complicates the first by showing the need for desperate hope, that is, for hope as the final bulwark against despair. If the first story of hope harshly depicts its implication in dangerous delusions, this second contrasts it positively with the hopelessness that comes from resignation.

While Nicias appears to present a case study of delusive hopes fueled by excessive piety, the portrait in the *History* is more ambiguous than that. This is not to deny the critique of hope evident in the treatment of Nicias but rather to supplement this critique with a constructive moment that dovetails with similar moments elsewhere in the text. Viewing Nicias as simply another example of the critique of hope detailed in the first section does not adequately explain Nicias’ valiant, albeit ultimately unsuccessful, effort against the Syracusans. While Connor (1984, 203) has suggested that Nicias’ invocation of hope must appear ironic given the Athenians’

own condemnation of hope in their “dialogue” with the Melians, the narrator’s final praise of Nicias after his death, that Nicias, who “least deserved such a fate” led a life “regulated with strict attention to excellence [*aretē*],”¹⁵ gives reason to question any complete dismissal of Nicias and his hopes. We must also remember that Nicias’ hopes were not originally baseless. While Demosthenes urged Nicias to withdraw, Nicias’ hopes were grounded in information about the Syracusans’ weakening position (7.48). From the beginning, Nicias fought against bad odds and he very nearly won, as the narrator notes (7.2). Only the unexpected and last-minute arrival of Gylippus with reinforcements from the Peloponnese, which the narrator describes as a lucky occurrence, changes the situation such that hope would begin to appear delusive (7.2). Nicias’ hesitation to retreat, which was only later exacerbated by his addiction to oracles, stemmed from a realistic assessment of the field of operations. His exhortations to hope (7.61, 7.77), then, carry the grounded hopes of a general struggling to stave off his troops’ despair; only in hindsight can we judge them as also being inflated by a delusive piety—and this is a partial judgment. Nicias faced a desperate situation and had already pled for permission to withdraw. The “great hopes” of the expedition had disappeared (7.75); in their absence the Athenians needed some alternative to despair and the total loss that would come with resignation. That alternative required hope.

Nicias presents one example of hope as not entirely delusive; the Melians provide another. The Melians’ insistence that as long as they had life they had hope, and that consenting to the Athenians’ subjugation would extinguish both life and hope, may first appear foolhardy (and thus as an example of the original critique of hope), but close attention to their language suggests otherwise:

But we know that the fortune of war is sometimes more impartial than the disproportion of numbers might lead one to suppose; to submit is to give ourselves over to despair, while action still preserves for us a hope that we may stand erect. (5.102)

Here it is not the case that the Melians put their hopes solely in salvation from the gods or the Spartans; instead, part of their hope is more basic. Despair would mean giving up to what appears as inevitable; the Melians, in contrast, assert hope as the only means of survival. As was the case for Nicias, hope here

describes an expression of human longing against seemingly insurmountable odds that might otherwise condemn the sufferer to resignation. The Athenians assume that subjection would not entail too much of a sacrifice and that the Athenian empire would preserve Melos while preserving itself. Yet the so-called dialogue also indicates the degree of coercion the Athenians exert: they reject the Melians’ desires to remain neutral; they forbid the Melians from discussing justice; and they scoff at the Melians’ respect for tradition and the gods. In other words, the Athenians demand that the Melians become Athenians—or even worse than Athenians since the Melians will not receive citizenship and must pay tribute. Given the degree of transformation the Athenians demanded, the Melians’ hope was indeed the only possible response if they wished to maintain any sense of national integrity.

Moreover, the *History* offers reasons to question an interpretation of the Melians’ hope as entirely delusive. While the Athenians deride the Melians for their hopes, appearing confident that they will easily quash them (5.115), this oversimplifies a complicated situation.¹⁶ Upon being rebuked by the Melians, the Athenians commence hostilities, building a wall around the Melians and besieging them. But the Melians counter, attacking during the night and stealing provisions from their assailants. The next winter the Athenians had still not crushed the Melians, and the Melians again take part of the Athenian lines. Only when Athenian reinforcements arrive, perhaps freed by the Spartans’ decision not to invade the Athenians’ ally, the Argives, and with a betrayal from within the Melian camp do the Melians surrender. If not for these contingencies, both on Melos and abroad, the Melians might well have emerged alive. While one could not claim that their hopes were realistic, the Melians’ hopes (like Nicias’ in Sicily) still very nearly came true. The odds were heavily stacked against the Melians, but the *History*’s accounts of human affairs are too complex and searching to allow for claims of certainty about human action; hope finds a place in the never-closed crevasses of possibility when despair (and with it, self-annihilation) appears to be the only alternative.

The examples of Nicias and the Melians also hearken back to a third moment in Thucydides’ narrative that further supports the constructive story of hope poised against despair. In their war against the Persians, the Athenians had also had the chance to make their peace and submit—first in response to

¹⁵I modify the Crawler/Strassler here to render *aretē* as “excellence” rather than “virtue,” which is their translation.

¹⁶I thank Kinch Hoekstra for his insightful suggestions about the arguments in this paragraph.

an offer from Darius and then with Xerxes. When Xerxes neared and their allies temporized, it looked as if the Athenians should capitulate. While the Peloponnesians remained safe at home, the Athenians were under mortal threat, just like the Melians. But the Athenians refused to surrender.¹⁷ Here are the Athenians at the assembly in Sparta years later, explaining themselves:

We left behind us a city that was a city no longer, and staked our lives for a city that had an existence only in desperate hope, and so bore our full share in your deliverance and in ours. (1.74)

With their polis only surviving in “desperate hope,” the Athenians still fought and won at Salamis, joining their allies to defeat the Persians. Rather than succumbing to despair, as would the Athenians after the Sicilian disaster (8.1), here the Athenians bear up with hope. Hope inspires their valiant and successful resistance, creating the very possibility that Themistocles can lead them to victory. Nicias and the Melians were crushed, but hope helped the Athenians to persevere at Salamis. Hope against the Persians sustained the Athenians—it maintained the image of their city when nothing else remained and provided the basis for the Athenian victory.

Taken together, these three moments of constructive desperate hope—Nicias on Sicily, the Melians against the Athenians, and the Athenians at Salamis—cannot outweigh the ruinous hopes that culminated in the Sicilian expedition in the first place. The overarching, primary account of the text points to a condemnation of hope for its susceptibility to delusion and destructive political consequences.¹⁸ But if hope tends toward excess, it also appears to sustain existence on the brink of despair. Even if it cannot guarantee success, hope appears necessary as a support for continued life. These moments thus contradict a total dismissal of hope’s connection to successful political action and complicate the conventional reading that Thucydides’ *History* presents a monological critique of hope.

The fragility of these constructive moments of hope, moreover, suggests reasons why some hopes succeed while others fail. These reasons begin to appear in Pericles’ two speeches around the plague,

where constructive hope and destructive hopes appear intertwined. In the Funeral Oration, hope takes the positive angle noted by the Corinthians in Book I. Pericles exhorts his fellow citizens to live with hope for glorious remembrance through the continued life of Athens: citizens can act with hope and die for Athens because Athens will outlive them. Athens’ “imperishable monuments” (2.41) allow her citizens to commit “to hope the uncertainty of final success” and choose “to die resisting, rather than to live submitting,” fleeing only from dishonor and meeting danger face to face (2.42). Athenian citizens thus die as heroes immortalized by their city herself, exemplars to the citizens still living:

These take as your model, and judging happiness to be the fruit of freedom and freedom of valor, never decline the dangers of war. For it is not the miserable that would most justly be unsparing of their lives; these have nothing to hope for: it is rather they to whom continued life may bring reverses as yet unknown, and to whom a fall, if it came, would be most tremendous in its consequences. And surely, to a man of spirit, the degradation of cowardice must be immeasurably more grievous than the unfelt death which strikes him in the midst of his strength and common hope! (2.43)¹⁹

The hopes invested in the city give its individual citizens reason to fight; without hope, they would have no encouragement to face mortal dangers. The hope of the Athenians, then, both of her citizens and of the city herself, lies in continued life when reverses can still come; hope is grounded in the empirical reality of the polis, not in some distant object of conquest or salvation by the gods. The desperate hope against the Persians at Salamis has developed into a hopeful democracy where the members of the *dēmos* find strength for individual action in the endurance of the *dēmos* as a whole beyond the bounds of a single human life.

But the fragility of hope appears shortly after the Funeral Oration with the advent of the plague; this shows how even well-grounded hopes can fall in the face of crisis or catastrophe and thus how no single hope can guarantee success; the constructive side appears always twinned with its destructive partner. The vision that hope creates, a vision of having one’s desires met indefinitely in the future, obscures changes of fortune like the plague as well as those unforeseen obstacles the Athenians will encounter as

¹⁷Euben (1977, 45) also identifies this connection.

¹⁸And in this sense, the Athenians’ castigation of the Melians for having groundless hopes is correct. The point remains, however, that hope presents an ineluctable part of human motivation, both for psychological reasons and because chance could always turn the course of events. I thank one of my anonymous reviewers for pushing this question.

¹⁹The Crawley/Strassler translation obscures an important sense by translating the final words of this passage, *koinēs elpidos*, as “patriotism.”

the war continues. The plague's sudden outbreak vanquishes the Athenians' hopes:

By far the most terrible feature in the malady was the dejection which ensued when anyone felt himself sickening, for the despair into which they instantly fell took away their power of resistance, and left them a much easier prey to the disorder. (2.51)

The despair that hastens each individual's death illuminates a broader point about Athens itself. Shattering the vision of Athens' immortality and continued life, the plague makes any hope of survival "vain." What once created an infrangible foundation—the immortal Athenian polity—now appears tenuous and fragile; without this basis, hope dissipates just like the "ancient simplicity" replaced by "lawless extravagance" in the wake of the disease's ravages (2.52). Without hope, Athenians transform:

Men now did just what they pleased, coolly venturing on what they had formerly done only in a corner, seeing the rapid transitions produced by persons in prosperity suddenly dying and those who before had nothing succeeding to their property. So they resolved to spend quickly and enjoy themselves, regarding their lives and riches as alike things of a day. (2.53)

Perseverance, patience, piety: all these marks of hopefulness from Pericles' Funeral Oration evaporate with the pestilence. Even desperate hope offers no guarantee of continued success—or life.

In his third and final speech, Pericles acknowledges that the plague exceeded the Athenians' previous hopes. Reversing course, Pericles now condemns hope, viewing it as a resort for those without the resources to confront fortune's vacillations.

Where the chances are the same, knowledge fortifies courage by the contempt which is its consequence, its trust being placed, not in hope, which is the prop of the desperate, but in a judgment grounded upon existing resources, whose anticipations are more to be depended upon. (2.62)

Trying to remind the Athenians that the foundations of their former hopes remain—that Athens herself persists despite the ruin of the plague—Pericles connects the knowledge of Athenian strength to their ability to withstand the present crisis. Judgment must stand alongside hopes, as we have seen: judgment about the reality of the situation and thus about the chances for success or survival. Still, this judgment can never be certain, and once the Athenians find themselves in foreboding conditions, their hopes now no longer have a place; they must solely rely on the good judgment of Athens' leaders. Pericles invokes hope even as he criticizes it, naming what once was a

source of strength for the Athenians. Faced with despair after the invasions of Attica and the plague, the Athenians have lost all hope and their confidence stands in shambles—yet hope remains poised to rise again, for good or for ill. By his very mention of hope, Pericles foreshadows Nicias' pleas in Sicily. In the face of despair hope once seemed the best course, but this hope, like Nicias', appears dwarfed by looming circumstances. Nicias was executed; Pericles, like those who fell into hopelessness upon becoming ill, succumbs to the plague.

Thucydides and "Radical Hope"

Thucydides' uniquely ambivalent concept of hope stands apart from nearly all of the invocations of hope in today's political discourse, save one: Lear's (2006) recent discussion of "radical hope."²⁰ In this work of "philosophical anthropology," Lear recounts the plight of the Crow tribe on the brink of cultural devastation: as white settlers increasingly encroached on their traditional land, as the buffalo population dwindled, and as disease ravaged their youth, the Crow faced the very real possibility of annihilation. In the midst of these existential challenges, a Crow chief named Plenty Coups announced a dream vision of the Chickadee, a symbol of adaptability and learning, and led the Crow people to a transformed existence. The Crow gave up their old way of life and embraced a completely new one. Lear calls the sources of Plenty Coups' strength and vision "radical hope," and he argues that this vision of hope can inform present responses to crisis and catastrophe.

For Lear, Plenty Coups serves as a "witness to a peculiar form of human vulnerability" when a way of life collapses (6). In such situations, a people must commit to a vision of goodness, a purpose in its collective life, that transcends the self-understanding of the moment. For Plenty Coups and the Crow, they had to envision an existence without buffalo, without the frequent wars in which Crow warriors distinguished themselves, and without the nomadic life that sustained their rituals and other communal practices. At such moments of imminent cultural transformation or destruction, Lear identifies the commitment to the possibility that from this disaster something good will emerge as radical hope. Radical hope thus "anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts

²⁰Citations in the paragraphs that follow refer to this edition.

with which to understand it” (104). Hope comes with some recognition of the possibility of despair but bears up against it. For Plenty Coups, radical hope manifested itself in fidelity to his prophetic dream, a dream that responded to the changed reality around him and envisioned a yet undefined alternative. Plenty Coups’ experience also speaks to a more general phenomenon for Lear, the “ontological vulnerability” that makes us human (50); radical hope informed by good judgment of a threatening reality constitutes the best possible response.

Lear’s account of “radical hope” sounds much like the Athenians prior to Salamis or the Melians standing up to the Athenians. Just as the Crow had nothing else but hope, the Athenians forsook their city in “desperate hope.” Thucydides’ account seems to imply that the Athenians’ good judgment of their circumstances at that moment led to the possibility of their hope’s validation. Only later, when hope inflated by *erōs* or *pleonexia* or piety obstructed their grasp of reality did the Athenians begin to err. At the crucial moment, “radical hope” seems to describe the Athenians’ strength to resist, holding the promise of resistance, even when that resistance constitutes only a desperate hope. While Nicias failed, Pericles succeeded; the Athenians redeemed their hopes against the Persians, and the Melians nearly did so against the Athenians.

Yet despite these similarities, Thucydides’ account of hope also contrasts with Lear’s in three ways that speak to the limitations of today’s hope-imbued politics. First, the *History* suggests that hope may depend on maintaining certain parts of life despite the threat to one’s existence. The Athenians cannot Medize;²¹ the Melians too find the prospect of submitting to the Athenians tantamount to self-destruction. Lear takes it as self-evident that continued survival, no matter the cost, beats annihilation. On Lear’s account, the Crow and Plenty Coups never entertained fighting until the last man fell. Thus hope for Lear becomes a panacea, the key to survival regardless of the condition of that future life. In fact, radical hope by definition cannot envision any future life but hopes nonetheless for its goodness. Put that way, the contrast with Thucydides’ accounts of hope could not appear in starker relief: contrary to Lear, the *History* suggests the possibility of hoping against such (“radical”) hope, of resistance even when it appears entirely futile; for both the Melians and the Athenians, capitulation would have entailed something worse than defeat. Accepting the

kind of cultural transformation Lear finds admirable in Plenty Coups would subvert the very basis of hope that emerges as constructive in Thucydides’ account. To borrow from Honig, Lear’s hope puts “mere life” before “more life” (2009, 10–11); Thucydides’ *History* leaves open the choice (if there is one) between the two.

Lear further ignores the potential dangers of hope. If Plenty Coups and the Crow roughly parallel the Athenians against the Persians, the *History* juxtaposes this hopeful resistance with the tragedy of the Melians while also reminding its readers of the pathologies of hope that haunted the Athenians after Salamis: *erōs* or *pleonexia* or piety can all fuel delusive and ultimately destructive hopes. “Desperate hope” can lead to ruin as well as survival, and even those hope aids risk pinning too much on hope, being led by hope to potential disasters. Pericles’ well-judged hope cannot predict or withstand the subsequent plague. While Nicias maintains a vulnerable hope in the direst of circumstances, he is guilty of holding hope too long when he fails to come to grips with the reality of his situation, instead infusing hope with piety and leading the Athenians to ruin. By heroizing hope through the character of Plenty Coups, Lear ignores the possibility that hope may also play the villain.

Finally, Lear denies the vulnerability of hope. For Thucydides, hope is never far from despair and always prone to fatal inflation by misplaced desire, greed, or excessive piety. The narrative of the *History* witnesses this complexity, as we have seen: “hope, danger’s comforter,” contains its different meanings that play out most notably in the rise and fall of the Athenians. Hope does not always lead to the longed-for good Lear wants to believe it does; it may become subverted, appropriated, twisted into something unbearable, or contrary to one’s most precious beliefs.

The contrast with Lear underscores the ambivalence concerning hope in Thucydides’ *History*. Hope will not, as Lear seems to have it, always lead to a long and happy life. The narrative of the *History* counsels deep skepticism even as it recognizes the need for hope. The resulting openness can educate judgment about hope, even while warning against complete confidence in these judgments. While it offers imaginative resources for understanding hope and its relationship to politics, the *History* calls into question the usefulness of such resources. Hope can inspire political action and sustain communities through catastrophe, yet it can also overwhelm apparently sagacious judgments, swamping these same hopeful communities. History too may prove feckless, as it did for the Athenians in a world where words had lost

²¹That is, the Athenians cannot adopt the practices of the Medes (and pay tribute to the Medes) while remaining Athenians.

their meaning. Nonetheless, as hope persists in today's political discourse, Thucydides' *History* can provide a useful reminder about hope's complications, both its necessity and its dangers: hope without assurance, a precarious hope, hope as "danger's comforter."

Thucydides' Hopes

Returning to Thucydides' text with Lear in mind also suggests a further facet to Thucydides' account of hope lacking in contemporary accounts. While "hope" plays an important role in the descriptions within the text, Thucydides also clues in his readers from the very beginning of the work that hope in some form imbues the act of making and writing the text itself. Here is the first line of the *History*:

Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, beginning at the moment that it broke out, and expecting [*elpisas*] that it would be a great war, and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it.²²

Here I follow the conventional translation of *elpisas* as "expecting," but given how wide-ranging and influential a role it will play in the text, *elpis* in this first sentence must suggest a connection between the expectations of the author and those expectations of characters in the narrative moved by hope. Unlike Herodotus, who begins his account of the Persian wars with assertions of knowledge, Thucydides selects a word that resonates with the hopes of the narrative.²³ Moreover (and again unlike Herodotus), by writing a contemporaneous history, Thucydides wrote without being fully aware of the greatness of the events he chronicled. While he had grounds for his hopes—the material development of Athens and Sparta being the most significant—there was no certainty, no way of knowing for sure, that the events would merit his treatment. The *History* presents itself, then, as a hopeful act: it begins with only an expectation that something will come of its being written, distributed, and circulated; that it will prove not merely "an essay

²²I have modified the Crawley/Strassler translation to emphasize the verb *elpisas*. Crawley/Stassler reads: ". . . and believing that it would be a great war. . . ."

²³In Herodotus's first sentence, he "presents his research" (*historiēs apodexis*), which does not exactly equate to knowledge. Later in the introductory section, however, Herodotus reasons that he will examine both great and small powers because of his knowledge that human prosperity never remains constant, using the participle of *epistamai* (1.5.5). Thucydides, in contrast, uses *elpizdein* to describe the war he chronicles.

which is to win the applause of the moment," but "a possession for all time" (1.22). This provides a way of reading the writing of the *History* as saying something about hope left unremarked in accounts such as Lear's.

Unlike modern accounts, then, Thucydides' *History* offers itself as a way of thinking about the hopes it chronicles in its narrative. There is a connection between what Thucydides is doing as an author and what he is describing as a historian, and the former can help us further understand the latter. Lear, as we saw, suggests that radical hope informed by good judgment of a threatening reality constitutes the best possible response to situations of crisis or emergency. Yet Lear says nothing about what this good judgment looks like, that is, about how one can know whether hope will lead to success or failure, survival or annihilation. On what basis can one know to trust prophets like Plenty Coups? How did the Athenians justify their hopes against the Persians at Salamis and how did this justification differ from the Melians'? In contrast to Lear's silence, Thucydides' *History* articulates some criteria for making such judgments. As we saw in the first and second sections, the *History* illuminates how hope becomes deluded when inflated by powerful passions; similarly, desperate hope seems best—although still not impregnable—when grounded in concrete realities, such as the stability of the Athenian polis. These two themes suggest a basis for understanding the hope of the *History* as a whole, a hope articulated by the narrator's description of the text's task as offering "an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to understanding of the future" (1.22). Connecting the stated project of the *History* with the theme of hope as we have seen it develop, I would suggest that the *History* is written in the hopes that truthful history can inform judgment and, more broadly, diminish the persistence of delusional overreaching led by hope. The grounding of this hope exists in the text itself, written as a "possession for all time" (1.22). At the same time, however, the narrative of the *History* testifies again and again to the fragility of hope and the ways in which knowledge proves inadequate for deterring poor judgment or combatting destructive passions. The work of the *History* is guided by hope, we might say, but it remains a realistic hope informed both by hope's excesses and by the contingency and unpredictability of human affairs.

Thus while it begins with a prefiguration of hope's prominent place in the narrative, moments in the *History* militate against the hope that truthful history might matter. In other words, the hopes of the *History*, like those it describes, are not obviously destined for fulfillment. Indeed, the narrative of the

History often demonstrates how little knowledge affects the momentous decisions of the war: from the bending of truths in the initial speeches by the Corcyraeans and Corinthians to the knowing ignorance of the Athenians about basic geography when they invade Sicily, other motivations—often animated by the same passions that inflate and delude hope itself—overpower all judgment and the correct use of knowledge. Moreover, the text’s motif of what Connor calls “the subversion of logos” calls into question the hope that language could conduce to learning, that it could bridge historical and circumstantial differences and provide a way of avoiding the mistakes of the past. Thucydides’ *History* does not offer many examples of good judgment informed by a clear-eyed assessment such as what it offers. When “words lose their meaning,” language and history begin to contribute to the destructiveness of war (Connor 1984, 244–45). Thucydides’ hopes appear to be in vain.

The description of the plague puts the issues of the *History*’s hopes in microcosm. Striking without forewarning, the plague throws Athens into chaos. Even the narrator of the *History* confesses powerlessness against it:

All speculation as to its origin and its causes, if causes can be found adequate to produce so great a disturbance, I leave to other writers, whether lay or professional; for myself, I shall simply set down its nature, and explain the symptoms by which perhaps it may be recognized by the student, if it should ever break out again. (2.48)

The *History* will “set down its nature,” but it makes no promises about an antidote. Readers must confront the fact that little helped against the plague; one could only pity those suffering the disease’s horrific effects. As Connor comments: “the possibility of predicting and controlling the future . . . erodes” (1984, 244).

Another episode later in the text gives further support to this reading of the project of the *History* as hopeless: the “history within a history” when the narrator recounts the Harmodius and Aristogeiton episode in Book VI.²⁴ Here the narrative breaks off from describing the hysteria in Athens following the mutilation of the Hermae and the mock celebration of the Mysteries in order to “show that the Athenians are no more accurate than the rest of the world in their accounts of their own tyrants and of the facts of

their own history” (6.54). The reactions in 415 were premised on a story widely credited in Athens: the people of Athens had heard how oppressive the tyranny of Peisistratus and his sons a century earlier had become before it ended and that the Spartans and not they the people nor Harmodius had put down the tyranny; this belief had made the people suspicious and prone to fearfulness. But while asserting some particular details as different, the excursus on Harmodius and Aristogeiton in the *History* does not challenge the overarching reasons for suspicion: although the Athenians mistakenly considered the entirety of Peisistratus’s tyranny as oppressive and believed Hipparchus to have succeeded him (when in fact Hippias was the eldest son), the tyranny did in fact oppress the Athenians following Harmodius and Aristogeiton’s plot and eventually the Spartans and the exiled Alcmaeonidae did enter Athens and deposed the tyranny (6.59). In other words, the Athenians’ unease and suspicions were based on an essentially correct story. Having the facts straight would have done nothing to change their interpretation and dampen their fears. History—and the *History*—seems feckless.

Yet the upshot of these examples notwithstanding, Thucydides’ insistent correction of the historical record evinces a kind of fidelity to the facts—and therewith to the truth—that is inherently hopeful; this speaks to how the text seeks to educate judgments about hope. If we are to have a basis for assessing our hopes, Thucydides seems to insist that this basis must lie in understanding the reality of the situation, and a detailed assessment of a given situation can provide criteria for evaluating our hopes. Thucydides’ assertions about writing for those who desire to know exactly what happened (1.22.4) in the whole of the *History* still stands. While the truth may not have mattered during crucial episodes in the *History*, one could say that Thucydides wrote the *History* in the hopes of truth’s mattering. Despite its overarching tone of pessimistic realism, the *History*, then, is also a hopeful history: it approaches human affairs with the hopes that it might inform and improve them (through exact knowledge of the past) even while offering reasons for doubting the hopes with which it was written. While also giving grounds for hopelessness with its repeated stories of the fecklessness of history, by writing in the first place, Thucydides forms a basis for hope in the physical creation of the *History* itself. Much as Pericles connected hope to the physical existence of the Athenian polis, the *History* gives material shape to its hopes by making an artifact meant to endure

²⁴Connor (1984, 244–45) also discusses this episode, but I owe thanks to Alex Stevens, my student in a seminar at Carleton College, for calling it to my attention.

beyond the circumstances of its creation. As a *ktēma es aei*—a possession for all time—the *History* appears to present itself as a text to be possessed and read and circulated.²⁵ By writing, Thucydides rejected despair; the *History* constitutes its own desperate hope. In a sense, the *History* suggests how to construct hope by introducing a new foundation for hope in the textual tradition it helped to initiate, tethering its hopes to a narrative that illuminates hope (in all its complexity) while propounding a hope chastened by its own history through the text's very existence.²⁶

Thucydides, Hope, Politics

A nearly unquestioned discourse of hope persists across American politics today, but a politics of hope informed by Thucydides' *History* can offer an alternative in two respects: with an ambivalent account of hope, as we saw in the first and second sections, and with the text's own invocation of hope and education of hopes, as we saw in the fourth section. Thucydides' *History* thus both chronicles and educates hope: it supplements its narrative account of how hope plays an ambiguous role in political life by also speaking to future actors in the hopes of deflating their hopeful longings; moreover, the *History* also self-reflexively shows the limits of all hopes, even the hope that truthful history might ameliorate the excesses of human nature. By way of conclusion, let me suggest what politics might follow from these findings and how a politics after Thucydides contrasts with the political uses of hope today.

Returning to the contrast with Lear can orient us to where Thucydides' *History* might lead. Lear's politics of hope are conventionally élitist: Plenty Coups acts as the beacon of hope, and Lear says little about the rest of the Crow people. So too many of today's invocations of hope repeat this heroization of the hope-bearing leader: witness Shephard Fairey's iconic image of candidate Barack Obama or even Jesse Jackson's mantra of "keep hope alive"—a hope vested in Jackson's candidacy—during his 1988

presidential run. In these instances and others, hope is borne by particular leaders who vow to unite their followers and lead them to a promised land. The disadvantages of the leader-driven politics that follow this kind of hope go unmentioned: the possibility of élite manipulation, an easily disillusioned *dēmos*, or the lack of solid foundation for any hope in the first place. All could lead these hopes not only to disappointment, but even to disaster. As leaders, Themistocles and Pericles stand apart from the rhetorical use of hope, suggesting then a different accent to a politics of hope informed by Thucydides. The "desperate hope" of the Athenians before Salamis leads to success thanks in part due to Themistocles' brilliant leadership. Pericles' invocations of hope in the *History* place this hope not in himself or his leadership but rather in the Athenian polis, its practices, and its traditions. Contrast Fairey's quickly commodified poster with the Acropolis: the one has all the ephemerality of another charismatic leader; the other stands, with all its aesthetic and political complexity, in the words of the Funeral Oration, as one of Athens' "imperishable monuments . . ." (2.31.4). Moreover, as the tide begins to turn against the Athenians, Pericles rejects hope as the sole bulwark against despair. In his third speech, as we saw, Pericles places the knowledge and judgment that the Athenian democracy possesses before hope. Thucydides' *History* thus offers both leaders as more complex counterpoints to the heroic portrayals of hopeful leadership to be found in Lear and contemporary politics.

These complicated examples of leadership also speak to the difficulties of pinning down any definable Thucydidean politics of hope on the basis of the *History*. Thucydides' *History* can speak to the problem of hope but it remains too complex to prescribe a single solution. Neither Themistocles nor Pericles embodies the perfect hopeful leader. Instead, for every instance when hope seems necessary for political success, a pathology also threatens. The contrast between the desperate hopes of the Athenians against the Persians at the beginning of Thucydides' chronicle, and the Athenians' despair and chaos in the wake of the Sicilian disaster by the *History's* end, frame the entire shape of hope. Miniature versions of this larger form appear at moments in the text: the hopefulfulness of Pericles' fellow Athenians that evaporates with the plague, provoking wide-spread destruction of the Athenian way of life; the hopeful resistance of the Melians that nearly saves them before they succumb to death and enslavement; the hopeful perseverance of Nicias that again carries him through difficult circumstances until he fails to

²⁵Havelock (1982, 138) notes that *ktēma* signified a transferable possession, inferring that here it connotes a written volume possessed by a reader. See also Yunis's comments on Thucydides' text as "written to be read" (2003, 189).

²⁶See the recent studies by Morrison (2006) and Greenwood (2006) for more elaboration of the demands Thucydides' text made and makes on its readers and the interpretive communities that might have followed.

recognize the changing reality around him and relies instead on piety. In each instance hope buoys these actors until it sinks them.

Yet the *History* does offer its own hopes, and the grounding of these hopes allows us to diagnose and evaluate the politics of hope today. Hope is necessary, as we have seen, but the *History* chastens all hopes with the education its text offers. The moment of hope's shift from constructive to pathological turns on a particular judgment: does this hope have empirical grounds? Is this hope exaggerated by *erōs*, *pleonexia*, or some other passion or ideology (such as inflexible piety)? The suggestion of the *History* seems to follow Pericles' contrast between knowledge and judgment and hope as "the prop of the desperate." With what Nietzsche named as his "courage to face reality," the author of the *History* holds up the most precise, detailed account of "the ways things are" as a counter to the hopeful delusions around him. Standing on the facts (and nothing else) even when the facts appear not to matter, such as with his correction of the Athenians' false beliefs concerning Harmodius and Aristogeiton, Thucydides takes his place with what Karl Rove reportedly (and disparagingly) called "reality-based communities" (Susskind 2004). Thucydides' *History* chronicles but ultimately rejects the attempts of the powerful to remake the world and instead insists on the undeniable power of reality itself and our ability to scrutinize and represent that reality with some degree of veracity. The Athenians' ignorance about Sicily prior to the invasion is a lamentable example of the kinds of delusions hope spawns, delusions that Thucydides sought to correct. So too today's foreign policy blunders suffer from a lack of empirical realism and are deluded by inflammatory passions.

Still, Thucydides' *History* does not promise answers. "Empirical realism" may sound too much like a prescription for success, one that ignores the sense of loss and practical aporia that pervades the *History*: in the response to the plague at Athens, for example, or in the vivid and tragic description of the Athenians' being slaughtered in Syracuse. To put it another way, the ambiguity of the hope of the Melians—with which this essay began—remains. Their hope may well have been pathological, especially if one places the greatest weight on their demise. Yet as we have seen, details and contexts militate against this reading: through the contrast with the Athenians as they near the apex of their hope-driven exploits, the Melians appear much more realistic, more grounded in a clear-eyed assessment of the necessity of resistance; similarly, the uncertainty about what "survival" for the Melians would have entailed complicates this

still further. The Melians could have survived, but for some bad luck both external and internal to their particular circumstances; their hopes may well have been vindicated by success. In the same vein, Lear overlooks how Plenty Coups' Crow may have gone the way of the Melians; "radical hope" always exists on a precipice between success and utter failure.

Thus while focusing its readers on the need for good judgment, Thucydides' *History* also educates these judgments for the shifting contexts and unavoidable uncertainties that characterize political reality. Judgment and knowledge remain, for Thucydides, indefinite and subject to revision: standards for a desirable outcome may shift, circumstances beyond one's control can change in an instant, and even the motivations for action can transform as they unfold. To follow hope in light of Thucydides means harnessing the necessary motivation for political success while tempering this motivation with contextual judgment and self-critical honesty.

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