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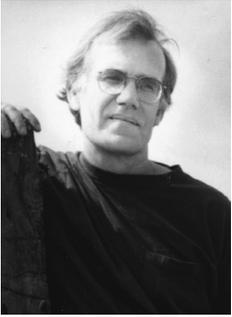
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## Classics and War

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**VICTOR DAVIS HANSON**, a professor of Classics at California State University, Fresno, received his B.A. at the University of California at Santa Cruz and his Ph.D. from Stanford University. In 1991 he was given the Award for Teaching Excellence by the American Philological Association – an annual citation given to the top undergraduate teachers of Classics. He is the author or editor of several books on military and ancient history, including *The Wars of the Ancient Greeks* (Cassell, 1999), *The Soul of Battle* (Free Press, 1999), and *Carnage and Culture* (Doubleday, 2001). He has also written about traditional agrarian and rural life and the contemporary culture wars. His books have been History Book Club and Book of the Month Club selections and have been translated into several foreign languages. His articles and reviews have appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Times*, *American Heritage*, *The Weekly Standard*, and *The Wilson Quarterly*, and he has been featured on National Public Radio and the Jim Lehrer News Hour. He currently writes a bi-weekly column on the war against terrorism for *National Review Online*. Dr. Hanson lives with his wife and three children on the farm where he was born in Selma, California.

*The following is an abridged version of Dr. Hanson's lecture at a seminar on "Liberal Education, Liberty, and Education Today," delivered in Phillips Auditorium at Hillsdale College on November 11, 2001.*

**T**he study of Classics – of Greece and Rome – can offer us moral lessons as well as a superb grounding in art, literature, history, and language. In our present crisis after September 11, it also offers practical guidance – and the absence of familiarity with the foundations of Western culture in part may explain many of the disturbing reactions to the war that we have seen on American campuses.

If more in our universities really understood the Greeks and Romans and their legacy in the West, then they would not see this present conflict through either therapeutic or apologetic lenses. As Classics teaches us, war in classical antiquity – and for most of the past 2,500 years of Western Civilization – was seen as a

tragedy innate to the human condition – a time of human plague when, as the historian Herodotus said, fathers bury sons rather than sons fathers. In others words, killing humans over disagreements should not happen among civilized people. But it does happen. So war, the poet Hesiod concluded, was “a curse from Zeus.”

Tragically, the Greeks tell us, conflict will *always* break out – and very frequently so – because we are human and thus not always rational. War is “the father, the king of us all,” the philosopher Heraclitus lamented. Even the utopian Plato agreed: “War is always existing by nature between every Greek city-state.” How galling and hurtful to us moderns that Plato, of all people, once called peace, *not* war, the real “parenthesis” in human affairs. Warfare could be terrifying – “a thing of fear,” the poet Pindar summed up – but not therein unnatural or necessarily evil.

No, the rub was *particular* wars, not war itself. While all tragic, wars could be good or evil depending on their cause, the nature of the fighting, and the ultimate costs and results. The Greek defense against Persian attack in 480 B.C., in the eyes of the playwright Aeschylus (who chose as his epigram mention of his service at the battle of Marathon, not his dramas), was “glorious.” Yet the theme of Thucydides’ history of the internecine Peloponnesian wars was folly and sometimes senseless butchery. Likewise, there is language of freedom and liberty associated with the Greeks’ naval victory at Salamis, but not with the slaughter at the battle of Gaugamela — Alexander the Great’s destruction of the Persian army in Mesopotamia that wrecked Darius III’s empire and replaced eastern despots with Macedonian autocrats.

## The Roots of War

IF WAR was innate, and its morality defined by particular circumstances, fighting was also not necessarily explained by prior exploitation or legitimate grievance. Nor did aggression have to arise from poverty or inequality. States, like people, the historian Thucydides tells us, can be envious — and even rude and pushy. And if they can get away with things, they most surely will. Thucydides later says states battle out of “honor, fear, and self-interest.” How odd to think that the Japanese and Germans were *not* starving in 1941, but rather were proud peoples who wanted those whom they deemed inferior and weak to serve them.

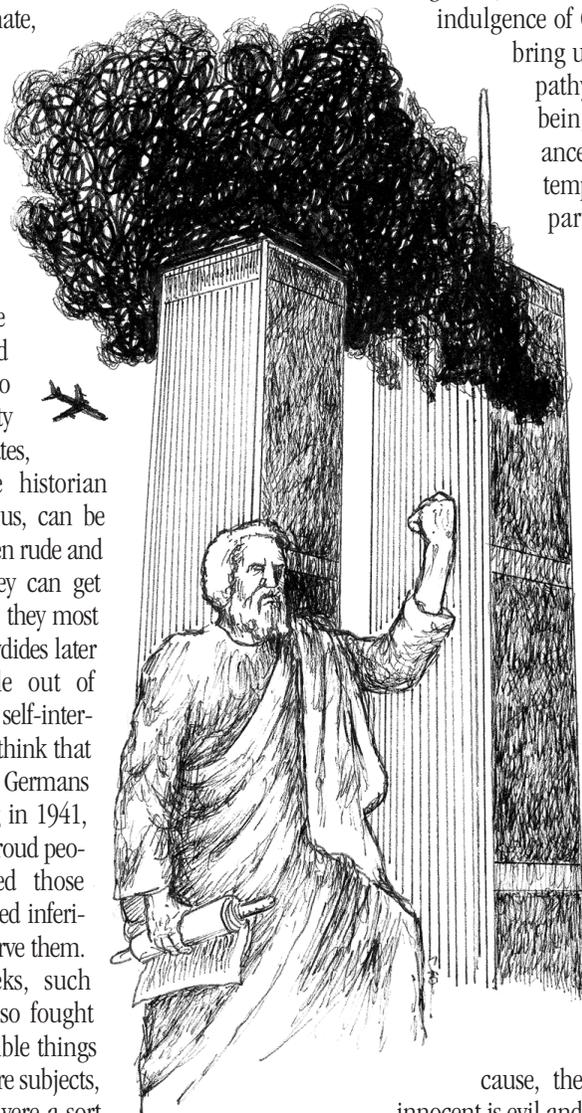
To the Greeks, such rotten peoples also fought mostly over tangible things — more land, more subjects, more loot. Wars were a sort of acquisition, Aristotle said.

Bullies, whether out of vanity or a desire for power and recognition, will take things from other people unless they are stopped. And if they *are* to be stopped, citizens — among them good, kind and well-read men like Socrates, Sophocles, Thucydides, and Demosthenes — must fight to protect their freedom and the save the innocent.

To a student of the Classics who trusts Thucydides or Plato more than Marx, Freud, or Michel Foucault, the present crisis, I think, looks something like this: The United States, being a strong and wealthy society, invites envy because of the success of its restless culture of freedom, constitutional democracy, self-critique, secular rationalism, and open markets that threaten both theocracy and autocracy alike. That we are often to be hated — and periodically to be challenged by those who want our power, riches, or influence and yet simultaneously hate their own desire — is to be often regretted, but always expected. Our past indulgence of Osama bin Laden did not bring us respect, much less sympathy. Rather, human nature being what it is, our forbearance invited ever more contempt and audacity on his part — and more dead as the bitter wages of our self-righteous morality and tragic miscalculation.

The enemies of free speech and intolerance — German Nazis, Italian fascists, Japanese militarists, Stalinist communists, or Islamic fundamentalists — will always attack us for what we are, rather than what we have done, inasmuch as they must innately hate freedom and the liberality which is its twin. Only our moral response — not our status as belligerents per se — determines whether our war is just and necessary. If, like the Athenians, we butcher neutral Melians for no good

cause, then our battle against the innocent is evil and we may not win. But if we fight to preserve freedom like the Greeks at



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Thermopylae and the GIs on the beaches of Normandy, then war is the right and indeed the only thing we can do. Caught in such a tragedy, where efforts at reason and humanity fall on the deaf ears of killers, we must go to war for our survival and to prove to our enemies that their defeat will serve as a harsh teacher – at least for a generation or two – that it is wrong and very dangerous to use two kilotons of explosives to blow up 5,000 civilians in the streets of our cities.

### The Modern View of War

**THIS DEPRESSING** view of human nature and conflict is rarely any longer with us. It was not the advent of Christianity that ended it; Christian philosophers and theologians long ago developed the doctrine of "just war," having realized that nonresistance meant suicide. More likely, the 20th Century and the horror of the two World Wars – Verdun, the Somme, Hiroshima – put an end to the tragic view of war. Yet out of such numbing losses – and our arrogance – we missed the lesson of the World Wars. The calamity of 60 million dead was not only because we went to war, but rather because we were naïve and deemed weak by our enemies well before

1914 and 1939 – at a time when real resolve could have stopped Prussian militarism and Nazism before millions of blameless perished.

The deviant offspring of the Enlightenment – Marxists and Freudians – gave birth to even more pernicious social sciences that sought to 'prove' to us that war was always evil and therefore – with help from Ph.D.s – surely preventable. Indeed, during the International Year of Peace in 1986, a global commission of experts concluded that war was unnatural and humans themselves unwarlike! Unfortunately, innocent people get killed because of that kind of thinking. Many, especially in our universities, now are convinced that war always results from real, rather than perceived, grievances, such as the poverty arising out of the usual list of sins: colonialism, imperialism, racism and sexism. In response, dialogue and mediation have been elevated to the grand science of "conflict resolution theory," a sort of marriage counseling or small claims court taken to the global level.

Rich and conceited Westerners simply could not accept the idea that more people in the twen-

tieth century were killed by Hitler, Stalin, and Mao off the battlefield than on it. How depressing to suggest that the Khmer Rouge, the Hutus, and the Serbians went on killing when left alone – and quit only when either satiated or stopped!

In the new moral calculus of the American university, bin Laden figures to be no Xerxes or Tojo. He is not even an inherently evil man who hates us for our clout and our influence. Far too few in the university understand that bin Laden wishes to strut over a united Middle Eastern caliphate under his brand of Medieval Islam, and to make decadent Westerners cower in fear. Instead, they insist that he is either confused (call in Freud) or has legitimate grievances (read Marx), and so we must find answers within *us* for what he does. Western importation of Arab oil? Stolen land from the Palestinians? Decadent democracy and capitalism? Jewish-American women walking in the land of Mecca? Puppet Arab governments? Take your pick – bin Laden has cited them all.

To stop the evil of Islamic fundamentalism, the tragic Greeks would make ready the 101st Airborne and the Rangers, while too many in academia would rather that we chit-chat with him, fathom him, or accommodate him as did the Clinton State Department. Seeing war as “Zeus’s curse” in this age of our greatest learning and wealth – and pride – is to descend into “savagery,” when our sophisticated elite promise that prayer, talk, or money can yet prevail. But if we deem ourselves too smart, too moral, or too soft to stop killers, then – as Socrates and Pericles alike remind us – we have become real accomplices to evil through inaction. Generations slaughtered in Europe, incinerated Jews, massacred Russians and Chinese, and the bleached bones of Cambodians are proof enough of what the Greeks once warned us.

## Western Exceptionalism

**FINALLY, CLASSICS** teaches how unique the Greeks and Romans were among the peoples of the ancient world; theirs was an anti-Mediterranean culture whose approach to politics, culture, literature, and religion was antithetical to almost every state in Africa, Asia, and the tribal confines of northern Europe. In our ignorance, too many Americans have made the fatal mistake of assuming that our enemies are simply different from us, rather than far worse than us – as if the current war in the Middle East is largely due to a misunderstanding among equals, rather than reflective of a vast faultline that goes back to the very origins of our civilization. Athens was a democracy;

Sidon was not. Farmers owned their own property in Greece, voted, and formed the militia of the polis; not so in Persia and Egypt. Thucydides was able to criticize his mother country, Greece; Persian clerks who recorded Darius’s *res gestae* on the walls of Persepolis were not. The Greek language and its European descendants have a rich vocabulary of words for “constitution,” “citizen,” “freedom,” and “democracy”; this is true of neither old Persian or modern Arabic. Such differences are not perceived, but real and critical, for they affect the manner in which people conduct their daily lives – whether they live in fear or in safety, in want or in security.

If our students and professors today would study the Classics, they might rediscover the origins of their culture – and in doing so learn that we are not even remotely akin to the Taliban or the Saudis, but are in fact profoundly different in the manner we craft our government, treat women, earn our living, and set the parameters of our religion. Modern cultural anthropology, social linguistics, cross-cultural geography, sociology, and nearly any discipline with the suffix “studies” would lecture us that the Taliban’s desecration of the graves of the infidel, clitorectomies of infants, torture of the accused, murder of the untried, and destruction of the non-Islamic is merely “different” or “problematic” – almost anything other than “evil.” Yet a world under the Taliban or its supporters, like the satrapy that Xerxes envisioned for a conquered Greece, would mean no free expression, no voting, no protection from arbitrary and coercive government, but instead theocracy, censorship, and brutality in every facet of daily life. Such were the stakes at Salamis and so too is the contest now with the Islamic fundamentalists, who are as akin to ancient absolutists as we are to the Greeks.

Such ignorance of one’s own past can weaken a powerful society such as ours that must project confidence, power, humanity – and hope – to those less fortunate abroad. This new species of upscale and pampered terrorist hates America for a variety of complex reasons. He despises, of course, his own attraction toward our ease and liberality. He recognizes that our freedom and affluence spur on his appetites more than Islam can repress them. But just as importantly, these terrorists realize that there is an aristocratic guilt within many comfortable Americans, who are too often ashamed of, or apologetic about, their culture. And in this hes-



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