Thucydides, Benghazi, and HONOR

By ALAN GREELEY MISENHEIMER

Secretary of State John Kerry delivers remarks at the University of Virginia

Department of State

In his February 20 speech at the University of Virginia, Secretary of State John Kerry made the case for diplomacy as an instrument of national policy. Generations of thinkers have recognized that neither our country's diplomatic weight nor its military power can be applied with full effect unless our national security strategy makes optimal use of both. This is true in peace no less than in war, and also in the conditions of political uncertainty that prevail in much of the Near East today. America's diplomats are pressing our nation's agenda in "some of the most dangerous places on earth," in the Secretary's phrase. The September 11, 2012, Benghazi attacks are a reminder of that fact.

American diplomats in the Near East work in an environment that can transform instantly from hieratic welcome to chaotic hostility. We prepare for this by studying strategy and human behavior, mastering techniques of influence and persuasion, cultivating fluency in the languages, cultures, and history of the region, and practicing the science of personal and institutional security that State's Diplomatic Security Bureau has advanced dramatically over recent decades. Since diplomacy is an ancient profession, predating the modern state by millennia, we also benefit from the study of ancient sources.

Ancient Diplomacy

Early cultures typically regarded foreigners as inherently threatening and even ritually unclean. Yet many recognized the

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need to communicate with other societies and developed a class of trusted specialists to undertake the task. It is thus the very essence of diplomats' missions to cross boundaries and serve beyond the limit of their countries' ability to protect them. Accordingly, it is nothing new for diplomats to find themselves in harm's way. In Asia, India, and Europe, traditions evolved holding diplomats sacrosanct and allowing them to travel unmolested. As today, these early concepts of "diplomatic immunity" sometimes failed.

The 13th-century Shah of Khwarezm caused the eradication of his state by torturing and murdering ambassadors bearing a goodwill message from Genghis Khan. Even in Greece, where diplomatic practice was first systematized, violations occurred. When the Persian King Darius sent envoys to the Greek city-states with a peremptory demand for earth and water as tokens of submission, the demarche was not well received. Those who visited Athens were cast into a pit, and those who took the message to Sparta were thrown into a well. The historian Herodotus indicates that some interpreted the destruction of Athens in the subsequent Persian invasion as divine retribution for these breaches of diplomatic immunity.

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Classical Greek diplomats, known as heralds, credited their eloquence and retentive memory to the inspirational tutelage of the god Hermes, whom Zeus often entrusted with delicate diplomatic missions. For centuries, Greek and Roman diplomats carried a staff resembling the caduceus—Hermes's staff, incorporating two intertwined snakes topped by wings—as a talisman of their profession and symbol of the gods' protection.

Thucydides's *History*

Diplomats figured prominently in Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*, which recounts the epochal 27-year conflict between rival alliances led by Athens and Sparta (431–404 BCE). Once hostilities commenced, all discourse between the warring parties ceased "except through the medium of heralds," and the narrative highlights their role. Truce terms were debated, peace proposals were frequently exchanged, and a negotiated ceasefire for recovery of the dead and wounded followed every battle. Treaty agreements were multitiered and complex, and recourse to arbitration was commonplace. Ambassadors from allied states met in conference, and well-timed demarches from smaller states sometimes altered the policy of great powers. Indeed the well-calculated (but deceptive) overtures of the Egestaeans swayed Athens to embrace perhaps the most catastrophic policy initiative ever adopted by a democracy: the failed invasion of Sicily, which crushed Athens's last hope for victory.

In studying the war that defined his age, Thucydides accomplished far more than simply chronicling the ebb and flow of an ancient conflict. His dense and uniquely analytical account goes deeper, examining the *nature* of war as an inescapable aspect of human civilization. In analyzing the political behavior of the Athenians and their leaders under the extreme duress of conflict, Thucydides revealed underlying patterns of human behavior that can be applied to any political system, whether in war or peace. In seeking to understand war in his time, the historian elucidated the nature of statecraft for all time.

This universality is reflected in the fact that scholars have discerned Thucydidean paradigms in dozens of large and small wars throughout history including the Vietnam War, Cold War, two World Wars, American Civil War, and even a mid-19th century conflict between rival kingdoms in Fiji. It also explains why the book has survived long enough to become, as the historian intended, "an everlasting possession, and not a contentious instrument of temporary applause."

Fear, Honor, Interest

Thucydides's fundamental insight appears deceptively simple. He identifies three essential factors that, either singly or in some combination, motivate policy decisions: fear, interest, and honor. These motives guided Athens's rise to mastery of a far-flung empire. They were no less central to the policy decisions by both the Athenians and their adversaries that brought about the destruction of that empire. They are intertwined in every decision that every state adopts today.

Fear might be equated with the modern concept of national security. *Interest* surely relates to contemporary notions of economic prosperity. As complex as both concepts obviously are, they seem concrete and familiar. *Honor* is harder to pin down. I would suggest that honor, for purposes of Thucydides's triad, engages the concept of justice and encompasses the values, moral standards, and behavioral norms that shape the way people live. A country's honor may be more difficult to measure or quantify than its military capabilities or gross domestic product, but the power of honor to spur momentous action by states, groups, or individuals is undeniable.

Thucydides tells us that it was fear—"the growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta"—that made the Peloponnesian War "inevitable." But even on the eve of war, Sparta's king exhorted his people to an alternative that sounds consummately rational and strikingly modern: a peaceful solution is still possible; send envoys to Athens and negotiate in good faith; and in the meantime, make concrete preparations for future war.

The ephor, a lesser official who is nevertheless entitled to speak on an equal basis in the Spartan assembly, overcame the king's appeal with a simple rebuttal: The Athenians have undermined our status and harmed our interests; we must vote for immediate war "*as the honor of Sparta demands*." Even though fear was the underlying cause, honor set the tempo of the march to war. As states often do today, Sparta allowed the human passions that only honor can incite—especially when ideologues and demagogues enter the picture—to overwhelm any objective calculation of interest and security.

Frontline of Honor

Precisely because of this link to notions of justice, morality, and human passion, honor is the diplomat's special concern. Why? Because American diplomats, representing their fellow citizens and the interests of their society, live and work on the frontline of honor.

This is not to say that U.S. Foreign Service Officers are uniquely "honorable."

Department of State

Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens, killed in attack on U.S. consulate in Benghazi, September 12, 2012

They would be the first to acknowledge that their country's diplomacy is augmented by partners from the civil service, military Services, and a range of civilian agencies, as well as the indispensable contribution of their locally engaged colleagues.

The point is that American diplomats practice their profession where their society's concept of honor—encompassing "our deepest values," as the Secretary put it, including the rights and freedoms on which their society is built—comes into direct contact with those of other societies.

This frontline is not a battle line, and the "discourse of honor" diplomats conduct on behalf of their society is not a war. But in countries where the disjunction between "our honor" and "their honor" is wide, the friction inherent in the diplomat's daily task increases, as does the threat. The challenge escalates further when state institutions are weak or in transition, as in much of the Near East today.

Moreover, while disparities in wealth and military power are obvious, every society on Earth demands equal status for its sovereignty and equal respect for its prevailing notion of honor. America's superpower status thus brings little advantage in this discourse, and a frontal approach—for example, advice to a Middle Eastern Muslim interlocutor to "lighten up" in responding to caricatures or films deemed offensive to Islam—is apt to be as well received as the Persian king's demand for earth and water.

Rather, an American diplomat must engage on an equal footing with foreign interlocutors to correctly understand the key tenets of the other society's definition of honor; relay this insight to Washington; convey, through word and action, key tenets of our own concept of honor; and, as possible, narrow the disjunction with an eye to averting conflict and establishing a foundation for increasing cooperation over time. For an American diplomat in the Near East today, success in this subtle enterprise requires immense patience, a well-honed ability to listen, and unshakable confidence in the American sense of honor. The outpouring of Libyan sympathy and admiration for Chris Stevens after the Benghazi tragedy demonstrates that he and his Embassy team were achieving success in the discourse of honor despite the extreme constraints of Libyan society.

Conclusion

Medieval Europe believed that angels were the first diplomats, entrusted by Highest Authority to carry messages between Heaven and Earth. Few American diplomats would claim such a sublime connection today, nor do they expect much guidance or protection from Hermes. Yet fortified by professional discipline and shielded by international law, bilateral arrangements, and their own precautions, American diplomats honorably follow the example of their ancient forbears. "Over there," where differing brands of honor converge, and sometimes conflict, they cross boundaries of sovereignty and culture to carry out their duties on behalf of the American people.

Now, as in ages past, outrages against the inviolability of diplomats will occur. Indeed, the February 1 attack on the American Embassy in Ankara reminds us that threats exist even in friendly countries where standards of public security are high. The best we can reasonably expect is that such outrages will remain infrequent, and that when they occur all voices will again unite to condemn violators, acknowledge victims, and underscore the importance of diplomacy not only as an instrument of national power, but also as a vital buttress to international peace and security.

Above all, American diplomats in the Near East will continue, like their friend Chris Stevens and his team, to hold their positions on the frontline of honor where diplomats work, live, and sometimes die. **JFQ**