

by personalities than by mechanisms of the state but also how debate and disagreement are a natural and potentially productive form of discourse between allies.

The meshing of key factors relevant to time and geography is another strength of Leebaert's work. The core discussion of crises across the Atlantic, Middle East, Asia, and Africa is interwoven with the themes of diplomatic, strategic, and economic history. Each subchapter is organized in a fashion that truly reinforces and builds on the previous arguments and evidence, resulting in a compelling prism through which to view this moment of historical competition and transition among Great Powers.

One small quibble is the lack of a formal bibliography. While the notes are detailed and add another layer of context, the author must have consulted a considerable number of sources. The fact that these works have not been identified is a drawback for any serious reader interested in learning more about this period. I would recommend *JFQ* readers seek out and read some of the works Leebaert uses as counterarguments and evaluate how they stand up to his criticisms. Doing so will allow the reader to identify the strengths and deficiencies that are inherent in any book, as well as reinforce the reality that history is "gray," rather than black and white. Excellent sources for an in-depth historical analysis include the *British Documents on the End of Empire Project*, as well as the archives of Presidents Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower in the Office of the Historian at the Department of State. In its totality, I suspect readers will walk away from *Grand Improvisation* with a much richer understanding of a complex moment in history, one fraught with immense geostrategic change that strategists on both sides of the Atlantic struggled to adapt to.

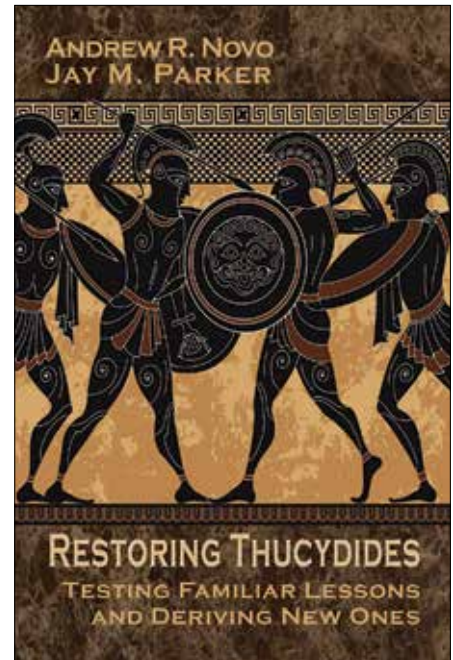
*Grand Improvisation* challenges the notion of an acquiescent British global power giving way to a confident United States with a clear schematic of a new global order on the drawing board. What Leebaert does so successfully is challenge this myth with solid historical research,

revealing the cogs of a relationship in transition—a transition in which U.S. strategists lacked a coherent grand strategy and British leadership fought to retain strategic independence.

Challenging our common understanding about the early days of the modern liberal international order and the personalities attempting to navigate it allows us to assess and interpret the present more clearly as the global order again shifts between Great Powers. With that in mind, joint force officers, national security strategists, and historians should take a close look at *Grand Improvisation*. JFQ

---

Professor Daniel Marston is the Director of the Secretary of Defense Strategic Thinkers Program in the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at The Johns Hopkins University.



### Restoring Thucydides: Testing Familiar Lessons and Deriving New Ones

By Andrew R. Novo and Jay M. Parker  
Cambria Press, 2020

218 pp. \$39.99 (Paperback)  
ISBN: 978-1621964742

Reviewed by Robert D. Spessert

Thucydides's *The History of the Peloponnesian War* offers national security pundits a plethora of persuasive "dead man quotes." However, they and their audiences have rarely digested, and infrequently understood, the context and history surrounding the phrases they employ. Professors Andrew Novo and Jay Parker of the National Defense University provide an insightful remedy for students of history and strategy in *Restoring Thucydides*.

The authors adeptly address the use and abuse of *The History*, claiming it is "mis-read, under-read, or unread." They assert that students of Thucydides should consider the text as a whole, know the historical context, and perceive the consequences of the Peloponnesian War in the years following Thucydides's

death. *Restoring Thucydides* reveals that the application of this additional evidence permits distinguishing between necessary and sufficient causes, understanding the importance of domestic politics and its influence on foreign affairs, and challenging deterministic “conventional wisdom.”

Early chapters concisely capture the historical narrative of the Peloponnesian War and address the “polarity” trap. At the heart of the book, a chapter titled “Power and Fear” examines Thucydides’s most popularized ideas, such as that the war arose because of “the growth of Athenian power and the fear this caused in Sparta.” Later chapters discern how allies and shifting alliances affect Great Power competition and explore the internal and external politics of the various city-states as well as offering context for the Melian Dialogue and the Sicilian expedition. Novo and Parker conclude by expounding on the dynamics of Great Power competition in the search for security and reflect on the defeat of Athens, which changed the Hellenic balance of power and permitted new challengers to usurp Sparta.

*Restoring Thucydides* refutes the conventional wisdom that Athens and Sparta existed in a bipolar system and that this structure created conditions in which war was inevitable. Sparta, with the largest territory in Greece, was powerful and attracted allies, but its demographics, economics, and government precluded it from becoming hegemonic. Three other entities at this time also had the ability to project power: Athens, with the largest navy; Corinth, which had the second largest navy; and the Persian Empire, with a population and land mass that surpassed Athens and Sparta combined but had failed twice to conquer Greece. Two major city-states remained neutral at the start of the war: Argos, a historical foe of Sparta; and Syracuse, which encompassed the second largest territory in the Greek world. Accordingly, the Hellenic world was actually multipolar. While Athens and Sparta displayed some hegemonic characteristics, other powerful actors populated the region and influenced the balance of power. They entered alliances, switched loyalties, and remained neutral. Persia,

for instance, sought to support one to weaken the other. Novo and Parker, consequently, reject the theory that determinants within a bipolar structure made war between Athens and Sparta inevitable.

Another key and often overlooked aspect the authors underscore is the depiction in *The History* of leaders who considered the domestic operational environment, as they made security decisions and pursued the acquisition or retention of power, glory, wealth, and fame, whether for themselves, their families, or their factions. His depiction of speeches, debates, and deliberations emphasize that leaders had choices and retained agency. While *The History* focuses on state-versus-state conflict, its pages also provide evidence of internal politics, domestic strife, and civil war. Novo and Parker dial in on how these clashes shaped and propelled numerous wartime decisions that ran the spectrum from whether to support allies, initiate conflict, promote or accept peace offers, recognize treaty violations, and submit to demands. For example, in the Melian Dialogue, the oligarchs on Melos refused to permit the Athenian emissaries to present their proposal to the public. Unstated in the dialogue is that the autocrats likely sought to retain their position of power and wealth and, therefore, denied the populace an opportunity to hear Athenian demands. Perhaps they presumed the people would accept them, resulting in a loss of power. Assumptions about whether Athens would use force or if Sparta would intercede may have arisen from the desire to retain their power.

This book is a noteworthy addition to the field studying Thucydides’s work. The 1954 Penguin Classic edition of *The History of the Peloponnesian War* runs 648 pages and uses unfamiliar syntax and uncommon names for people and places. Novo and Parker provide extensive context to this original text, challenge classic “lessons,” and offer numerous other insights. It is also a worthy complement to those who have read Graham Allison’s *Destined for War* and offers greater dimension to the strategist’s favorite construct, the “Thucydides Trap.”

*Restoring Thucydides* serves two distinct audiences. First, it is an asset to students of history and strategy who seek a more robust understanding of the Peloponnesian War and its applicability to modern geopolitical issues. Second, this outstanding book offers those involved in national security revelations about individual agency, domestic politics, the international security environment, and strategy. It also arms readers with the evidence and background to accept or challenge how others employ the oft-quoted maxims of Thucydides.

*The History of the Peloponnesian War* captivates those who seek to understand contemporary geopolitical struggles. Rather than rereading the original, joint force operators, planners, practitioners, and strategists will find an exceptionally valuable and educational alternative in *Restoring Thucydides*. JFQ

---

Robert D. Spessert, JD, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Joint, Interagency, and Multinational Operations at the U.S. Army’s Command and General Staff School satellite at Fort Gordon, Georgia.