

US election: Elusive virtues that would help nation heal these scars

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Abraham Lincoln warned of dire consequences should 'the mobocratic spirit' be allowed to prevail.

Many decades ago, in that fleeting parenthesis between the ravages of Marxism and those of the assault on Dead White Males, there raged in academia something of a great debate about Thucydides's History of the Peloponnesian War.

As with most such debates, it is difficult to understand how issues that seem so peripheral could have provoked such excitement. And as so often happens, once each side had claimed its share of (balding) scalps, the combatants wearied of the whole thing and moved on.

But while the participants were far too busy talking to listen carefully, those watching from the relative safety of the undergraduate benches soon learnt there was much more to Thucydides than the puzzles that

had triggered the storm.

Nothing, it turned out, was accidental in the intricate masterpiece he worked on for at least 27 years. There were, in particular, good reasons the soaring beauty of Pericles's Funeral Oration — which is now widely recited on Anzac Day — was immediately followed by an account of the devastating plague that hit Athens in the spring of 430BC, when the war was in its second year.

After all, there are few more powerful exemplars of that untranslatable combination of intelligence, planning and resolve that the Athenians termed "gnome" than Pericles's call for his countrymen to prove worthy of "the praise that grows not old".

Yet there are also few more uncompromising demonstrations of the limitations of human foresight than the plague, which Pericles himself described as "the one phenomenon that proved stronger than our expectation".

Entirely unforeseen by Pericles in his weighing of the war's likely course, its wreckage went well beyond the horrific cost in human life; rather, its worst consequence — and the one that did the most to bring about Athens' eventual defeat — was that it left "the fabric of society nearly broken, both intellect and virtue weakened or abused". The underlying tensions had, no doubt, always been there. But by shattering life's fragile steadiness, the epidemic raised conflicts to new heights, preparing the ground for "stasis" — society's disintegration into factions.

And as "man's intelligence", rather than calming the furies, "served to spread conflict far and wide", even language was distorted beyond recognition, with words being used to mean their opposite: instead of connoting virtues, "moderation", "careful analysis" and "patience" became insults to be hurled at "weaklings", "procrastinators" and "cowards".

This was the original triumph of what George Orwell would later call “newspeak”. But Thucydides presented the phenomenon as far more terrifying than that Orwell imagined: not as something imposed from above by despots but as a spontaneous, altogether authentic voice roaring out of the political whirlwind.

Moreover, once even the possibility of dialogue had broken down, extremism fed on itself in “a frenzied struggle to exceed one’s rivals at excess itself”. And the successive leadership changes that process unleashed failed to bring any lasting respite.

In some cases, that was because the “new men” were dangerous demagogues, such as Cleon; in others, because they were, like Nicias, well-intentioned but ineffective. None could restore the dispositions that led to civic strength and individual attainment, or prevent those who degrade and debase from gaining ground.

Little wonder then that, as Athens’ defeat approached, Thucydides stopped his account in mid-sentence: more than most, he knew that politics depends at least as much on hope as on fear — and at that point, his reserves of hope had run out.

And little wonder too that so many troubled epochs — from the Rome of Catiline and Caesar to the England of Cromwell and Hobbes — have found Thucydides timely.

Today, his echo resonates most loudly in the US, where the coronavirus — striking like the plague of Athens out of the blue — helped transform longstanding divisions into a war of all against all.

Beginning with Tocqueville, American democracy’s greatest students invariably feared the tyranny of the majority, with its grinding conformity and its reduction of social life to solitary apathy; in contemporary America, as in Thucydides’s Athens, it is factious minorities, flexing their

muscles with little regard for civility and the law, that have proven to be by far the more vicious tyrants.

Entirely ignored in the firestorms they have ignited is Abraham Lincoln's warning, delivered in one of his earliest and finest speeches, that should "the mobocratic spirit" — which "substitutes furious passions" for "the executive ministers of justice" — ever be allowed to prevail, "depend on it, government (of the people by the people) cannot last".

And even if those institutions withstand the shock, the confident belief that "we Americans are the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world" is grievously tattered, while the civil religion of "Americanism" which that belief sustained hangs by a thread.

To say that is not to fall into a facile "declinism" that pines for a past that never was, laments a present that isn't and despairs over a future that will not be.

Whatever one makes of the election, this is hardly the first time — and certainly will not be the last — that like Tolstoy's Napoleon, the president-elect seems more likely to prove a cork floating on the oceans than the moon controlling the tides. Time and again, America's power and prosperity have survived that and worse.

Nor would hopelessness about America's prospects be faithful to Thucydides's enduring insights.

Observing human suffering "too great to be measured by tears", he could be extremely bleak; yet he was no Euripides, for whom man is little more than a miserable wretch, who was only given the gift of forecasting the future so that the gods could ensure his unceasing disappointment.

On the contrary, Thucydides's history is perhaps unique among historical writings in its claim that mankind's errors are rooted in human nature and

its simultaneous insistence that they are mistakes that can and should be avoided. But if one thinks, as Thucydides did, that civilisation perpetually skates on thin ice, with murderous rage waiting to break through whenever brute chance strikes, then no virtues can be more important in avoiding humanity's recurring errors than adaptability, moderation and prudence. And nowhere does it matter more to the cause of freedom that they be well implanted than in the United States.

Whether the closeness of the result, and scars it will leave, finally hammer that home to America's political elites remains to be seen. This much, however, is certain: until that lesson is learnt, Lincoln's dream, that the nation the civil war was fought to preserve would, for centuries to come, rival the glory that was Periclean Athens, will remain a distant and fading ideal.