

Comments on Panel, “Statesmen at War”
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The papers I have been assigned—Allison D’Orazio’s on Thucydides and Robert Faulkner’s on Carlyle—explicitly raise the question of nobility in politics and war. By “nobility” I don’t think they mean to refer to status at birth, but rather to elevation of purpose, or generosity of spirit, or simply a beautiful deed or action performed for its own sake—a demonstration of human greatness or dignity—something that is the opposite of what is base or low or self-serving or craven. To speak Greek, they mean to refer not to the *gennaion*, but to the *kalon*—also translated as the beautiful. Since I like to define statesmanship as the exercise of political virtue in high office, and following Aristotle’s notion that the virtuous deed done for its own sake is noble or beautiful, I applaud both Ms. D’Orazio and Professor Faulkner for raising the question of nobility in war on a panel on “Statesmen at War,” for indeed it ought to be a central theme.

What, then, is nobility in statesmanship, ancient and modern? If I understand D’Orazio’s argument, it is the true but obscure aim of the Athenians in launching the doomed Sicilian expedition. Why obscure? Because, she argues, neither of the parties to the debate admits a concern with the noble, either as a reason to go to Sicily or to refrain from Sicily. Instead, they speak of their obligation to their allies there, the Egestians, which all seem to agree is a relatively weak obligation; they speak of the advantages of gaining power in and maybe even over Sicily, as well as the risks; the advantages of staying home and attending to local threats, as well as the risk of doing only that; as in so many of the speeches in Athens that Thucydides

gives us, the two speakers, Nicias and Alcibiades, impugn one another's motives and thereby raise the issue of the conflict between the private and the public good. They don't say much about the justice or injustice of conquering Sicily, perhaps because by this time at Athens only arguments of interest are taken seriously—the Melian dialogue had just been reported immediately before the report of the Sicilian debate, and Diodotus had taught that you can only persuade the Athenians to act justly if you hide the issue of justice and argue on the basis of interest. D'Orazio very helpfully compares the speeches here to Pericles' Funeral Oration, where the justice of the empire was defended and the glory of Athens, the school of Hellas, was memorably celebrated—not least their freedom and generosity. Were the Athenians hiding their true motive from themselves? Was the motive shameful—brute conquest and greed? Ordinarily one might think that's why politicians keep their reasons obscure.

D'Orazio doesn't exactly think so, but doesn't exactly think not. She argues that they secretly believe in the nobility of the enterprise—I suppose because they secretly believe that they are worthy to rule an empire or want to “bolster their flagging self-regard” (p. 32)—but they now keep their desire secret, because they doubt the justice of the cause and perhaps, in an era of “civil deterioration,” they doubt their worthiness. This sounds plausible enough, but what I didn't understand and would like to hear explained is what Thucydides himself makes of all this. For he lets the secret out of the bag for the reader, and in no uncertain terms: He says, echoing (she nicely reminds us) the Funeral Oration, that *eros* fell upon the Athenians, a complex of desire that struck men of different ages in different ways,

including for the multitude hope of “eternal pay.” Is the *eros* Thucydides describes the same longing for the noble (remember, in the Greek the same word means “beautiful”) that D’Orazio analyzes? Or is the object of desire rather the wealth and beauty of Sicily, the more ordinary object of *eros*? If acting upon the latter is unjust, is acting upon the former? In short, does Thucydides condemn the expedition from the start, or would he applaud its noble motive—anticipating, I suppose, (since he places Carthage as well as Sicily in Alcibiades’ sights,) the Romans in their mastery of the Mediterranean world by several centuries—if the expedition had been nobly executed, proving by its success the worthiness of the Athenians? In short, is D’Orazio finding nobility where Thucydides saw only *eros*, or are they referring to the same thing?

Robert Faulkner’s paper is altogether as morally serious as the summary you just heard, but also delightful, full of little gems—my favorite is his mention of Carlyle’s influence on the great landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead—and zeroes in on the question of nobility and greatness. Against Carlyle’s Hegelian celebration of world-historical individuals, heroes worthy of admiration and in a sense even of worship, Faulkner takes us back to school with Aristotle, returning to the essential core of what we admire in heroic virtue—namely, courage in battle in the face of death—and gives a beautiful account of the virtue in this regard of George Washington, whom Carlyle never mentions, contrasting him favorably to Napoleon, whom he does. I found the paper almost flawless—the only glitch was the implication that Washington was not yet commander-in-chief when he charged his white stallion in the New Jersey battles, whereas I believe he was appointed

commander-in-chief by Congress in the spring of 1775, and then dispatched to Cambridge to take charge of the minutemen. But I do wish to raise a question about Carlyle's quest for nobility and a doubt about whether this can be satisfied by a return to Aristotle and perhaps even to Washington.

In his magnificent recent book, *Metamorphoses of the City*, Pierre Manent distinguishes political regimes from political forms. Aristotle may have adequately described the various regimes possible in the *polis*, but the form of the *polis* was succeeded by the empire, and the empire by the Church, and the Church in a way by the nation-state. Is it so clear that political virtue—and what we call “statesmanship” (I’m not sure there is a Greek equivalent, unless *politike*, often translated as “political science”)—doesn’t vary with the change of form? Surely the face of battle has changed; if Washington’s charge would have been recognizable to Alexander or Cyrus or Xenophon, what would be the equivalent in a leader today? Seal Team Six? There’s certainly courage there, but also enormous technical training and technological support; wouldn’t even Washington have been confined to the war room with temples bulging and fists clenched, eyes intent upon a screen? In short, whatever one makes of Carlyle’s solution—I think Faulkner has captured its weaknesses—hasn’t Carlyle identified a genuine problem: How to preserve ambition for virtuous, even heroic action in a utilitarian, technological, democratic age? Olmstead succeeded marvelously in creating a new kind of park for a new kind of city, even recreating or exaggerating the roughness of nature in vivid contrast to block upon block of pavement and brick and stone (and later steel and glass). Does virtue likewise need to change in response to our democracy (and technology)? I

imagine Faulkner would resist saying it must—indeed, so do I—but it seems to me that all the time we have to adjust to a world full of machines, where actions affect myriad others without any direct human exchange or interaction, where leaders' images are ever more available and their persons ever more remote. In short, isn't Carlyle's object—restoring the humane imagination in an industrial age—a challenge for us today in our post-industrial era, not least because in his failings he became a tragic hero in his own tale?