
Faith for the Fight

BARRY STRAUSS

AT A RECENT ACADEMIC CONFERENCE on ancient history and modern politics, a copy of Robert D. Kaplan's *Warrior Politics* was held up by a speaker as an example of the current influence of the classics on Washington policymakers, as if the horseman shown on the cover was riding straight from the Library of Congress to the Capitol.* One of the attendees was unimpressed. He denounced Kaplan as a pseudo-intellectual who does more harm than good. But not so fast: it is possible to be skeptical of the first claim without accepting the second. Yes, our politicians may quote Kaplan more than they actually read him, but if they do indeed study what he has to say, then they will be that much the better for it. Kaplan is not a scholar, as he admits, but there is nothing "pseudo" about his wise and pithy book.

Kaplan is a journalist with long experience of living in and writing about the parts of the world that have exploded in recent decades: such places as Bosnia, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Russia, Iran, Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. Anyone who has made it through those trouble spots is more than up to the rigors of reading about the Peloponnesian War, even if he doesn't do so in Attic Greek.

A harsh critic might complain about *Warrior Politics*' lack of a rigorous analytical thread, but not about the absence of a strong central thesis. Kaplan is clear about his main point: we will face our current foreign policy crises better by going

*Robert D. Kaplan. *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002). xxii + 198 pages, \$12.00.

back to the wisdom of the ancients. He refers specifically to the great thinkers and writers of classical Greece, Rome, and China, as well as to some of their leading modern interpreters, particularly Machiavelli, Hobbes, Malthus, Kant, the American founders, and Churchill. This is an eclectic bunch, but it is arguable that they all have in common an acknowledgment of tragedy. Kaplan calls them “constructive pessimists” because of their “grim view of human behavior” (xxi). They share a realism about the limits of progress and a skepticism about human perfectibility. Kaplan contrasts this with the widespread optimism that he sees as rampant in modern America. Our underlying liberalism makes a world of nice days in which all disputes can be settled by negotiation, dude. The author, instead, reads in classic texts what he observed as a foreign correspondent: a reality to turn the sunniest personality into a pessimist.

Meanwhile, back in the West, it would take a Tacitus or Herodotus to chronicle the decadence, corruption, soft-living, and clever hopes that now beset us. Nourished in Europe’s long nineteenth-century peace, these easy illusions reached their full growth in response to the slaughter of the First World War. Because of its respect for human life and its preference for civility to honor, liberalism promotes an impersonal and technological way of war, in which the issue is decided by airplanes, missiles, and bombs rather than the clash of warriors. Robust liberalism is not pacifist; it knows the need to defend itself from attack by illiberal societies, and hence it promotes a sound and sturdy defense. But robust liberals spoil their children, and grown to adults, they in turn indulge in wishful thinking. The pleasure of the liberal peace is so great and the span of capitalism’s wealth is so vast that they refuse to imagine how anyone could desire hostilities. Unfortunately, the thugs, fanatics, and warriors outside the borders of liberal society would rather make war than love.¹

Writing before September 11, 2001, Kaplan already saw a world in which ethnic warfare, state collapse, corrupt regimes, and an exploding population of unemployed young males ripe

for trouble, were all making liberal regimes into tiny and beleaguered islands of civilization. The only way to defend them was the time-honored way in which civilized states have always protected themselves against barbarism: a tough and hardened outlook in diplomacy and warfare. This entails a strong defense at home and a vigorous presence abroad, with armed intervention as needed, sometimes for a prolonged period. Imperial protectorates established by American power may be nothing to cheer about, but in the coming unpleasantness, they are a better alternative by far than the twentieth century's "disastrous utopian hopes" (147).

"Ancient history," writes Kaplan, "is the surest guide to what we are likely to face in the early decades of the twenty-first century" (14). Kaplan argues that twenty-first century warfare will be like ancient warfare in three ways. It will pit civilized nations against barbarians, just as the Trojan War delivered Troy's towers into the rough hands of the Greeks. It will make victory depend on targeting barbarian chieftains, just as the Romans had to defeat and confine Mithridates, king of Pontus (120–63 BC), when he set Anatolia on fire with rebellion and hatred of Rome. And it will be decided by fierce and furious combat—often in urban areas, often spilling over onto innocent bystanders. By contrast, the Cold War, with its face-off of conventional armies and nuclear missiles, will look stable and gentlemanly.

These conditions might lead us to look back for lessons to the era of marauding Achaeans or of Hadrian's Wall, as Kaplan suggests. Yet they may also caution us to weigh carefully the matter of *which* models from the ancient world to choose. For example, at times Kaplan seems to see Greco-Roman texts as a kind of ancient *McGuffey Readers*, morality stories of stirring heroism, dazzling derring-do, and cruel truths. Take, for example, his advocacy of Livy. Kaplan praises Livy's "canonical images of patriotic virtue and extreme sacrifice" (31). He forgives Livy his "romantic view" of the Roman Republic because it inspired "the allure that the classics held for nineteenth-century schoolboys" (31).

Hannibal was a villain, Cincinnatus and Fabius were heroes: that's all ye know and all ye need to know.

Fortunately, Kaplan generally prefers the ancients' realism, of which they offer examples aplenty. This is a tonic for the modern reader. We need, for instance, the Romans' recognition of the necessity of forward defense, the Greeks' recognition that life is short and painful, and both people's understanding that the question "why do they hate us?"—a cry raised by many Americans after September 11, 2001—is superfluous. The ancients took it for granted that success would breed envy and that envy would lead to attack.

Nor did the ancients suffer from the noble illusion that, if only good will and understanding were given a chance, innocents would be spared and the world would live in peace. Nobody in antiquity spoke of giving peace a chance, because the ancients understood that peace is the end of a process and not the beginning. Our word "peace" comes from the Latin "*pax*," in turn derived from the verb "*paciscor*," which means to "strike a deal" or "make a bargain." There is wisdom in this etymology, because it recognizes that peace is part of an activity. Peace does not just break out. It requires patience, wisdom, and diplomacy backed up by force.

We need that harsh wisdom, but we don't need the belligerence that often went with it. The ancients had a propensity to march first and ask questions later. By contrast, we must fight not only a hard war but a smart war.

The heroic ideal of antiquity can inspire but it can also deceive. Neither the reality of ancient warfare nor the culture of the classical world put a premium on engaging in a low-intensity conflict or asymmetric warfare. Yet that is the kind of fight that we face today. The current crisis calls not only for lions but for foxes. The war's protagonists are and will be spies, assassins, and special forces, as well as infantrymen and paratroopers.

The ancients were different. The Romans, for instance, went on punitive raids against barbarians, built defensive walls, fielded mobile cavalry forces, policed the seas for pi-

rates, and made prudent treaties with buffer states. But the default mode of Roman warfare, and Greek or Macedonian warfare before it, was fighting a pitched battle. It is true that cunning, stratagems, tricks, and even occasionally the use of biological and chemical agents, were all part of the commander's repertory.² But the measure of the military art was battle and the acme of success was winning the encounter.

A Greek or Roman general would probably not have agreed with Sun-Tzu that the height of generalship was achieving victory without having to fight. A Roman commander without enemy corpses to his credit would not have been permitted to march through Rome's streets in triumph, and diplomats were not fêted in Greece as warriors were. Ambitious generals wanted to win battles, not to make battles unnecessary. In at least tacit acknowledgment of this, Kaplan makes Sun-Tzu one of his book's heroes, but the attempt to combine Sun-Tzu and Thucydides is a shotgun marriage. Sun-Tzu calls on commanders to be crafty while Thucydides castigates them for being too clever by half.

Nor is a Greco-Roman general the best source of inspiration for a modern commander in search of good intelligence, hard-nosed patrolling, and reliable and effective local allies—three essential ingredients in successful counter-guerrilla warfare, such as the Americans are waging in Iraq as of this writing. Greek and Roman commanders did not fret much over calibrating the use of military force so as not to alienate the civilian population in occupied territory. More wisdom on these subjects is to be found in the US Marines' *Small Wars Manual*, first published in 1940 and recently re-issued, than in Xenophon or Caesar.³

Classical warfare is an encyclopedia of hammer blows and of the use of tricks to deliver them more effectively. At the battle of Salamis in 480 BC, for example, the Greeks used disinformation to lure the Persian fleet into fighting under conditions favorable to the Greeks but destructive to the Persians. But they never imagined that they could drive the Persians out of Greece merely by harassing the occupiers or

by poisoning the population of Persepolis or by assassinating the satrap of Sardis or by terrorizing travelers on the Royal Road in western Asia. Such tactics did not come easily to the ancient mind.

When they did think of unconventional tactics, ancient commanders had their hands full convincing the political authorities to let them use them. Neither Spartan nor Athenian strategists, for instance, were able to get approval at the outset of the Peloponnesian War to establish a garrison in enemy territory. Athens waited six years before turning to this strategy, and conservative Sparta waited eighteen years. To turn to another case, the Persians dragged their feet on the brilliant advice of their Greek mercenary general, Memnon of Rhodes, as to how to defeat the invasion by Alexander and the Macedonians. Memnon proposed a strategy of battle avoidance and scorched earth on land and at sea, a naval offensive in the Macedonian rear in Greece. But the Persians only made a half-hearted attempt to follow his advice, choosing instead pitched battle on land—and disaster. Likewise, only ruinous and repeated defeat convinced the Romans to turn to a Fabian strategy of delay against Hannibal's invading army.

Even when ancient conflict did revolve around a small and dirty war, ancient writers and audiences showed little interest in it. For example, the real Trojan War consisted much more of raids on soft targets in the Trojan hinterland, like cities, cattle, and women drawing water from wells, than on set battles on the plain of Troy. But the real war only leaves traces in Homer, while heroic battle takes center stage. The real war was won, of course, by a trick. But the Trojan Horse gets short shrift in Homer, perhaps because it too was bad box office in early Greece.

Today, the wars of the next decades will be very ugly, and managing them will require “the finest cunning” (153). Who will lead us? Kaplan points not to the larger-than-life Pericles or Augustus as an ancient model of statesmanship, but to the cranky, forceful, maligned but astute Tiberius, who

ruled Rome as Augustus' successor (AD 14–37). Tiberius abandoned glory and the cult of personality in favor of building up the empire's military and financial strength, and so he left a mighty edifice to his successors. (In the second half of his reign Tiberius became a tyrant, which Kaplan discounts in favor of Tiberius' early success.)

Kaplan might have added for his readers' inspection an even greater ancient example of crafty policy, Odysseus. Like Tiberius, Odysseus was ruthless and bloody, but he knew how to get the job done, whether it was conquering Troy or making his way home to Ithaca. And when he wasn't sidetracked by his curiosity and wanderlust, he committed himself to the interests of his family and his country. Although he lacked the glamour of Achilles, Odysseus proved to be the most effective king in Greece.

Kaplan, to his great credit, gets all this right. Creative pessimism, virtue guided by force and cunning, liberal patriotism, necessary imperialism: all the important points are there in his little book. But Kaplan may be much more of a modern than he admits. Consider a recurring theme of his essay, the superiority of good judgment over scientific determinism. As he puts it, "foreign policy is the opposite of comprehensive knowledge. . . . Instinctive judgment is vital" (38). The result is an encomium of intuition, and even of exuberance or clairvoyance. Kaplan applauds the gutsiness and anti-determinism of Ronald Reagan and Sir Isaiah Berlin, while he criticizes the timidity of Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush (Bush the Elder). Kaplan's greatest hero is Winston Churchill. Yet Churchill tests the limits of Kaplan's ancient model; indeed, Churchill breaks the mold.

Churchill was Churchill: remarkable and indispensable. And it is doubtful that he thought much about classical forebears. Churchill wrote voluminously but not about the ancient world. I suspect that as soon as he finished school, he tossed away his Greek and Latin textbooks and never looked back. Certainly, he was influenced by admirers of the ancients. There are traces of Gibbon in his prose and of By-

ron in his grandiosity, but the last lion was neither legionnaire nor gladiator; he was a knight. Churchill loved crusades and lost causes, like his opposition to Nazi Germany in the thirties, in defiance of the British government, and his stubborn support of the British Empire after 1945.

Nor was he a pagan. Churchill explicitly evoked the defense of Christian civilization; indeed, he said that nothing less was at stake in the Battle of Britain. In his finest hour, he displayed the unflinching resistance not of a philosopher but a prophet. He seemed to be a man less lit by reason than touched by madness.

Consider the events of a special cabinet meeting that Churchill, as prime minister, called for 28 May 1940. It was a dark day. The fall of France was apparent and the outcome of Dunkirk, where the British army was to be evacuated, was still in doubt. Churchill, nonetheless, spoke with determination. He said, according to the report of one person there:

We shall go on and we shall fight it out, here or elsewhere, and if at last the long story is to end, it were better it should end, not through surrender, but only when we are rolling senseless on the ground.⁴

The result was emphatic, as Churchill later wrote:

There occurred a demonstration which, considering the character of the gathering—twenty-five experienced politicians and Parliament men, who represented all the different points of view, whether right or wrong, before the war—surprised me. Quite a number seemed to jump up from the table and come running to my chair, shouting and patting me on the back. There is no doubt that had I at this juncture faltered at all in leading the nation, I should have been hurled out of office. I was sure that every Minister was ready to be killed quite soon, and have all his family and possessions destroyed, rather than give in. In this they represented the House of Commons and all the people.⁵

It would be tempting to compare this to the stand of Leonidas, the Spartan king at the battle of Thermopylae, defending Greece in 480 BC. He baited the Persians to “come and get him,” and they did, but not before the king and his men killed 20,000 of the enemy; the Greeks lost 4,000 men, including all 300 Spartans, among them Leonidas himself. The comparison would be tempting but deceptive. The history of Britain has no shortage of warriors who chose death over dishonor, from Boudicca to Harry Hotspur to Horatio Nelson. There was no need to look beyond the Channel for inspiration, nor did Churchill do so. He wrote later of the spirit of 1940:

There was a white glow, overpowering, sublime, which ran through our island from end to end.⁶

Churchill understood something that immersion in the classics might mislead us into forgetting. Men and women no longer fight and die for Greece or Rome. In fact, not even the ancient Greeks and Romans fought for something as abstract as Greece or Rome. Then as now, people fought for their homes, for their families, and for their gods. They fought for their freedom, but only if the stakes were real and tangible, and not some antique or faraway ideal. Look at a classical text and you will see that what moved the ancients is little different from what moves us: the gods and heroes, the stones of their ancestors, the safety of their wives and children.

When, for instance, virtually the entire adult male population of Athens rowed out on ships to fight the battle of Salamis in September, 480 BC, their rallying cry was freedom. But this was not some academic principle. The Persian invaders had driven Athenians from their land and burned their national religious shrine. “Freedom” meant that the Athenians wanted to free their homeland and take it back.

Kaplan understands this. “National pride,” he writes, “is a prerequisite for a Churchillian foreign policy” (31). But it is less clear that he understands the importance of religion. Kaplan takes pains to criticize a politics of “otherworldly

absolutism” just as he prefers “secular self-interest” to “religious virtue” (115). And he is right to point out that religion in foreign policy can lead to extremism. Nor can even the best of intentions succeed without “muscle and self-interest” behind them (100–1). Yet there is more to the matter than that. Faith is not just a diversion from the pursuit of power but the spark that moves men from the safety of everyday life to the danger of war.

The Greeks, for example, would never have dreamt of going to war without the blessing of the gods. Before evacuating the city of Athens for the island of Salamis, for instance, the Athenians consulted the god Apollo through his oracle at Delphi—twice; they invoked by vote of their assembly the special help of Zeus All-Powerful, Athena of Victory, and Poseidon the Securer; and they shivered at the news that, on the Acropolis, the sacred snake of Athena had declined to eat his usual honey cake, which meant that the eponymous goddess herself had evacuated Athens. They refused to fight the battle of Salamis before sending for sacred images from the island of Aegina, about fifteen miles away, to be brought to help them. And they reported numerous apparitions by friendly gods and heroes during the battle itself.

It would be easy to write all this off as propaganda, but before doing so, remember that war entails death, and death evokes the most powerful emotions. Call it religion or call it inspiration, but the belief that Christian civilization itself was at risk seems to be what moved Churchill and his ministers to keep on fighting against Germany in May 1940 when it was possible to make peace. Kaplan asks wisely, and repeatedly, what drove Churchill to oppose the Nazis for so long and at such cost to his own country. The answer is that he smelled sulphur in the air around Hitler.

The American politician who best understood the connection between faith and fighting is, of course, Abraham Lincoln. It may be significant that Lincoln appears only once in *Warrior Politics*, and then only to receive the accolade of “the ultimate prince” (61). The reference is part of Kaplan’s

discussion of Machiavelli, significantly, a cynic about the use of religion. Lincoln understood, in a way that Machiavelli perhaps did not, the intimate connection between faith and war. Oh, Machiavelli knew that religion could supply an army with a little Dutch courage, and Kaplan praises Lincoln for the idealism that inspired his tough fight for the union, but the issue is much deeper.

As Mark Noll puts it in his recent, magisterial volume on American religious belief, Lincoln was an ordinary man who defined the theological meaning of the Civil War better than any theologian. In his famous Second Inaugural Address (4 March 1865), Lincoln stated that the theological significance of the conflict was ultimately unknowable but perhaps not flattering to the United States, since it might represent divine punishment for a slave system from which North as well as South had profited. Yet Lincoln insisted that the war was no mere secular event. He had already pointed to this conclusion in his First Inaugural (4 March 1861), before a shot was fired, when he tried to maintain peace by references to “the better angels of our nature” and “the Almighty Ruler of Nations, with his eternal truth and justice.”⁷

Religion can be abused and misused by warriors: it is enough to cite Osama bin Laden, the Islamists, and their distortion of Islam in order to prove that point. But religion is also what allows us to respond to suicide bombings and mass murder by putting our own lives at risk. Without faith in the profundity of what is at stake, we would simply answer the Islamists with a businessman’s bargain. We would say something along the lines of “All right, you made your point on September 11. We have no wish to suffer any further bloodshed, so let’s make a deal.” But we smell the sulphur, and so, instead, we risk a small number of our soldiers’ lives in the short term in order to save millions of all of our lives in the long term.

So, Kaplan’s salute to paganism might be evaluated as good but not thorough enough. Hardheadedness, pessimism, force, and cunning make an infinitely better basis

for foreign policy than do fatalism, utopianism, pliability, and trust. A tough-minded conservative can make the world safer for democracy than can a well-intentioned but soft liberal. But none of these qualities will carry a leader through crises, setbacks, bloodshed, and years of hard work. Only an ultimately irrational faith in the justice of his cause, the virtue of his country, and the wickedness of his enemy will support him.

The ancients would have called this piety. What we call it today, in our secular, relativistic, multicultural, postmodern society, is not clear. But if we are to win the wars that lie ahead, we had better identify it.

NOTES

1. See Azar Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War: Fuller, Liddell Hart, Douhet, and Other Modernists* (New York 1998).

2. See Adrienne Mayor, *Greek Fire, Poison Arrows, and Scorpion Bombs: Biological and Chemical Warfare in the Ancient World* (New York 2003).

3. For a concise introduction to counter-guerrilla warfare, see Mackubin Thomas Owens, "No Comparison. Iraq is Not Like Vietnam" NRO: National Review Online, November 6, 2003, <http://www.nationalreview.com/owens/owens200311060900.asp>. On the preference of ancient Greeks for decisive battles, see Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* rev. ed. (Berkeley 2000).

4. Hugh Dalton, *The Second World War Diary of Hugh Dalton, 1940–1945*, Ben Pimlott, ed. (London 1988), 27, as cited in John Lukacs, *Five Days in London, May 1940* (New Haven 1999), 5.

5. Winston Spencer Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, vol. 2 of *The Second World War* (Boston 1949), 99–100, as cited in Lukacs (note 4), 3.

6. Lukacs (note 4), 3.

7. First Inaugural: Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings 1859–1865. Speeches, Letters, and Miscellaneous Writings. Presidential Messages and Proclamations* (New York 1989), 223, 224. Second Inaugural: Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford 2002), especially pages 430–35.