

Two Rebel Historians: Thucydides, Howard Zinn and Telling Truth for Social Good

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In order for historians to positively influence their readers, they must remove ideologies that distort a clear vision of human history. Thucydides and Howard Zinn sought to do this after being disillusioned by how their respective societies abused history. Thucydides thought that Herodotus' supernaturalism kept readers from understanding their roles in society. Zinn, similarly, argued that the exceptionalism of American history textbooks prevented readers from participating in society. Both demythologized their writings of history by eliminating those ideologies that prevented the positive influence they thought society desperately needed.

1: History Defined

History ought to leave readers with as much responsibility and control over their actions as they, by nature, do. Herodotus' *Histories* stifles the reader's perception of this fact by asserting that the supernatural has all human life structured within fate. American history textbooks encourage the reader to be apathetic towards political life by suggesting that only heroes—whether statesmen or political advocates—induce positive change in society. This study will use Gary Nash's *American Odyssey*, a commonly used American history textbook, as a case study.¹ Although it is likely that Herodotus and the authors of these textbooks did not intend to constrain the reader's freedom, their respective ideologies of supernaturalism and exceptionalism do precisely that. Thucydides and Howard Zinn condemned these ideologies and removed them entirely from their histories. These historians agree that by presenting history without any illusions, they will assist their readers in confronting the current, traumatic events of their society.

¹ Nash, Gary. *American Odyssey: The United States in the Twentieth Century*. Westerville: Glencoe Division of Macmillan/McGraw-Hill Publishing Company. 1992.

This is an examination of how these men crafted controversial histories to serve a practical function for the reader. Both men attracted either overt or subtle criticism for their representations of history. Plato, albeit indirectly, disagreed with Thucydides' idea that education and traditionalism could not prevent societal decline after circumstances became too demanding.² Thucydides' popularity later suffered in the Hellenistic Period because audiences of that time thought his *History of the Peloponnesian War* consisted of mostly "rebarbative" Greek on Greek violence.³ It is also likely that this sort of sentiment would have existed at the time Thucydides' history was published.

Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States: 1492—Present*⁴ attracted immediate criticism because of its opposition to both the United States government and nation-states in general. Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen published *A Patriot's History of the United States: From Columbus' Great Discovery to the War on Terror* to counter both Zinn and what they considered widespread unpatriotic scholarship.⁵ Schweikart and Allen argue that left-wing historians such as Zinn fail to understand the real American history because of their "Marxist biases" and disbelief in virtue.⁶

Thucydides and Zinn expected criticism for their histories because they thought that the unpleasant truths of human history would prove of most use to their readers. The following are the main questions of this study: Who are these men? How did they come to produce histories

² Woodruff, Paul. *Thucydides: On Justice, Power, and Human Nature*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company. 1993.

³ Grafton, Anthony, Glenn W. Most, and Salvatore Settis. "Thucydides." *The Classical Tradition*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2010. 935-36.

⁴ Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States: 1492—Present*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers. 2005.

⁵ Schweikart, Larry and Michael Allen. *A Patriot's History of the United States: From Columbus's Great Discovery to the War on Terror*. Sentinel. New York. 2004.

⁶ *Ibid.* xi, xiii.

that were antithetical to the mainstream histories of their respective societies? And, lastly, how do their histories try to positively influence the lives of their readers?

Before continuing, it is crucial to examine the purpose and function of history in human society by asking some fundamental questions: What is history? Why do people use or even need it? What events make history? Who should write it? What are the criteria that determine a particular history's trustworthiness?

At its most general level, history is the record of past events. Yet even this definition is insufficient since recording past events is done by chronicles and annals. The distinction between these and history is primarily a difference of narrative. Chronicles and annals merely record certain occurrences in order to preserve them for future reference. They do not explain events as historians do. This, in fact, is the historian's main purpose: to structure past events through an explanatory narrative.

Since history tries to explain events, controversies of interpretation necessarily arise. This is accounted for in the etymology of the word history. From the Greek ἱστορία, the word is a compound of three parts: a root, an agent indicator, and an abstract suffix. The root, *wid/*, meaning 'to see,' provides English with the word video. The *-tor* indicates that the word refers to an agent that does the action the root of the word suggests. In this case, ἵστωρ happens to be a complete word of its own, defined not so much as one who sees, but "one who knows law and right", "judge", and "witness."⁷ The verbal form of this word, ἱστορέω, provides the action of the ἵστωρ succinctly: "inquire into or about", "examine", and "give an account of what one has learnt". The suffix *-ia* is a common ending that refers to an idealized conception of the root. ἱστορία, although usually translated directly from the verbal root as "inquiry" or "examination,"

⁷ All definitions come from Liddell-Scott-Jones.

etymologically refers to the abstract conception of an agent whose purpose is vision. More than that, *ιστορία* entails an informed opinion or judgment about whatever event was witnessed. We should consider these judges historians because of their efforts to synthesize diverse opinions—whether from witnesses or other judges—into a single construction. History, then, entails a complex discussion of witnesses and of judges.

What is most unsettling about this understanding of history is that a single interpretation of the past could never be a truly definitive explanation. Every person has his or her unique conception of history. Witnesses of the same event give contradictory reports and historians argue over minute details. It is enough to suggest that no person can ever have a true knowledge of the past even if he or she witnessed it. Yet this outlook is too pessimistic since it demands an unreasonable level of objectivity and would then suggest that history as a study has no validity. The historian who wants to positively change society must think that people depend on history in three ways: To understand their origins, to function in their daily lives, and to act in constructive ways. Although history requires diverse opinions, it still needs factual accuracy and an precise depiction. Historians can only hope, as Zinn states, to participate in the “inevitable taking of sides which comes from selection and emphasis.”⁸ Certainly, historians cannot expect to be absolutely definitive, but a significant part of their task is to accept that constraint as a foundation for subsequent dialogue.

2: The Rebel Historians:

Two instances of this kind of historiographical dialogue occur with Thucydides and Howard Zinn’s responses to the reception of history in their respective eras. Both men were

⁸ Zinn 10

acquainted with the standards society set for historiography, but they thought that adding to this historical dialogue through those standards subverted the aspects of history that are useful to the reader. These men deliberately crafted their histories in ways that were contrary to the prevailing interpretations of those times. For us to understand their approaches to historiography we have to analyze their respective works within the contexts of their lives.

Thucydides

Thucydides, as far as we know from his own work and from later biographers, was an Athenian who lived from c. 460 BCE to c. 395 BCE. He mentions himself only a few times in his own work and always in the third person. Thucydides does not include much autobiographical information other than that his father's name was Olorus and that he was Thracian. Donald Kagan writes that this Olorus is likely the same grandfather of Cimon, a famous Athenian general and statesman, and that Thucydides' family was largely "anti-Pericles."⁹ Beyond this, very little is known, but Kagan characterizes Thucydides as an "Athenian of the bluest blood and considerable wealth," and an avid supporter of Pericles despite his family's political associations.¹⁰ An apocryphal story reports that as a young boy he listened to Herodotus give one of his lectures while in Athens. Thucydides writes that he began writing his work at the moment the war broke out because he understood its unprecedented scale.¹¹ He was among the many Athenians who caught the plague that ravaged Athens in 430-29 B.C.E. at the onset of the Peloponnesian War, but was one of those who survived.

⁹ Kagan, Donald. *Thucydides: The Reinvention of History*. London: Penguin Books. 2009. 7

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Thuc. 1.1.1

At the Battle of Amphipolis in 424 B.C.E., Thucydides served as Athenian general and suffered a defeat against the Spartan general Brasidas. On account of this defeat, Thucydides was put on trial for προδοσία (treason), exiled from Athens, and lived in Sparta for some time.

He described the experience:

καὶ ξυνέβη μοι φεύγειν τὴν ἑμαυτοῦ ἔτη εἴκοσι μετὰ τὴν ἐξ
Ἀμφίπολιν στρατηγίαν, καὶ γενομένῳ παρ' ἀμφοτέροις τοῖς
πράγμασι, καὶ οὐχ ἦσσαν τοῖς Πελοποννησίων διὰ τὴν φυγὴν,
καθ' ἡσυχίαν τι αὐτῶν μᾶλλον αἰσθέσθαι.

And it happened that I was exiled for twenty years after my generalship at Amphipolis, and in being on both sides of the actions, and no less with the Peloponnesians on account of the exile, I better perceived a certain quality of these events because I was not distracted.¹²

That Thucydides provides the only account of this episode makes it difficult for us to understand why the Athenians punished him so harshly. He makes no overt defense of his actions and leaves the narrative to speak for itself. Kagan observes that whatever defense Thucydides had made to the Athenian jury did not work.¹³ Although Thucydides would not have falsified his account (if we trust his historical method), he apparently did not wish to highlight his own failure to arrive at Amphipolis before Brasidas took the city. Thucydides' depiction of this event, Kagan asserts, "would permit most readers to conclude that Thucydides was not at fault but was improperly condemned by an enraged and irrational post-Periclean democracy, as almost all of them have done over the millennia."¹⁴ Nevertheless, it is impossible to assume Thucydides' silence on his trial either implicates or acquits him.¹⁵ It is clear, though, that Thucydides' banishment from Athens shaped his vision of society and history.

¹² Thuc. 5.26.5; All translations are my own.

¹³ Kagan 148

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Kagan 147

Yet what constitutes that vision has long been a subject of debate. Why did Thucydides want to write a history of the Peloponnesian War? What purpose did he think was worth dedicating over thirty years of his life to his history? Who was his intended or actual audience? Moreover, given that biographical details are sparse, who was Thucydides? What makes these questions so contentious is that any attempt to answer them must wrestle with the unique narrative of Thucydides' *History*. That uniqueness is his scrutiny of accounts from witnesses and his essentially modern approach to objectivity. How and why Thucydides came to express his peculiar view of history are key questions for this study.

Some points on the content and style of the *History of the Peloponnesian War* are worth mentioning here. It is a massive, eight-book record and analysis of selected events that transpired between 433—411 B.C.E. Unfortunately, his history lacks the concluding events of the war because Thucydides died before completing it. Since his death occurred about a decade after the end of the war, he must have spent a significant amount of time polishing the volumes he had finished. This is likely, given how consistent and purposeful Thucydides is in describing events and portraying characters. Even his dense and difficult prose indicates how precisely Thucydides wanted to narrate not only the events of the war, but also the tendencies of human behavior. Early on in the work, he explains the difficulties of acquiring information from witnesses, of reporting the necessary components (τὰ δέοντα) of important speeches, and of assessing conflicting testimonies and slanted viewpoints in order to arrive at an accurate depiction.¹⁶ Immediately after describing his process, he presents his purpose:

καὶ ἐς μὲν ἀκρόασιν ἴσως τὸ μὴ μυθῶδες αὐτῶν ἀτερπέστερον
φανεῖται· ὅσοι δὲ βουλήσονται τῶν τε γενομένων τὸ σαφὲς σκοπεῖν καὶ
τῶν μελλόντων ποτὲ αὖθις κατὰ τὸ ἀνθρώπινον τοιούτων καὶ
παραπλησίων ἔσεσθαι, ὠφέλιμα κρίνειν αὐτὰ

¹⁶ Thuc. 1.22.1-3

ἀρκούντως ἔξει. κτῆμά τε ἐς αἰεὶ μᾶλλον ἢ ἀγώνισμα ἐς τὸ παραχρῆμα ἀκούειν ζύγκεται.

And it may well be that the lack of fantasy of these events will seem unpleasant to audiences. But whoever will want to examine the apparent nature of past events as well as of events that will occur at some time again, which will be of this kind or nearly resembling it in accordance with the consistency of human nature—it will be sufficient to judge these things useful. And it is composed as a possession for each and every event rather than as a declamation to present audiences.¹⁷

The prophetic aspect of the κτῆμα ἐς αἰεὶ is an unusual component of Thucydides' history.

Jeremy McInerney comically described the κτῆμα ἐς αἰεὶ as, “the most arrogant piece of Greek ever written. And yet, ironically, correct, because we are still reading it today, so it is still a possession for all time.”¹⁸ Thucydides sought to produce a work that was both informative of the past and interpretive of the future. He justifies his work's immortalization by defining human nature as constant (κατὰ τὸ ἀνθρώπινον), thereby making the statement logical insofar as the argument is concerned. All characters within the history operate on the same plane of existence, without any supernatural influence. Modernity assumes this as an obvious objective for historians, yet in his own historical context, Thucydides was peculiar. His history was the first to make no mention of divine intervention. How did Thucydides come to view history in this way and how does his understanding of human nature shape his narrative?

That prophetic aspect of Thucydides' work must not be confused with determinism, that is, a belief that denies the tangibility of free will. For Thucydides, all individuals and groups have the freedom to act as they want without supernatural influence. Thucydides focuses on how

¹⁷ Thuc. 1.22.4

¹⁸ McInerney, Jeremy. “Reading Thucydides in Washington (1 of 3).” Conference: *Barack Obama and the Lessons of Antiquity*. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7VCHfbAc80&feature=watch_response_rev>. April 17, 2009. April 4, 2012. 00:07:15-00:07:28

groups interact with one another and how a single person communicates with a group. G. E. M. de Ste. Croix writes that Thucydides sought to compose a work that demonstrated those “recurring features in the behavior of human groups in the political and international field.”¹⁹ In Thucydides’ history, a single person ultimately determines his or her own actions, but a larger group can sway that person away from their opinions and values because of the group’s tremendous influence. Thucydides, having been banished by the Athenian democracy for reasons he might have considered unjust, is cynical towards groups because of their tendency to act rashly and irrationally whenever their interests are not met. Thucydides does not suggest that groups of people are essentially good or bad, but rather that group mentality is predictable and dangerous. Predictable because groups will usually act according to their own interests. Dangerous because a group can instill a rigid deference to authority in people, allowing them to make bad decisions they otherwise would not have done or to commit horrible atrocities against other people.

Those patterns of behavior, however, also do not represent determinism since his history consistently leaves room for chance.²⁰ One such instance of chance occurred in the form of an eclipse during the Sicilian Expedition. This eclipse caused Nicias, an Athenian general, to give into his panicked soldiers and follow the soothsayers’ prescriptions to wait twenty-seven days despite the urgent need to retreat.²¹ That action directly contributed to the disastrous defeat the Athenian army later suffered. Notice that it is not the divine that influences Nicias’ decision, but rather the pressures of his army and his own conception of the divine derived from that chance

¹⁹ De Ste Croix, G. E. M. *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World from the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests*. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Limited. 1981. p. 27.

²⁰ Kagan 15.

²¹ Thuc. 7.50.4.

occurrence. Given the unparalleled devastation this event helped cause, Thucydides is rightly contemptuous of any irrationally based thought.

That particular episode reflects Thucydides' overall purpose and suggests the sort of audience he had in mind when he wrote his history. The so-called "exact knowledge" (τὸ σαφὲς σκοπεῖν, lit. "the clear examination") Thucydides presents is as follows: Nicias' inability to see beyond his own superstition made him all the more capable of conceding to his soldiers and soothsayers and ultimately caused him to bring on disaster. That plain vision of the event then takes on a didactic essence as a κτῆμα ἐξ αἰεὶ (lit. "a possession for each and every occurrence") that warns of the dangers of superstitious thought. In a hypothetical circumstance, had Thucydides been the general instead of Nicias, it is unlikely the Athenians would have delayed retreat.

To whom would Thucydides have thought this lesson beneficial? Given his aristocratic and military life, as well as the low literacy rate of 5th c. Greece²², it is enough to assume his intended audience was of the same social class or profession as himself. Following the scientific trends of Hippocrates and the sophists, Thucydides' goal was to clarify the general tendencies of human behavior under certain circumstances. As Kagan explains, Thucydides came to believe that "the world [is] subject to reasoned analysis, if not to absolute or scientific certainty, and that intelligent individuals with unusual gifts could, by careful and systematic study of human behavior, make good and useful estimates of the likely reaction of people, especially en masse."²³

²²Rosalind Thomas observes that Greek literacy is difficult to define given the wide range of reading skills. Thomas observes that although there were many "literate," there was a, "distaste for the written word even among the highly literate." Given the complexity of Thucydides' writing style and Thucydides' own statement in 1.22, his history favors the written word. Here, it is enough to suggest that those who read Thucydides' history were few. Thomas, Rosalind. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1999. 3-4

²³ Kagan 15

This explains Thucydides special admiration for Pericles and fascination for Themistocles, both of whom were unique in being able to understand events as they happened and follow through with a clear expectation of the future.

Howard Zinn

Howard Zinn was born in Brooklyn, NY on Aug. 24, 1922 and lived until the age of 87, passing away on Jan. 27, 2010. He led a very active life as a political activist, professor, and writer. The motivations and intentions Zinn had when he wrote *A People's History* came directly from his life experience, so it is worthwhile to examine his personal history with some detail. Zinn describes in his autobiography, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*²⁴, that when he was fourteen he saw police crush a Communist rally in Times Square and was knocked unconscious by some assailant (likely a policeman because Zinn was carrying a Communist banner). Zinn said that he was astonished that free speech could be attacked in America and that,

From that moment on, I was no longer a liberal, a believer in the self-correcting character of American democracy. I was a radical, believing that something fundamental was wrong in this country—not just the existence of poverty amidst great wealth, not just the horrible treatment of black people, but something rotten at the root. The situation required not just a new president or new laws, but an uprooting of the old order, the introduction of a new kind of society—cooperative, peaceful, egalitarian.²⁵

Later on, he served in World War II as a bombardier that flew missions over Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and France. In April 1945, close to the end of the war, Zinn's unit was ordered to bomb a small French town called Royan that was occupied by 5,500 German troops.²⁶

²⁴ Zinn, Howard. "You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train (sel.)." *The Zinn Reader*. New York: Seven Stories, 1997.

²⁵ Ibid. 154

²⁶ Ibid. 275

Without appreciating the event at the time, Zinn participated in the first use of napalm on the Western Front.²⁷ Zinn writes that there is no accurate number of the casualties, but it at least tops one thousand.²⁸ It was a devastating attack that followed a British attack that happened on January 5, 1945, resulting in the complete annihilation of the city.²⁹ After the war ended, Zinn began to reflect heavily on his actions at Royan and later returned there in 1966 to write an account of the attack in his book, *The Politics of History*.³⁰

After the war, he attended New York University as an undergraduate and Columbia as a graduate student on the G. I. Bill. When he began teaching American History at Atlanta's Spelman College in the 1950s, the Civil Rights Movement started to gain momentum. Zinn helped organize demonstrations in solidarity with the Movement and advised the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). At the onset of the Vietnam War, Zinn published one of the first books opposing the conflict entitled, *Vietnam: The Logic of Withdrawal*. When Daniel Ellsberg, a consultant of the RAND Corporation, released what would become known as *The Pentagon Papers*, Zinn and Noam Chomsky personally edited them for publication.³¹ After moving to Boston, Zinn spent the remainder of his life teaching at Boston University and ceaselessly engaging in political activism. He first published *A People's History* in 1980, yet continued to expand on the work with subsequent chapters on the Clinton presidency and War on Terror until 2003. Since that time, it has sold over one million copies.

²⁷ Ibid. 268

²⁸ Ibid. 270

²⁹ Ibid. 271-72

³⁰ Zinn, Howard. "The Bombing of Royan (from *The Politics of History*)." *The Zinn Reader*. 267-280.

³¹ See *The Pentagon Papers: Critical Essays*, ed. with Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn (Beacon Press, 1972).

A People's History has changed the way many Americans think about their nation's history. His book has influenced many teachers in the United States to impart the lessons from Zinn's history.³² Many actors, musicians, and activists, such as Matt Damon, Bob Dylan, and Danny Glover, collaborated with Zinn to perform readings and songs from American history for the documentary feature film, *The People Speak*.³³ The Occupy Movement which started on September 17, 2011 was heavily influenced by Zinn. Its focus on the income gap between the 99% of the population and the top 1% was taken directly from one of the last chapters of *A People's History* entitled "The Coming Revolt of the Guards."³⁴ Years before the movement began, Zinn wrote, "Against the reality of that desperate, bitter battle for resources made scarce by elite control, I am taking the liberty of uniting those 99 percent as 'the people.' I have been writing a history that attempts to represent their submerged, deflected, common interest."³⁵ It is clear, at least, that Zinn's influence is still gaining popularity.

Howard Zinn's history is unique because of its self-proclaimed, skeptical view of governments and sympathy for people's movements. For Zinn, history is predominately influenced by the actions of those who do not hold authoritative power. He intentionally wrote *A People's History* as a counter to the nationalistic, top-down oriented histories that permeate schools and universities in the United States. These histories, Zinn argues, present an unrealistic, heroic picture of the United States' government and statesmen and seriously mislead their

³² A Google search for these Zinn-inspired teaching lessons will come up with multiple websites. Two such examples: The Zinn Education Project <<http://zinnedproject.org/>> and the People's History of Texas <<http://www.peopleshistoryintexas.com/>>.

³³ *The People Speak*. Dir. Howard Zinn, Chris Moore, and Anthony Arnone. Perf. Matt Damon, Viggo Mortensen, and Don Cheadle. The History Channel, 2009. DVD.

³⁴ On October 6, 2011, at the first mass demonstration of Occupy Austin at City Hall, I saw a man come up to the speaking platform holding a copy of *A People's History*. While gesturing with the book in his hand, he referred to this chapter specifically and discussed its relevance on that day.

³⁵ Zinn 632

readers not only about the nature of the American past, but also about how they should relate to their present society. In this way, according to Zinn, a historian is much like a mapmaker who must sort through vast quantities of information in order to make a useful map. It is not so much a matter of, “selection, simplification, emphasis, which are inevitable for both cartographers and historians.” Zinn states, “But the mapmaker’s distortion is a technical necessity... [whereas] [t]he historian’s distortion is more than technical, it is ideological.”³⁶ Moreover, this ideological distortion is not as evident as a specific type of map advertises. American history textbooks often disguise their exceptionalistic ideology by limiting what kinds of events qualify as parts of American history. Those nationalistic histories downplay fierce contentions between groups and whitewash brutal actions in order to present the United States as a family of common interests. Zinn opposes this idea since it *unintentionally* trains readers for the, “easy acceptance of atrocities as a deplorable but necessary price to pay for progress.”³⁷ He continues:

One reason these atrocities are still with us is that we have learned to bury them in a mass of other facts, as radioactive wastes are buried in containers in the earth. We have learned to give them exactly the same proportion of attention that teachers and writers often give them in the most respectable of classrooms and textbooks. This learned sense of moral proportion, coming from the apparent objectivity of the scholar, is accepted more easily than when it comes from politicians at press conferences. It is therefore more deadly.³⁸

In the exceptionalist narrative, Zinn argues, nations are falsely treated like families while bitter conflicts of interest are suppressed; class-consciousness holds minimal influence while the Founders appear as benefactors of total equality; grave atrocities become marginalized while national borders expand in distance. The point is not to condemn or grieve for the past, Zinn

³⁶Zinn 8

³⁷Zinn 9

³⁸Zinn 9

explains, “[t]hose tears, that anger, cast into the past, deplete our moral energy for the present,”³⁹ the point is to draw strength from those moments in history when people joined together in opposition of overwhelming currents of injustice. Historians should emphasize those proactive moments, because ignoring them is to sabotage their occurrence in the present and in the future. “I am supposing, or perhaps only hoping,” he says, “that our future may be found in the past’s fugitive moments of compassion rather than in its solid centuries of warfare.”⁴⁰ Therefore, any narrative that denies or significantly limits the influence of solidarity-based actions on history, absent of governmental power, deprives the reader of a certain encouragement to influence their own society.

Having covered some essential points about the historiographical approaches of Thucydides and Howard Zinn, it is worth emphasizing why it is important to compare them as historians. The important qualities of history at the origin of historiography obviously differ from our contemporary standards. Yet the profound changes Thucydides made from Herodotus and Zinn from nationalistic histories share a common radicalism. By laying the earliest and latest examples of historiographical contention side by side, this study will attempt to show that history requires an unabashed presentation of the past if we are to progress towards a more just future. However much Thucydides and Zinn may differ in their understanding of human nature over time, they agree that readers of history must confront humanity without any illusions—especially when the worst aspects of humanity dominate. Only in this way can history have a purpose, otherwise it is merely an appeal for applause, a brief infatuation that leaves readers uninspired towards the potential of their lives.

³⁹Zinn 10

⁴⁰Zinn 11

In order to structure this argument clearly, I will discuss the changes in historiography in chronological order. I will start with the ancient Greek *modi operandi* of disseminating historical knowledge by describing the shifts of thought that occurred from the Dark Ages (1200-800 B.C.E.), through the Archaic Period (800-480 B.C.E.), and into the Classical Period (510-323 B.C.E.). This will then proceed to discuss the same process for American historiography starting from the first American history textbooks in the 19th century until today. I cannot be terribly exhaustive, instead I will focus on the elements within historiography for which Thucydides and Howard Zinn are unique—namely, Thucydides’ political realism that excludes the divine and Zinn’s populist viewpoint that rejects nationalism and exceptionalism. By examining how these historiographical shifts occurred, this study should provide a clearer conception of how the Greeks viewed themselves and how we view ourselves.

3: Herodotus & The Origins of Greek Historiography

Herodotus is rightly the father of history because he was the first to approach history as an inquiry. Although the Greeks considered Homer and Hesiod to be historians in a very loose sense, Herodotus presented history with a scientific approach and in a prose style. Thucydides took Herodotus’ *Histories* as a model so it is appropriate to focus on Herodotus as a precursor.

Born c. 484 B.C.E. in Halicarnassus of Asia Minor, Herodotus travelled much of the ancient Mediterranean world. As is the case with Thucydides, there are no reliable sources that discuss Herodotus’ life other than the *Histories*. Unlike Thucydides, however, Herodotus was much more willing to write in the first person in order to discuss his methodology and his opinion on points that interested him. This reflects how Herodotus presented his work: live oration. Although there is more to include on this point, it is enough to mention here that while

Herodotus was travelling, he would give lectures at different cities. How many of the places discussed in the *Histories* Herodotus actually visited is still debated, but he certainly had been to most of the eastern Mediterranean.⁴¹ He allegedly died in Thurii c. 425 B.C.E., a fact that indicates he saw the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War (there are sections of his history that refer to events closer to this date).⁴²

The *Histories* themselves are a compilation of different categories of specialist writings that would not be considered exclusively history, e.g. geography, ethnography. Modern standards had not yet been formed, so it is futile to criticize him on those points. Or as Arnaldo Momigliano puts it, “There was no Herodotus before Herodotus.” Herodotus nevertheless set a certain expectation for future historians: To inquire into the events of the past. Herodotus describes his own purpose best in the proem of his work:

Ἡροδότου Ἀλικαρνησέως ἱστορίας ἀπόδεξις ἦδε, ὡς μήτε τὰ
γενόμενα ἐξ ἀνθρώπων τῷ χρόνῳ ἐξίτηλα γένηται, μήτε ἔργα
μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμαστά, τὰ μὲν Ἑλλήσι, τὰ δὲ βαρβάροισι
ἀποδεχθέντα, ἀκλέα γένηται, τὰ τε ἄλλα καὶ δι’ ἣν αἰτίην
ἐπολέμησαν ἀλλήλοισι.

A display of Herodotus the Halicarnassean’s inquiry: that the past occurrences of humankind might not, in time, vanish, nor that the great and spectacular achievements, displayed either by the Greeks, or by the other peoples, become without glory, both other things and why they began to fight with one another.⁴³

However much Herodotus includes of other non-historical information, the main objective of his history is to preserve the great deeds and wonders of the past and narrate the origins of the Persian Wars. These parameters offer such a large range of topics that there might not actually be any cohesion within the work as a whole. Given that the second book of the history is a lengthy

⁴¹ Thomas, Rosalind. “Introduction.” *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories*. Ed. Robert B. Strassler. New York: Anchor Books. 2007. ix

⁴² Ibid. x

⁴³ Hdt. 1.1.1

discussion filled with anecdotes Herodotus heard about Egypt, there is reason to suspect the cohesiveness of the work. Some have argued, however, that Herodotus sought to provide an unparalleled context through which to discuss the largest conflict the Greeks had ever faced.⁴⁴ Thucydides, after all, wrote his work for precisely that reason as well. Egypt, of course, had been subjugated by the Persians before the invasions of Greece and so was not without logical connection to Herodotus' purpose.

Herodotus says that the ultimate purpose of his work is to prevent the deeds of the past from becoming not famous (*ἀκλέα*). What the actions of the Greeks and the non-Greeks represent to Herodotus and his readers are monumental demonstrations of κλέος, 'glory,' 'fame,' or with a more general sense, 'report.' The pursuit of κλέος was hardly new to Herodotus, of course, since it was the most profound goal of life to the heroes of the Homeric Age.

The Homeric poems display the importance of this goal by being, "embodiment[s] of the κλέος that they represent."⁴⁵ Every hero in the epics, however well-known, sought to immortalize himself by fighting bravely in combat. The moment and mode of death frequently served as the primary indicators of the gravity of an individual's κλέος. Homer uses the word κλέος, per se, sixty-four times in both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and often adds epithets such as μέγα 'great' or ἐσθλόν 'good' in order to emphasize the grandeur of a tale and its characters.⁴⁶ In the *Odyssey*, Homer includes a geographical sense with εὐρυ- 'wide' when referring to Odysseus' fame on a horizontal plane.⁴⁷ Likewise, Odysseus' κλέος contains a vertical dimension since it can reach heaven.⁴⁸ However figuratively we may understand the Greeks perception of κλέος, the ancient

⁴⁴ Thomas ix

⁴⁵ Finkelberg, Margalit ed. *The Homer Encyclopedia: Vol. II*. U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell. 2011.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 442

⁴⁷ Od. 8.73-82

⁴⁸ Od. 8.74

heroes thought that the fame of their achievements generated a tangible, eternal existence. Given the powerful, physical implications of κλέος, it is understandable how by Hesiod's lifetime the canonical nine Muses acknowledged Clio (Κλειώ, 'she who gives fame') as the muse of epic poetry and history.⁴⁹

Herodotus picked up this tradition of κλέος two centuries later and at the very least appreciated its relevancy. Yet the relevance of κλέος in Herodotus' work is not as self-evident as it is for Homer since he uses it only six times in the entirety of his history (twice with the alpha-privative variant). In all occasions except for the proem, Herodotus uses the word for instances that relate to Spartans (including one instance with the alpha privative).⁵⁰ All four uses of κλέος also refer either directly or indirectly to the Battle of Thermopylae. Although it is clear that Herodotus, along with a great majority of Greeks, respected the Spartans for their sacrifice at the pass, it is strange that other battles that routed the Persian military do not nominally merit κλέος.

Thucydides, however, uses κλέος only three times and with significantly less grandeur. He joins Herodotus by referring to Sparta in a famous line about how posterity will doubt Spartan power was as great as its renown.⁵¹ His second use of κλέος refers to the Phaeacians' notability for their ships.⁵² His second use is when Pericles announces that women are great when they have neither positive nor negative κλέος to their names.⁵³ What is important to observe here is the diminishing importance of κλέος between the epic poets and Herodotus as well as between Herodotus and Thucydides. Additionally, Thucydides never used the word to characterize events like Herodotus did. And after Book 2, κλέος disappears altogether. In order

⁴⁹Schachter, Albert. "Muses." *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*. Eds. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth. New York: Oxford University Press. 1998.

⁵⁰For κλέος, see Hdt. 7.220.2, 7.220.4, 9.48.3, 9.78.2. For ἀκλέος, also see 5.77.1

⁵¹Thuc. 1.10.2

⁵²Thuc. 1.25.4

⁵³Thuc. 2.45.2

to explain this peculiarity, the dynamics of the changes in historiography must be explored further.

During the transition from the Archaic Age into the Classical Age (700-500 B.C.E.), a massive intellectual revolution occurred among the Greeks living in Ionia.⁵⁴ This was characterized by a new emphasis on scientific and philosophical thought that tried to understand the world through epistemology. Hippocrates' medical school and the Pre-Socratics were the forerunners of this revolution, and their scientific methodologies had a great effect on Greek society. Kagan describes their fundamental approach as an avoidance of "nonrational or supernatural explanations and to seek an understanding of man with reference only to his own nature."⁵⁵ Herodotus, born at the cusp of the Classical Age at the origin point of this revolution among the Ionian Greeks, was the first to grapple with history according to the new paradigms of thought. In order to establish clarity about the truth of past events, a historian had to synthesize conflicting witnesses, stories, and monuments with each other. This is why Herodotus, unlike Homer and Hesiod, does not invoke a Muse in order to provide him with a clear account. In Herodotus' frame of mind, the best accounts of the past come through *inquiry* (ἵστορία) and a *display* (ἀπόδειξις) of the evidence. Herodotus nevertheless trusted the Muse-inspired Homer to provide both a stylistic influence and a reliable account of the Trojan War (as Thucydides, on both points, did as well), yet he demonstrated his technique by narrating the story of Alexander (Paris) according to both the Persian Empire's λόγοι ("versed in tales or stories... hence of chroniclers") and other Greek sources.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Kagan 9

⁵⁵ Kagan 9

⁵⁶ Hdt. 1.1.1-4

Although Herodotus' work is a trove of information about the past, perhaps his most lasting achievement was his establishment of the historical method. I have already discussed the word *ιστορία* at some length. Let us now look at the word following it in his proem, *ἀπόδεξις*. The word itself simply means a 'display' of some kind, but Egbert Bakker argues that the term has greater significance. Bakker says that this word is more indicative of Herodotus' purpose than *ιστορία* since *ἀπόδεξις* emphasizes a representative quality of his history.⁵⁷ This is seen in how the Greeks used public monuments and trophies in order to serve as a primary mode for historical connection. The *Histories* seek to stand in place of the once visible great deeds and works of the Greeks and non-Greeks (Herodotus repeats *ἀποδεχθέντα* here) as well as display the *αἰτίη*, or 'cause', of their conflict in the Persian War.⁵⁸ Bakker summarizes the viewpoint of Gregory Nagy, "[i]n this account, *ἀπόδεξις* is not 'proof' or 'display', nor a one-time event, a display lecture or *epideixis*, but a 'public presentation', a performance, a link in a chain of transmission starting with the events in the past and ending with the public exhibition of Herodotus' *historiē*."⁵⁹ Herodotus crafted his work not so much to produce an authoritative narration of past events, as is evident in the following quote, in which he leaves the credibility of the stories up to the audience and readers:

Τοῖσι μὲν νυν ὑπ' Αἰγυπτίων λεγομένοισι χάσθω ὅτεφ τὰ τοιαῦτα
πιθανά ἐστι· ἐμοὶ δὲ παρὰ πάντα τὸν λόγον ὑπόκειται ὅτι τὰ
λεγόμενα ὑπ' ἐκάστων ἀκοῆ γράφω.

Now let these things said by the Egyptians be useful to whomever these sorts of things are credible. But, for me, it is a fixed principle in every story that I write the things I heard said by each person.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Bakker, Egbert J. "The Making of History: Herodotus' *Historiēs Apodexis*." *Brill's Companion to Herodotus*. Eds. Bakker, De Jong, Van Wees. 2000. pp. 3-32.

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⁵⁸ Bakker 25

⁵⁹ Bakker 10

⁶⁰ Hdt. 2.123.1

Bakker further suggests that Herodotus' ἀπόδεξις, with its intrinsic value placed on the reader, is in fact a precursor to Thucydides' "possession for all time."⁶¹ However, Thucydides' use of the word ἀγώνισμα, "that with which one contends, a prize-essay," in characterizing Herodotus' historical performance emphasizes that the *Histories* were a prize competition piece and held no merit for understanding the consistencies of human nature.⁶² Nevertheless, Bakker argues, Herodotus' writing achieves the same immortal effect as Thucydides' given our current discussion.

4: Herodotus and the Supernatural

Although Herodotus expressed an unprecedented amount of objectivity in his display of the past, he never fully grasped the modernism with which he dabbled. Many occurrences in his work demonstrate a profound failure to immunize his history against unscientific αἰτία. This is most likely an unintended consequence of Herodotus' willingness to accept any variety of λόγοι, or 'accounts', from whatever source his eyes and ears could access. For all the scientific approaches that Herodotus pioneered, his *Histories* are nevertheless rife with traditional, archaic models of thought that provided ample space for the supernatural. In this sense, Herodotus rebelled against the current scholarly trends of secularism, defending, "traditional practices... against contemporary skepticism."⁶³ However much Herodotus appreciated his inquiry-based approach, he would treat stories of gods and prophecies with the same amount of respect as other non-supernatural accounts. On account of this leeway for superstition, Herodotus' account

⁶¹ Hdt. 1.22.4; Bakker 30-31

⁶² Bakker 31-32

⁶³ Lateiner, Donald. "Oracles, Religion, and Politics in Herodotus." *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories*. ed. Robert B. Strassler. Andrea L. Purvis Trans. New York: First Anchor Books Edition. 2009. 16

demonstrates fundamental problems that contain significant repercussions that resonate throughout an otherwise admirable attempt at historiography.

There are a number of striking configurations Herodotus' superstition takes in the *Histories* that significantly challenge the integrity of the work. Firstly, Herodotus often provides narratives that have characters' whose names represent a pun or a moral within a particular story. The second configuration comes from Herodotus' fascination for omens and dreams. The third is his reverence for oracles, particularly the one at Delphi, which Herodotus mentions five times as often as Thucydides.⁶⁴ The last is the direct intervention of divine characters. Together, these suggest that human behavior is largely beyond human control since the divine can appear at any moment. Given Herodotus' authorial control over whether to include these occurrences in his history, scepticism towards the *Histories* is well deserved.

An example of the first kind of narrative configuration occurs with the story of Hegesistratos in book 9. After the Persians had been repulsed from Plataea and were making a retreat, a Greek force gathered at Delos under Leotychidas, a Lacedaimonian. Hegesistratos, with two other ambassadors from Samos, strongly encouraged Leotychidas to attack the Persians at Ionia since the Greeks there would immediately revolt.⁶⁵ Herodotus writes that Leotychidas determined to follow Hegesistratos' suggestion merely on account of his name, meaning "leader of the army." This episode is certainly reminiscent of Thucydides' account of Nicias and the eclipse so it would be hasty to attribute Leotychidas' superstition to Herodotus' own. Despite the obvious Greek penchant for omen-reading, Leotychidas was not in as perilous a situation as Nicias during the Sicilian Expedition since he was not in immediate danger nor was he pressured by sooth-sayers and, more importantly, by panicked, superstitious troops. It is reasonable that

⁶⁴Lateiner 5

⁶⁵Hdt. 9.90.2

Leotychidas could have held this opinion himself but there is another instance that undermines the plausible rationality here.

Early in the *Histories*, Herodotus recounts tales of Croesus that embody not only the first of these narrative configurations, but also the latter two. In the story of Croesus, his son, Atys, and Adrastus, whom Herodotus describes as, “άνήρ συμφορήν έχόμενος και ού καθαρός χεῖρας (a man who has misfortune and blood guilt on his hands),”⁶⁶ all but one of these narrative configurations is present. Beginning immediately after the famous Solon dialogue, Herodotus says that Croesus was struck with a great retribution from the divine (έκ θεοῦ νέμεσις μεγάλη) since he ignored Solon’s advice that all human life is “chance” or “misfortune” (Οὔτω ὄν, ὃ Κροῖσε, πᾶν ἐστι ἄνθρωπος συμφορή).⁶⁷ After Croesus received a true, prophetic dream about the death of Atys, he attempted to prevent that outcome. The ultimate outcome of the story that affirms the credibility of the dream is supplemented with the significance of Adrastus’ name, which means ‘he who cannot run away’. Through this nominal configuration, Herodotus emphasizes the moral of Solon (which may well be Herodotus’ own) by crafting a character who is incapable of evading the looming, divine συμφορή.

Since Herodotus even has Croesus discuss the dream with Atys and Adrastus, the possibility that the Hegesistratos episode occurred in the way Herodotus presented it is questionable.⁶⁸ Since Herodotus manipulates the dialogues Croesus has, it is possible that he could have done the same with Leotychidas. Although there is no certainty in this supposition, the mere absurdity of the Hegesistratos episode combined with implication of the Adrastus episode seriously undermines its historical plausibility.

⁶⁶Hdt. 1.35.1

⁶⁷Hdt. 1.34.1 & 1.32.4

⁶⁸Hdt. 1.38.1 & 1.43.2

Two Herodotean themes can also be seen in the story of Croesus' misinterpretation of the oracle's advice about imperial expansion. Croesus, upon receiving an oracle that he would destroy a great empire if he attacked the Persians, inadvertently destroys his own power. Just as in the Adrastus tale, an event expected to occur in some particular way in fact happens in the opposite. This is a particularly common theme in Herodotus' writing since it is characteristic of oracles to provide ambiguous or misleading messages from the gods.⁶⁹ It should be noted that Herodotus does provide a distinction between this oracular mode of communication with the divine and direct intervention. Herodotus, after all, is fond of ritualism and digresses on the practices of particular cultic institutions. Lateiner also notes that Herodotus observed instances of corruption at the oracular centers and, oddly, records more of their errors than their practices.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, Herodotus still attributes a large amount of credibility to them. This Croesus episode is such an instance of Herodotus' trust in oracular strength yet it also contains a commentary on how people ought to behave given the active presence of the divine. Cyrus' defeat of Croesus came as a natural consequence of Croesus' pecuniary and power-based actions. Given Croesus' inability to understand Herodotus' Solonian method of life, Croesus inadvertently suffered the results of his initial intentions. This kind of karma promotes a second Herodotean theme that Lateiner phrased as a maxim, "[M]ind your own and restore to others your own."⁷¹ This idea will resurface later on in the analysis of Herodotus' view of the Athenian Empire.

The final narrative configuration of direct divine intervention occurs during Herodotus' telling of the Battle of Marathon. In the story of Philippides, during the run back from Sparta

⁶⁹ Lateiner 8

⁷⁰ Lateiner 13

⁷¹ Lateiner 15

after requesting military assistance for the oncoming battle at Marathon, Pan appeared to him.⁷² Herodotus writes that Pan, “ordered him to ask the Athenians why they were paying no attention to him, although he was well disposed toward them, had already and often been of service to them, and would serve them further in the future.” The Athenians apparently believed this and set up a shrine to Pan below the Acropolis. Herodotus later writes that after the Athenians received “favorable” sacrifices, they charged the Persians at Marathon who, “assumed that the Athenians were seized by some utterly self-destructive madness (μανίην τε τοῖσι Ἀθηναίοισι ἐπέφερον).”⁷³ Through this order of narration, Herodotus implies that the Greek success at Marathon was, in no small part, on account of Pan’s assistance. Although Herodotus distinctly avoids the word πανικός in his telling, μανίη nevertheless suggests an entrance of the *deus ex machina*. μανίη, meaning “enthusiasm” and “inspired frenzy,” does contain religious implications. Although the narrative has the Persians observe this change in the Athenians, it nevertheless depicts this in sequence with the Pan story. It is clear Herodotus wanted to convey Pan’s influence on the Athenians, but he wanted to present it with an air of subtlety. μανίη was a good choice for Herodotus since it concealed the divine’s immediate presence while fully displaying its effect.

Dodds discusses a similar idea while analyzing the effects of ἄτη in Homer (a word the LSJ defines as, “bewilderment, infatuation, caused by blindness or delusion sent by the gods, mostly as the punishment of guilty rashness”). He writes in this context, “All departures from normal human behavior... are ascribed to supernatural agency.”⁷⁴ Whether or not the Persians understood Pan’s presence, Herodotus’ audience would likely have picked up on the divine

⁷²Hdt. 6.105-6

⁷³Hdt. 6.112

⁷⁴Dodds 13

agency. Nevertheless, Herodotus' celebration of Athens' triumph has disturbing implications that violate realistic depictions of the past. This point, too, will be discussed later on.

Here, it is worthwhile to briefly discuss what the Greeks thought the gods thought about them. From Hesiod onwards, it is evident that the gods had a largely negative impression of humanity. The Prometheus story in the *Theogony*, for instance, records how Zeus' punishment for Prometheus' deceitful sacrifice and theft of fire was directed at humans since he commissioned the creation of Pandora and sent her the notorious box that released every evil into the world except ἐλπίς, "hope" or "expectation."⁷⁵ The result of these sorts of stories and beliefs left the Greeks with a cosmic sense of isolation and helplessness.⁷⁶

Herodotus also presents this similar outlook through the Solon and Croesus dialogue. Herodotus has Solon state that humanity must ultimately strive for happiness and glory since life is in every sense ephemeral. Although Herodotus does not use the word κλέος, the essence of the word obtains throughout Solon's expositions on Tellus, Biton, and Cleobus. Solon calls the character of the gods φθονερόν τε καὶ παραχῶδες (jealous and interfering) because of their contempt for humanity's ability to escape the constraints our own mortality and "encroach on their prerogative."⁷⁷ Since only happiness and glory ought to matter to a human, Croesus was unable to relate the morals to his own life because of his abundant wealth and eagerness for power. Herodotus has Croesus' strong desire to increase his dominance lead him straight into the divine νέμεσις. However long the moral of this story of reckless greed may last, it is important to remember that Herodotus constructs his historical narrative according to the moral. What is

⁷⁵Hes. Th. 507-616

⁷⁶Dodds 29

⁷⁷Hdt. 1.32.1; Dodds 29

striking about this is that Herodotus has deemphasized the facts of an event in light of these sorts of narrative configurations that give undue reverence to supernatural thinking.

Then all of these narrative configurations are tantamount to fiction, antithetical to history. From the slight play of names, to confusing, yet guiding omens, dreams, and oracles, and to active divine agency, Herodotus' *Histories* relies on a structure of fate. In the stories of Candaules Herodotus frees himself from his own Solonian idea that human action creates a corresponding consequence.⁷⁸ For the historiographer, the tiniest fabric of fate is the greatest betrayal. With fate, speculations may run wild with an unaccountable passion because of the presumptive end they have. Even historiographers with honest intentions can inadvertently promote types of thought that falsely attribute a divine blessing to themselves. Thucydides was certainly aware of this consequence as well as the extents of damage possible.

5: Thucydides, Polemics, and the Progress of Secularism

When it comes to how ancient peoples thought, M. P. Nilsson makes an excellent consideration, “[P]rimitive mentality is a fairly good description of the mental behavior of most people today except in their technical or consciously intellectual activities.”⁷⁹ Modern intellectual standards forbid seeing an active supernatural influence as the cause of human actions. These standards did not exist during Herodotus’ lifetime, so it is important not to disparage his masterwork because of the current state of evolution. Nevertheless, Thucydides, whose standards modernity nearly reflects, *was* the evolution of Herodotus’ historical method because he eliminated unfounded superstition from his narrative. Thucydides actively disparaged Herodotus

⁷⁸Hdt. 1.8.2; Dodds 42

⁷⁹Dodds viii

early on in his history partly because of this supernatural concern.⁸⁰ Certainly for Thucydides, the individual's own ideas and beliefs about the divine and supernatural can influence his or her actions, but there isn't the slightest activity on the divinity's part.⁸¹ Following the train of secularism from the Ionian intellectual revolution, Thucydides cut off the irrational frays of historiography that Herodotus perhaps thought would be unethical to leave out.

Thucydides' secularism is so strict it even draws modern criticism because his rigid principles prevent him from including information that would provide a clearer narrative. The fundamentally religious aspect of the Amphictyonic League receives no attention by Thucydides despite its tremendous impact on Greece during the 5th century.⁸² In Thucydides' account of the Mytilenean soldiers' wearing of one sandal during their escape from the Athenian barricade, he omits the probable religious aspect of it and provides an unreasonable reason for it.⁸³ Yet to criticize Thucydides on this aspect requires a delicacy similar to the one I hope I have sufficiently presented here for Herodotus. Thucydides' cynicism towards the supernatural is, nevertheless, one of the best legacies he left historians. While Herodotus sought to convey his first impressions to a present-minded audience, Thucydides attempted to extract a timeless thread that runs through the backbone of historiography.

Before discussing the unusually secular approach to historiography Thucydides had, it is important to examine how he would have seen the human society of his day. Most, if not all,

⁸⁰See p. 10

⁸¹In one peculiar instance, Thucydides gives credit to an oracle for being correct about the length of the war (5.26). Although Hornblower cites Dover HCT 5.433 that this may not be authentic, he states this part is an, "inconsequential interruption, but perhaps it represents an attempt by the grave historian to 'lighten up' a little." Hornblower, Simon. *Commentary on Thucydides: Vol. III*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2008. 45

⁸²Hornblower, Simon. *A Commentary on Thucydides: Volume I*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1991. 169

⁸³Thuc. 3.22.2; Hornblower. 1991. 406-407

Greeks would have recognized that the world was a bitter place infused with competing interests. The Greek poleis and every other empire, country, city, and tribe represented compact, though diverse, units with each looking to increase the quality of their own livelihoods. Wars and other conflicts arose when those interests collided, whether for resources, territorial control, politics, or religious reasons. The Greeks were certainly unusual for their multiple religious and athletic festivals that could supersede conflict, such as the two to three month truce heralded before the Olympic Games to provide safety to travelers.⁸⁴ Yet despite the piety and traditionalism of the Greeks, there was no overarching authority that attempted to alleviate conflict. Arthur Eckstein characterizes ancient Greece concisely, “Amid the multitude of states, there was no international law, and the few restrictions on interstate behavior that existed by informal custom had no means of being enforced.”⁸⁵ There was nothing to check the bellicosity of the Greeks: war never stopped.⁸⁶

Eckstein’s chapter, “The Anarchic Structure of Interstate Relations in Classical Greece,” merits more detail. For want of interstate laws, Eckstein lists four different informal customs that held some of those functions: “protection of official envoys (and sometimes other resident aliens) from harm; not attacking neutral states during wartime; minimal protection of the civilian population of the enemy under specific conditions; and abiding by sworn treaties.”⁸⁷ None of these measures were held absolutely as Thucydides consistently demonstrates in his history. When treaties were made, it was customary to swear under the auspices of the gods since there

⁸⁴ Swaddling, Judith. *The Ancient Olympic Games*, 2nd ed. London: British Museum Press. 1999. 10

⁸⁵ Eckstein, Arthur M. “The Anarchic Structure of Interstate Relations in Classical Greece.” *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2006. 75

⁸⁶ Palaima, Thomas G. “Why Do Wars Begin,” H. Swain ed., *Big Questions in History*. London: Jonathan Cape 2005. pp. 129-134. 134

⁸⁷ Eckstein 38

was a complete lack of mortal accountability. But this did not prevent conflict from arising since even the Delphic precincts failed to avoid the violence.⁸⁸ Wars broke out for this, that, and the other cause and any cessation of violence was merely the product of resource exhaustion or of political pragmatism. Eckstein quotes Michael Rostovtzeff's succinct diagnosis, "In the ancient world, the sole deciding force was might."⁸⁹ The Greek poleis centered much of their governance on this fact and they maintained well-established military traditions in accordance with that diagnosis. All social strata of the poleis were intimately acquainted with the dangers of conflict and they had no conception of life without it.⁹⁰ While Eckstein states that this anarchic structure, "forced them in that direction," it is important to observe that the militaristic response to the overwhelming conflicts were among the prime, if not the essential, cause of their frequency.⁹¹

Much of the pessimism in Eckstein's article comes directly from Thucydides' own conception of the events of his day and of human nature. In the following section, I have selected the Melian Dialogue in order to show Thucydides' revolutionary approach to historiography.

Here, it is useful to restate Thucydides' objective in light of both the progression of historiography through Herodotus and the generally bellicose nature of Greek society. Thucydides intended his *History of the Peloponnesian War* to be a possession as far as iteration extends (κτῆμα ἐς αἰεὶ) for those seeking as clear a view of the past as of the future (ὅσοι δὲ βουλήσονται τῶν τε γενομένων τὸ σαφὲς σκοπεῖν καὶ τῶν μελλόντων), provided the consistency of human nature (κατὰ τὸ ἀνθρώπινον).⁹² As previously mentioned, this κτῆμα is

⁸⁸ Eckstein 40

⁸⁹ Eckstein 42

⁹⁰ Eckstein 44; Palaima 134

⁹¹ Eckstein 43

⁹² See p. 9-10; Thuc. 1.22.4

meant to serve a didactic function for the reader in order that the same mistakes of the past—like Nicias’ superstition—might, at least, be acknowledged in the reader’s present time.

Yet there is a subtle implication of the κτήμα that deserves note: in order for Thucydides’ history to serve its iterative and didactic functions, it must present an ulterior reading that exists purely in allegory. The Peloponnesian War, after all, occurred only over three decades on one part of the planet and, since that time, how states function has changed radically. Aware of this, Thucydides thought that the only pragmatic aspect of history was the potential for manipulating the future (Note that τὸ σαφὲς σκοπεῖν takes both τῶν γενομένων and τῶν μελλόντων as objects). Since any notion of human biological change is nil in this discussion—the scope of written history extending back only to a fraction of humanity’s existence—Thucydides’ allegorical task relies on the essence of humanity’s behavior. Although he never explicitly defines what human nature is, he demonstrates it through the setting of the Peloponnesian War. Given Greek society’s marriage to war and celebration of monumental conflicts, it is impossible to see how Thucydides could have chosen any other setting.

6: The Melian Dialogue

One tragic episode in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* is the dialogue between the Athenians and the Melians in the summer of 416. This episode can serve as a model of Thucydides’ approach to historiography since the largest part of the episode occurs as a conversation between Athenian envoys and the Melian elite. Because of this, the Melian Dialogue encapsulates much of Thucydides’ interpretations of the role power, justice, fear, the divine, nature, and honor in society, so it is worth going through in detail. Thucydides’ own opinions about warfare and politics in general are quite evident in this account. Given the gravity

and the polarized nature of the dialogue, Thucydides wanted his readers to understand both how imperialism, at any point in human history, has at its basis an irrational justification and how this fundamental flaw ensures that those who wield imperial power will destroy themselves.

Thucydides introduces the episode by stating that the Athenians occupied the island of Melos and then besieged the polis with a large contingent of ships (mostly from Athens, but some from their tributary states, Chios and Lesbos), archers, mounted archers, and hoplites.⁹³ Although Melos was colonized by the Lacedaimonians and was controlled by an oligarchic government, Thucydides tells us that the islanders had tried to maintain friendship between the rival powers without getting involved in the conflict. Before the Athenians began to attack Melian territory, their generals sent ambassadors to the polis to negotiate surrender. The Melian oligarchs only allowed the ambassadors to speak to the leading citizens and some city officials in order that the Athenians might not persuade the common people to give up (τὸ πλῆθος). The Athenian ambassadors take advantage of this setting by foregoing arguments that distract from *realpolitik*.

Although Thucydides could not have been present at the closed negotiation, he presented whatever evidence he gathered about the dialogue according to what had to have been discussed. As a result, Thucydides was able to demonstrate what would happen whenever power is the predominate factor in any discussion. Power is so obtrusive in this episode that the Athenians and Melians are unable to negotiate anything because their interests are unwaveringly polarized. The Athenians, armed with a vastly superior military, stubbornly refuse any argument the Melians make which does not result in their capitulation. The Melians, having maintained an

⁹³Thuc. 5.84

independent polis for nearly seven hundred years⁹⁴, cannot accept the premise of the Athenian's discussion. This opposition allowed Thucydides both to elaborate on the nature of the Athenian Empire and to warn readers about how power can easily mislead and corrupt its wielders.

After the Melians open the discussion concerning the justice of the Athenian invasion, the Athenians respond that any dialogue that does not acknowledge the inevitable subjugation of Melos ought to end immediately.⁹⁵ The Athenians state that they do not justify their actions with “good entitlements (μετ’ ὀνομάτων καλῶν),” i.e. their victory over the Persians or on account of any Melian injustice,⁹⁶ but rather, “that in human discussion, lawful claims are decided when both sides are under equal compulsion; but those who are superior in power do as they please and the weaker concede (ὅτι δίκαια μὲν ἐν τῷ ἀνθρωπείῳ λόγῳ ἀπὸ τῆς ἴσης ἀνάγκης κρίνεται, δυνατὰ δὲ οἱ πρὸντες πράσσουσι καὶ οἱ ἀσθενεῖς ξυγχοροῦσιν).”⁹⁷ This statement alone does not mean that might *makes* right; the Athenians instead argue that “might supercedes right between unequals.”⁹⁸ The distinction is important to observe here because the Athenians want to subvert the Melians’ claims for justice, *not* to vindicate the occupation. The Melians could have dismissed the negotiations if the Athenians had blatantly claimed the justice of their actions by right of their military. If the negotiations had ended at that moment, the Athenians would have been forced to begin the arduous and expensive process of besieging the city. Yet this is not what the Athenian generals wanted since they sent the first ambassadors to persuade the Melians to surrender, without having to make the expense. Since

⁹⁴Thuc. 5.112

⁹⁵Thuc. 5.87

⁹⁶Kagan posits that the decree of Thudippus in 425, which sought to increase the revenue from not only the Athenian tributary poleis, but also poleis that were not even under Athenian control. “Melos, which had never paid tribute, was now assessed at fifteen talents, a sign that the Athenians meant to bring the island under their control” (139)”

⁹⁷Thuc. 5.89

⁹⁸Woodruff 103.

the Athenians wanted to keep the Melians in the discussion, they do not deny the essential importance of justice, but they instead downplay it to the point of irrelevancy. The Athenians present their argument as objectively as possible in order to get the Melians to recognize their perilous situation and surrender without a fight. It is only enough, however, to keep the Melians in the negotiations. Although the Athenians do not argue might makes right in this instance, one of the forthcoming, primary components of their argument nevertheless relies on that idea.

The Melians then respond that a peaceful solution on the grounds of friendship is still viable, despite the foreboding military strength of the Athenians.⁹⁹ The Athenians, however, object to this point as well since an independent Melos indicates weakness in their rule. They say that Athens must subjugate independent poleis (especially on islands) not only to increase its empire, but also to ensure security. An independent polis would suggest to Athens' subjects, enemies, and other neutral powers that that polis has an equal power to Athens. The Athenians fear that this suggestion could drive that independent polis, or any other polis uncontrolled by Athens (ἀνάρκτος), to behave unreasonably (ἀλογίστως), i.e. oppose Athenian rule for any reason except for power. For the Athenians, the expansion of their empire is necessarily the same act as preserving it.

Having abandoned arguments on the grounds of justice, the Melians assert that they still have hope in two ways. First, that the gods are likely to assist them because they, at least, side with justice. Second, that the alliance they will make with the Lacedaemonians will deter the Athenian attack. The Athenians, sharing in Thucydides' skepticism about divine intervention, warn the Melians not to deceive themselves with irrational supernaturalism. In one of the most

⁹⁹Thuc. 5.94

crucial parts of the Athenians argument, they counter the Melians by stating that they think the gods are no less likely to assist themselves. They explain:

τῆς μὲν τοίνυν πρὸς τὸ θεῖον εὐμενείας οὐδ' ἡμεῖς οἴομεθα
 λελείπεσθαι: οὐδὲν γὰρ ἔξω τῆς ἀνθρωπείας τῶν μὲν ἐς τὸ θεῖον
 νομίσεως, τῶν δ' ἐς σφᾶς αὐτοὺς βουλήσεως δικαιοῦμεν ἢ
 πράσσομεν. ἠγούμεθα γὰρ τὸ τε θεῖον δόξει τὸ ἀνθρώπειόν τε σαφῶς
 διὰ παντὸς ὑπὸ φύσεως ἀναγκαίας, οὗ ἂν κρατῆ, ἄρχειν· καὶ ἡμεῖς
 οὔτε θέντες τὸν νόμον οὔτε κειμένῳ πρῶτοι χρησάμενοι, ὄντα δὲ
 παραλαβόντες καὶ ἐσόμενον ἐς αἰεὶ καταλείποντες χρώμεθα αὐτῷ,
 εἰδότες καὶ ὑμᾶς ἂν καὶ ἄλλους ἐν τῇ αὐτῇ δυνάμει ἡμῖν γενομένους
 δρῶντας ἂν ταῦτό.

Well, then, we do not think that we will be left out of the good will of the divine. For neither from the human custom concerning the divine nor from human will concerning each other do we act with justice or do as we please. From this, we believe that the divine—and we know that humanity—by necessity of nature, rule wherever they may exert power. And we were neither the ones who placed this law nor were the first who used it once it was set down, but taking it as it is and intending to leave it as it always will be, we use the law knowing that you, as well as others—that if you happened to be in this position over us, you would do the same.¹⁰⁰

The Athenian claim that their actions are in harmony with φύσις ἀναγκαία and νόμος has far reaching implications not only in this dialogue, but also with Thucydides' opinions on the Athenian Empire as a whole and with imperialism in general. The first question that arises is: What do the Athenians think about the gods? To this I propose a second question: Is it at all similar to the Archaic understanding of gods and of fate?

Recall that the Athenians explicitly tell the Melians that they would not make arguments of entitlement;¹⁰¹ their focus is on power alone. If the Athenians wanted to claim divine support, they certainly could have done so because of Herodotus' story of Pan's assistance at Marathon. On the other hand, if the Athenians had asserted any divine support, the cosmic dimension of the

¹⁰⁰Thuc. 5.105.1-2

¹⁰¹See p. 36

conflict would likely have galvanized the Melians since they had just claimed that support. This, too, could have ended the negotiations.

Instead, the Athenians circumvent the issue and claim that their position as the aggressor is justified because of φύσις. The gods are as irrelevant here, the Athenians suggest, as justice. The Athenians do not deny either the existence of the gods or the relevance of justice, but rather, they state that because these are not omnipotent, there is no reason to consider them. Φύσις, however, is at the top of the hierarchy; able to compel gods and men equally to assert rule wherever they have power. The Athenians say, by the necessity (ἀναγκή) of nature, whoever has the capacity to rule, ought to by law (νόμος). Although the Athenians previously held off from claiming might makes right,¹⁰² it is clear that their argument ultimately relies on it.

Here is the logic: The Athenians must subjugate—that is, rape, murder, enslave, and steal from—the Melians because their island is free. This freedom, no matter how small, poses the greatest danger to the strongest power because this indicates that power's weakness. Other peoples, whether controlled by the strongest power or not, who observe this might conclude that they desire and deserve to pursue their own freedom. Emboldened both by this desire and by the apparent weakness of the strongest power, these people might resist that overwhelming force—an action the Athenians consider unreasonable (ἀλογίστως).¹⁰³ Yet if the number of opponents to the strongest power increases, the strongest power faces an existential threat. Because of this danger, the strongest power, then, has no incentive to relinquish its dominance. Athens, therefore, must necessarily expand its rule over those it does not control because of their mere possession of a superior military. This is the νόμος the Athenians cite as their justification.

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³see p. 37

The Melians have no alternative but to trust in the Lacedaemonians' military assistance. For the Athenians, this is as far-fetched a possibility as the friendship the Melians proposed earlier. The Lacedaemonians, the Athenians say, will not help them because they fear challenging Athens' naval power.¹⁰⁴ Although the Melians also suggest the possibility of a Lacedaemonian invasion of Attica, the Athenians ignore this point and cite their unwavering ability to besiege.¹⁰⁵ Having realized that the Melians refuse to adhere to the Athenians' negotiations of surrender, the Athenians criticize the Melians because of their hopes for the future (ἐλπιζόμενα μέλλεται) and very unreasonable intention (πολλήν τε ἀλογίαν τῆς διανοίας). After the negotiation ends, the Melians decide to follow their hopes in the gods and in the Lacedaemonians and to resist Athenian aggression, but they still offer friendship.¹⁰⁶ The Athenians again criticize the Melians on the futility of their hopes and resume besieging the city. At the end of summer, Melos capitulates to the Athenians. The Athenians then kill all the men of military age and enslave all the women and children. Thucydides tells us the Athenians later colonized the island with five-hundred settlers.¹⁰⁷ With that last atrocity, the episode at Melos ends.

The final response of the Athenians to the Melians deserves special attention because of the way Thucydides integrates it with the premise of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. The Athenians say,

ἀλλ' οὖν μόνοι γε ἀπὸ τούτων τῶν βουλευμάτων, ὡς ἡμῖν δοκεῖτε,
τὰ μὲν μέλλοντα τῶν ὀρωμένων σαφέστερα κρίνετε, τὰ δὲ ἀφανῆ
τῷ βούλεσθαι ὡς γιγνόμενα ἤδη θεᾶσθε.

But then you alone, at least, from these resolutions, as you seem to us, judge the things that are about to happen as clearer than the

¹⁰⁴Thuc. 5.109

¹⁰⁵Thuc. 5.111

¹⁰⁶Thuc. 5.112

¹⁰⁷Thuc. 5.116

things you see and you look on the things that are unclear, through wishful thinking, as already happening.¹⁰⁸

This contrast of future events with past events recalls Thucydides' stated purpose in 1.22.4.¹⁰⁹

Thucydides uses the same vocabulary to express this contrast, but these differ in their meanings.

Thucydides wrote his *History* in order to allow his readers have as clear an understanding of the past as of the future, provided the constancy of human nature. The Athenians say that the Melians place too much value in their expectation of the future and have warped their understanding of the present because of it. The νόμος the Athenians cite contains the same iterative quality (ἐσόμενον ἐς αἰεὶ)¹¹⁰ that Thucydides' history provides as a κτήμα. The integral relationship, then, between Thucydides' κτήμα and the Athenians' νόμος is not so much human nature in general, but rather the tendencies of people when they attain too much power. This does not mean that Thucydides' use of κτήμα and the Athenians' use of νόμος are intended to bring about the same result. In the Melian Dialogue, Thucydides isolates the chief idea that all imperial powers rely on to justify their actions. Thucydides does not condone this νόμος, he rather encapsulates its effects in the Peloponnesian War. This microcosm of the νόμος is Thucydides' κτήμα.

Thucydides offered his κτήμα to his readers so that they might understand how the νόμος invariably tends to be used by any dominate person, group, or state. His account of what occurred at Melos indicates that he did not want his readers to capitulate to this νόμος and make justice, faith in the divine, and hope in humankind meaningless. Still, Thucydides was not a pacifist and certainly did not expect his work to uproot this νόμος from human society altogether. Given the limited audience of his day, Thucydides likely wrote his history both to

¹⁰⁸Thuc. 5.113

¹⁰⁹p. 9-10 & 33-34

¹¹⁰Thuc. 5.105; p. 34

help his readers understand how self-interest corrupts people and to encourage them to pursue justice and to respect humankind.

We must observe at this point the similarity between Thucydides' understanding of the νόμος and the ideology of American exceptionalism. McInerney describes the general idea of American exceptionalism as an ideology that, "sees the U.S. as a force for good... [and that] America can be the world's conscience."¹¹¹ Although exceptionalism could apply to any nation-state, it is especially important concerning the U.S. because of its economic and military superiority in the world. The chief similarity between the νόμος and exceptionalism is that both allow people to justify atrocities and distort history.

7: Analysis of *American Odyssey*

Let us now move to the third part of this study: American history textbooks. I have chosen Gary Nash's *American Odyssey: The United States in the Twentieth Century*, published in 1992, as my case study because the American Textbook Council, an independent New York-based research organization, acknowledges its wide use in American high schools.¹¹² It is also important to note that this textbook was written after *A People's History* was released. Although Zinn could not have been referring to this textbook specifically, *American Odyssey* nevertheless contains the same problems of exceptionalism that he pointed out. By critically examining the style of the narrative, I will show that this particular textbook relies on an exceptionalist ideology.

¹¹¹McInerney, "Reading Thucydides in Washington (2 of 3)."

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOHXq3XLYhg&feature=relmfu>>. 00:08:48-00:09:09.

¹¹² Alridge, Derrick P. "The Limits of Master Narratives in History Textbooks: An Analysis of Martin Luther King." *Teachers College Record*. Vol. 108, No. 4. April 2006. pp. 662-686. 664

Textbooks' histories often interchange the agency of a particular action between a nation and a persona in order to produce implicit narrative cues. Although this would seem to occur primarily because of a pragmatic need for simplicity, given that this practice occurs innocuously at the colloquial level (say, George W. Bush waged war on Iraq), the switch bears a far reaching implication that history cannot exist without a formulaic narrative. By jumping from one agent to another, the narrative sabotages the ability of the readers to understand the actions of each agent and to follow the sequence of events clearly. *American Odyssey* demonstrates this quality in a number of episodes including the narratives of Martin Luther King Jr., World War I, and the Vietnam War. Such interchanges suggest inevitability in the progress of human time and make readers passive to their roles in history.

Compared to other textbooks that call themselves histories, *American Odyssey* is rather exemplary in its historical presentation. Nash is either not guilty, or only partially guilty of the accusations that Zinn and Francis Fitzgerald, author of *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century*, have with such works. In *America Revised*, Fitzgerald complains that most textbooks suffer from practically "unreadable" and homogenized writing because of the numerous editors that suck out all individuality and style.¹¹³ Even though it is the product of nine consultants and thirty-seven reviewers from across the country, Nash's prose remains polished. The organization of sections is clear and intelligible and the anecdotes are not arbitrary since they consistently contribute to the arc of the narrative.¹¹⁴ He often includes what Fitzgerald would call "nasty information," that is, significant events that many textbooks choose to leave

¹¹³ Fitzgerald, Francis. *America Revised: History School Books In the Twentieth Century*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company. 1979. 24

¹¹⁴Fitzgerald 50

out because of a particularly negative portrayal of the U.S.¹¹⁵ These events range from the betrayal of Filipino Revolutionaries in the Spanish American War to the falsity of the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the gruesomeness of My Lai.¹¹⁶ Nash seeks to make history serve a social purpose, stating, “[h]istory is a powerful tool ... [that] empowers us by making us see the importance of becoming active participants in our society.”¹¹⁷ It would be unfair to assume a tone as accusatory over historical omissions as Fitzgerald’s against other textbooks since Nash is not maliciously guilty. This makes an analysis of Nash’s textbook a bit more complicated since the faults do not awkwardly stick out like an “evasive” Vietnam narrative.¹¹⁸ It is precisely for this reason that *American Odyssey* is worth analyzing since it bears a reasonable approach to historical narrative. Where he has faults, other textbooks of his caliber likely contain similar error. Whether or not Nash intended it, the changes of agency in his narrative indict him for either some of these previously mentioned problems. These also subvert his desire to have history play an active role in society since they can stymie the reader into passivity.

A brief examination of the inset image of *American Odyssey* will provide a good illustration for the more technical arguments of narrative that follow. The first page of the book depicts a stern Uncle Sam on a ship scoping out to the readers’ right over the rest of the book while simultaneously holding a pair of binoculars and rolling up his right sleeve. He appears ready to land and get hands on with whatever comes. The seaman figure in the back grasps a halyard and gazes in the same direction with a less intense, but equally committed expression. Here, it would also be useful to remember that the epic hero, Odysseus, at the end of his perilous, decades long journey, returned with none of his companions. Although this ominous point

¹¹⁵Fitzgerald 96

¹¹⁶Nash 209, 658, & 681

¹¹⁷Nash xvi

¹¹⁸ Fitzgerald 125

probably wasn't a part of Nash's allusion, his history occasionally reads like the narration of a captain, whose only concern is his own office. In this way, the student is not so much led through the history as he or she is pushed along by the leading voice of the chapter.

It is worth mentioning here that objectivity in any historical narrative is impossible. That we require narratives to string together isolated facts from the past dooms our understanding of a truly objective history. Jerome Bruner's article, *The Narrative Construction of Reality*, confirms this by stating on the one hand that "narrative constructions can only achieve 'verisimilitude'... a version of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and 'narrative necessity' rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness," and on the other that it is a biological impossibility for us.¹¹⁹ Human intelligence, he argues, operates in "domains" in knowing and in skill:

Principles and procedures learned in one domain do not automatically transfer to other domains... [I]f the acquisition of knowledge and of mental powers is indeed domain specific and not automatically transferable, this surely implies that a domain, so called, is a set of principles and procedures, rather like a prosthetic device, that permits intelligence to be used in certain ways and not others. Each particular way of using intelligence... fits it to a particular range of applicability.¹²⁰

In other words, these domains are culturally specific "tool kits" of "principles and procedures" for applying intelligence to understanding "reality."¹²¹ The importance of this observation is that it questions the "universal translatability of knowledge from one culture to another," thus indicating no narrative is without a bias.¹²² The historian's task, then, is to assemble a wide array of subjective narratives in order to create Bruner's verisimilitude. "[H]istory's essence," stated

¹¹⁹ Bruner, Jerome. "The Narrative Construction of Reality". *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 1. Autumn, 1991. pp.1-21. 4-5, 2

¹²⁰Bruner 2

¹²¹Ibid.

¹²²Bruner 3

Marita Sturken, a professor for the University of Southern California, “[is] the *work* of confronting the past,” despite the myriad of past events and perspectives.¹²³ Although this essentially tells what a narrative is, it does not explain how narratives work nor how they interact with each other to create a story.

Essentially, narratives operate with an agent that does action in a particular scene. The agent is expected to have some degree of freedom in his or her choice, leaving the reader only to speculate on the reasons for whatever action was taken.¹²⁴ Like a character in a play, the scene must also be introduced alongside the agent. How these two enter into a narrative carries an implicit influence about the progression of events as well.

For example, Nash customarily starts each chapter with a personal narrative that evokes the scene before the chapter leads it in. In the section just before the chapter on World War II, Nash inserts a lengthy entry entitled, “Personalizing the War,” quoting from Ernie Pyle’s war narrative *Dispatches from the Front*.¹²⁵ Although the war has yet to begin as far as the primary text is concerned, the reader has already invaded Normandy and is capturing German pillboxes. Bruner refers to this type of telling as “narrative diachronicity,” when the discourse either “flashbacks [or] flash-forwards.”¹²⁶ Although there is little harm in colloquial narratives, there is an implication imbedded in its use in a history textbook. The clearest message of this passage is taken for granted in the subsequent historical narrative leading up to the war: Germans are the enemy. When textbook authors use this technique, they make a posterior event supersede an anterior event. The narrators of the textbook, then, imply that chronology has no hold on the

¹²³Sturken, Marita. *Reenactment, Fantasy, and the Paranoia of History: Oliver Stone’s Docudramas*. University of Southern California. 79

¹²⁴Bruner 7

¹²⁵ Nash 390

¹²⁶ Bruner 3

progression of human affairs. This suggests that an air of inevitability pervades history, that there could have been no other outcome than war because the Germans were always hostile.

Another problem that arises in history textbooks is a tendency to glamorize the agents through which the narrative is driven. *American Odyssey* was written according to the “great man, great event” narrative that dominates how most other textbooks display their histories. This narrative suggests that for every monumental event in history, there corresponds an incredible persona that arbitrated how a nation reacted to it. Called the master narrative by Derrick P. Alridge in his article, *The Limits of Master Narratives in History Textbooks: An Analysis of Martin Luther King*, and henceforth in this study, this portrayal of history contains inherent problems. Alridge argues that because the personae of the master narratives are often, “portrayed in isolation from other individuals and events in their historical context . . . The result is that students often are exposed to simplistic, one-dimensional, and truncated portraits that deny them a realistic and multifaceted picture of American history.”¹²⁷ These personae often retain a sanctimonious freedom from guilt or error as James Loewen, author of the textbook-incendiary work, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, observes, “[T]extbooks –old and new –wriggle to get the hero off the hook.”¹²⁸ One of the most insidious way textbooks can protect their master narratives from shame is through the very voice of the sentence (that is active or passive action). Loewen continues, “Imparting information in a passive voice helps to insulate historical figures from their own unheroic or unethical deeds.”¹²⁹ Examples of this will be seen in a later analysis of Nash’s World War I and the Vietnam War narratives.

¹²⁷ Alridge 663

¹²⁸ Loewen, James W. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New York: Touchstone. 2007.17

¹²⁹ Loewen 18

More often than not, the master narrative in Nash's textbook is held by the president of whatever time period in question. Nash has the president prompt a majority of the nation's decisions, ignoring the other forces that influenced a particular action. This can leave the reader feeling groundless and dependent not so much on Nash's word, but more so on the determination of the president. An example of this can be seen in this passage about Teddy Roosevelt's acquisition of the Panama Canal. This section places an impersonal telling of the facts after the Panamanian independence right before ending the section with, "Roosevelt took pride in having forcefully secured the canal, forging ahead in spite of reservations from Congress and legal advisers. He noted, 'I took the Canal and let Congress debate.'"¹³⁰ The problem with this section is not so much the extralegal behavior of President Roosevelt as it is that the section concludes with his final word. A reader who just came out of an impersonal voice should expect the U.S. to behave according to its legal procedures, but the switch to the presidential narrative at the end inoculates these reasonable expectations with the preeminent authority of the president.

The presidential persona does not carry the narrative all the time though, since it flip flops between that and a less personal "United States," or even another American group or demagogue. Alridge's main examination looks at *American Odyssey*, among other textbooks, for the narrative of Martin Luther King Jr. His examination revealed that King's story promoted three narratives: "King as a messiah, King as the embodiment of the civil rights movement, and King as a moderate."¹³¹ As will be developed later, Nash's work also displays these themes of messiah, embodiment, and historical distortions in other parts of his textbook. With respect to the first of these, a depiction of King as a messiah is clearly seen in *American Odyssey* in a sentence before the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail", "Representing the opposition was King, who timed

¹³⁰Nash 206

¹³¹Alridge 664

the demonstrations to include his arrests on Good Friday, the Christian holy day marking the death of Jesus.”¹³² Alridge also associates a large black and white photograph of a march from Selma, Alabama to the capital, Montgomery, with Moses leading the Israelites through the Red Sea.¹³³ The result of such a depiction both makes King “seem like a superhuman figure who made few (if any) mistakes” and ignores “any personal weaknesses, struggles, or shortcomings, nor ... convey[s] the tensions that he encountered among other civil rights leaders.”¹³⁴ The messianic treatment of individuals in *American Odyssey* does not end at King, however, as will be shown in a later analysis of Nash’s treatment of Woodrow Wilson.

‘King as the embodiment of the civil rights movement,’ Alridge points out, is by far one of the most widespread sentiments in textbooks. This most directly relates to a point brought up already in this paper, the “great man” and “great event” narrative. Alridge’s complaint is that textbooks, “condense a large body of information within the life of an individual, event, or series of events.”¹³⁵ Nash certainly dedicates most of the civil rights sections to King as well as giving considerable attention to the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Unfortunately, he neglects to go into detail of any of the other activists he mentions, such as Malcolm X, Langston Hughes, Fannie Lou Hammer, Ella Baker, and even Henry David Thoreau. Malcolm X is given his own section in the narrative, yet his assassination concludes the brief paragraph that introduced him.¹³⁶ Nash is also guilty of what Alridge calls a “*maternal frame of reference*” which refers to, “the tendency of males in the civil rights movement to

¹³²Alridge 667-668, Nash 685

¹³³Alridge 667, Nash 688

¹³⁴Alridge 669

¹³⁵Alridge 670

¹³⁶Nash 586

relegate women to stereotypical roles as mother and child-bearer.”¹³⁷ This obviously denies women from having a substantial role in the narrative despite their tremendous contributions.¹³⁸

It is truly unfortunate that these movements that consisted primarily of common citizens acting for equality is narrated in a dictatorial style. This narrative is antithetical to the idea of the movement itself since its objective was the self-inspired empowerment of many marginalized groups of people. Such a style of narrative robs the reader of a sense of the “relationship between the civil rights movement and our present struggles for equality, democracy, and freedom.”¹³⁹ This issue of narrative dominance will be examined in Nash’s treatment of the Vietnam War.

The third and last point of Alridge’s argument refers to a white-washed depiction of Martin Luther King Jr. Textbooks tend to celebrate a persona like King over a persona like Malcolm X’s because of the prior’s inoffensiveness and the latter’s controversial status. Inoffensiveness, as Fitzgerald points out, is an institutional feature of the textbook publishing business.¹⁴⁰ Truth comes down to the lowest common denominator since publishers seek to sell as many books as possible by appealing to the widest array of people. If a textbook focuses on master narratives, the treatment of that particular agent must necessarily have messianic qualities. The reader, to some extent, must trust the agent through which he or she is receiving the narrative. A messiah may only have so many blemishes, so there are significant restrictions on the personalities, beliefs, and actions of what that agent may be represented with, regardless of truth. Textbooks prefer Martin Luther King Jr. over Malcolm X because the latter’s harsher rhetoric and open acceptance of violence in self-defense are troubling. King’s status as a

¹³⁷Alridge 684

¹³⁸Alridge 672; This phrase refers to, “the tendency of males in the civil rights movement to relegate women to stereotypical roles as mother and child-bearer.” 684

¹³⁹Alridge 673

¹⁴⁰Fitzgerald 43

moderate covers up his later, controversial attitudes towards capitalism, race riots, poverty, and the Vietnam War. Alridge states, “Textbooks reinforce the image of King as a moderate by providing excerpts from his speeches that either skim over or omit his critiques,” leaving behind a shell of pleasant words.¹⁴¹ One character that is treated in a similar attitude to King is the agent of the nation.

In narratives, a nation can bear as much of an agency over a particular action as a persona. Since the nation is supposed to reflect the totality of a certain population, it must also display inoffensive tendencies in order to appeal to that wide range of audience. The morals and values of a nation are unstated and yet are assumed to be akin to the messianic figure. This is because the nation’s impersonality, as seen in the Panama Canal episode of the *American Odyssey*, mimics the lack of human personality seen in a character like Martin Luther King Jr. The agency of a nation usually occurs in an international context for pragmatic simplicity in order to reflect the specific government or group operating with that nominal title. The obvious dichotomy between these two understandings of the nation is often left hazy, yet the cloudy sense of it provides enough of a picture to keep the narrative moving along. Perhaps that simplicity is why most textbooks, as Fitzgerald observes, “are still accounts of the nation-state.”¹⁴² Howard Zinn is highly skeptical of this narrative precisely because of that foggy understanding of what the nation is precisely referring to when it is used. He denies any credence to it in his premise,

My viewpoint, in telling the history of the United States, is different: that we must not accept the memory of states as our own. Nations are not communities and never have been. The history of any country, presented as the history of a family, conceals fierce conflicts of interests (sometimes exploding, most often repressed)

¹⁴¹ Alridge 675

¹⁴² Fitzgerald 47

between conquerors and conquered, masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex.¹⁴³

In spite of this, *American Odyssey* heavily relies on the national narrative and the presidential personae. Nash uses the agency of the nation frequently in context with the military, such as in this episode entitled, “Expansion of Monroe Doctrine”:

In 1904 Germany threatened to send its navy to the Dominican Republic. Germany intended to collect money owed to it by Dominican customs, but could not do so peacefully because various factions in the Dominican Republic fought for control of customs revenues. Before Germany could send troops to collect its debts, U.S. troops seized Dominican custom-houses and supervised the collection of customs fees and the repayment of debts. Roosevelt justified this action by issuing a corollary, ... extending the Monroe Doctrine.¹⁴⁴

A closer reading will bring attention to the fact that the United States took action before any persona instigated it. By phrasing it in this way, Roosevelt does not seem to have any direct agency over the action, so all that is required of him is a posterior justification. Nash’s text often relies this switch of agency in order to simplify international interactions by stripping out all the politics and viewpoints. The end result leaves the intentions leading up to the action behind the scene and fails to give a sense of what agent held responsibility. That the agency of the United States behaved in a *necessary reaction* to the perceived threat, to a certain extent, also excuses the use of this ambiguous agent in the narrative. Nash uses this impersonal agency of the nation in this type of context to push action through the narrative because of its simplicity. This tendency, however, does not allow the reader to adequately critique the action of the nation because they *cannot* know what they are critiquing. The reader must instead, transpose their understanding into the highly fallible messiah narrative of the president.

¹⁴³ Zinn 10

¹⁴⁴ Nash 206

Woodrow Wilson is also pointedly associated as a messiah at the end of World War I since he is shown holding an obstinate sense of morality during the section on the Treaty at Versailles.¹⁴⁵ Nash introduces Wilson as hoping that the League of Nations would provide a new sense of international conduct and allow for self-determination for colonial countries. As the Fourteen Points start to fail in the discourse of the narrative, Nash depicts Wilson as a bit of martyr, stating:

As the conference dragged on for five long months, he would give up more and more of his Fourteen Points as well as his own good spirits and health. By April he appeared thinner, grayer, grimmer, and spoke more nervously. His face twitched as he spoke, and he spoke with greater moral rigidity than ever before. This irritated the European leaders around him. "I never knew anyone to talk more like Jesus Christ," said Clemenceau in exasperation.¹⁴⁶

This selfless conception of Wilson as the battered messiah is misleading in a few ways since it hides many of the faults the president had, such as his racist qualities.

Nash concedes to Wilson's racism as among his largest character flaws, but he phrases it rather mildly and in a roundabout way. After being accused by William Monroe Trotter, an editor of the *Boston Guardian*, for providing a new slavery for Blacks while giving a New Freedom for Whites, Nash dictates, that "Wilson ... had little sympathy for their complaints," and that he "resented anyone challenging his authority, particularly a defiant African American."¹⁴⁷ The narrative is more of an obtuse hint at Wilson's racism, lacking the clarity of Loewen's concise description that Wilson was an "outspoken white supremacist."¹⁴⁸ Loewen goes into far more detail than Nash about this aspect, pointing out how far Wilson went to segregate both the government and the Democratic party. Moreover, Loewen includes a

¹⁴⁵ Nash 232

¹⁴⁶ Nash 232

¹⁴⁷ Nash 191

¹⁴⁸ Loewen 19

fascinating anecdote about a film celebrating the Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction: “At a private White House showing, Wilson saw the movie, now retitled *Birth of a Nation*, and returned [a] compliment: ‘It is like writing history with lightning, and my only regret is that it is all so true.’”¹⁴⁹ Both Nash and Loewen agree that this racism affected the Treaty of Versailles and the Fourteen Points, but again Nash is vastly less critical.

Although Nash observes that the self-determination of countries in Asia and Africa was undermined by Wilson’s unwillingness to include a provision calling for racial equality, he adds a foreign conspiracy to the narrative. Nash writes, “Japan devised a scheme to secure its control of Shandong” and to expand its regional hegemony by instigating for that formal declaration of equality.¹⁵⁰ In so doing, Nash switches the agency of the event to an outside participant, Japan, and changes Wilson’s racism into a tool for the action. In other words, Wilson is no longer actively in control of his racism since he is not in control of himself. Readers are then expected to channel their moral frustration outwards into another nation in which they have no participation. Loewen again observes this episode much more bluntly, stating, “Wilson’s sentiment for self-determination and democracy never had a chance against his three bedrock ‘ism’s: colonialism, racism, and anticommunism.”¹⁵¹ He even includes an ominous foreshadowing about a young Ho Chi Minh who “appealed to Woodrow Wilson at Versailles for self-determination for Vietnam, but ... had all three strikes against him.”¹⁵² If Nash was narrating according to messianic principles by not spoiling the Wilson persona any more beyond a gentle bigotry, he would then have been necessarily constrained to leave out Wilson’s connection to the Vietnam War.

¹⁴⁹ Loewen 21

¹⁵⁰ Nash 234-235

¹⁵¹ Loewen 19

¹⁵² Loewen 19

Agency over the war in Vietnam is possibly the most dicey of all narratives in *American Odyssey*. Although Nash dedicates about 50 pages to the Vietnam War, he ascribes to what Fitzgerald called the “crabgrass theory,” which refers to, “the avoidance of active combatants as subjects.”¹⁵³ That is to say textbooks often discuss the Vietnam War without giving a clear explanation of events or of the motivations of whatever agents are mentioned. The essential narrative that textbooks adhere to in this setting is that, “the war kept growing until it became ‘full-fledged’; many Americans were ‘deeply troubled’ by it; and yet, in spite of negotiations and troop withdrawals, the war kept on going – until it finally stopped.”¹⁵⁴ The narrative of Vietnam begins with the French control of Indochina, yet neglects to mention Wilson’s connection to it. Nash’s narrative relies on the messiah narrative of the presidents to escalate the conflict, stating,

In 1950 the French, unable to crush the Vietminh, appealed to Washington for aid. President Truman was not eager to support France’s colonial ambitions. Yet the cold war had increased tensions in Europe. Truman was afraid to lose France as an ally against the Soviets, who in August 1949 had exploded their first atomic bomb.¹⁵⁵

The *necessary reaction* in this selection can be compared to the Dominican Republic intervention since the action of the president is distinct from the action of the U.S. This is likely because Nash cannot allow the impersonal United States seek conflict because it would not make sense given the thorough discussion of the opposition to the war within the nation later on. Specific personae are needed to hold the nation to its course through the history.

This style of narrative continues even into descriptions of geography. Although Fitzgerald’s complains that geographical representations in textbooks are usually lacking and

¹⁵³Fitzgerald 126

¹⁵⁴Ibid.

¹⁵⁵Nash 655

unclear, Nash sidesteps that criticism by displaying the terrain through a soldier's narrative.¹⁵⁶ The geography, in a way, is possessed by the agency of the United States, to be used and demolished as necessity permits.

Nash has the nation led into the war by President Johnson through the Tonkin incidence.¹⁵⁷ Although Nash acknowledges that the incident was instigated by American and South Vietnamese forces, he suspends this fact until after Congress grants Johnson war resolution powers. Nash presents this near the end of that section in the following sentence, "Years later, however, it was revealed that Johnson had withheld the truth from the public and Congress."¹⁵⁸ Nash attempts to preserve Johnson's messiah status by stating that he did not lie, but rather "withheld truth."

The responsibility of the carnage in the war is not attributed to the president either, but rather to the impersonal nation. Although war narratives could not be expected to deviate too far from this style, there are a couple of areas worth mentioning. Nash explains the demographics of the American draftees, but fails to do so for either side of the Vietnamese forces.¹⁵⁹ The lack of personalizing the Vietnamese (as well as most other "enemies" of the United States) is expected given the limited agencies of the textbook narratives. As Loewen states, "They could never credit our enemies with equal humanity."¹⁶⁰ To do so would to subvert the nation and the personae behind it. The devastation of the bombings in Vietnam is isolated from the rest of the narrative in *American Odyssey* and seems to float on its own between the U.S. military and the place of Vietnam. In one instance, a small text box at the bottom of the page presents the might and

¹⁵⁶ Fitzgerald 124; Nash 659

¹⁵⁷ Nash 657

¹⁵⁸ Nash 658

¹⁵⁹ Nash 661

¹⁶⁰ Loewen 235

extent of the damage in terms of the tons of bombs, rather than providing a window into the slaughter of lives.¹⁶¹ At the end of Nash's discussion of Vietnam, the loss of war is narrated through the South Vietnamese troops after mentioning American withdrawal. Since the narrative subordinates the American defeat, it moves the reader past this loss and throws it onto the South Vietnamese narrative. The Vietnam War concludes:

For the first time in history America had lost a war. The extreme optimism and self-confidence felt by Americans following World War II had been shattered. Despite every advantage in wealth and technology the United States had been unable to defeat a third world nationalist movement.

The people of Southeast Asia also paid a great price for the war in Vietnam. In the course of the war more than eight million tons of bombs –the equivalent of 640 Hiroshimas –had been dropped on Southeast Asia. Two million Vietnamese and uncounted Cambodians and Laotians were dead. Their land lay in ruins, their villages –to the Vietnamese the heart of their ancient culture –destroyed.¹⁶²

These two paragraphs are incompatible with respect to their content. There is little proportion between the defeat of the U.S. by an abstract concept (a third world nationalist movement) and the Southeast Asian people's suffering semi-genocidal destruction. Worse than that, the second paragraph implies that the Southeast Asians purchased the war for themselves and paid for it in millions of lives.

The interchanges and styles of master narratives seen in *American Odyssey* provide the reader with a fixed participation in the history. The sedentary role of the reader is magnified when the narrative watches authority and responsibility bounce back and forth between nation and persona like a beach ball. In this sense, the historical narrative behaves more like "infotainment," that is, a permanent show that asks for permanent audience. If Nash's goal of

¹⁶¹ Nash 699

¹⁶² Nash 700

history is to prepare students for the participation in the present society, how could they be expected to behave any differently than in the role they have been accustomed to? Bruner says that biologically, we cannot transfer our knowledge into skill, but if our knowledge of history does not demand an understanding of our own, present agency, how could any participation be expected?

Loewen sums up the idea rather well, “Citizens who embrace the textbook view would presumably support *any* intervention, armed or otherwise, and *any* policy, protective of our legitimate national interests or not, because they would be persuaded that all our policies and interventions are on behalf of humanitarian aims.”¹⁶³ History must be narrated in a way that engages the participation of the reader. Not to provide a singular narrative with clever wordplays that hide or excuse highly unethical actions. These induce a certain style of interpretation and deny agency not only from those acted in the past, but also from the reader himself/herself. The goal, as Zinn says, “is not to grieve for the victims and denounce the executioners,” because it is a waste of energy.¹⁶⁴ History, therefore, must be extremely conscious of itself, its role in an individual’s own mind, and its narratives in order to maintain its relevance and promote social action.

8: Howard Zinn on Vietnam

As I demonstrated how Thucydides portrayed history by analyzing his account of the Melian Dialogue, I will do the same with Zinn’s interpretation of the Vietnam War. Since Zinn was politically active during that time, it is ideal to select this chapter entitled, “The Impossible Victory: Vietnam,” because it represents Zinn’s direct experiences too. The account is guided by

¹⁶³Loewen 235

¹⁶⁴Zinn 10

his scepticism about the actions and motives of the United States government. Because of his skepticism, Zinn removes exceptionalistic thinking from the narration of past events. Throughout the chapter, Zinn discusses the relationship between the government's illegal actions abroad and domestic subordination (i.e. the Vietnam War and the resistance towards the Anti-War movement). Zinn concludes the chapter by establishing the direct influence of the Anti-War Movement on ending the campaign in Vietnam.

Before starting the analysis of the chapter, it is useful to mention some points about Zinn's writing. Since Zinn switches between the topics of the U.S. government's actions in Vietnam and its domestic actions, the chapter does not follow a strictly chronological sequence, but it generally progresses from 1945-1975. Alongside soldiers' and newspapers' accounts, much of the information Zinn presents about the war in Vietnam comes from the U.S. government's internal documents. For example, Zinn cites the *Pentagon Papers* nine times within the chapter. He uses sources like these inner documents for two reasons: First, to contrast what the government states to the public with the information it keeps secret. Second, to draw attention to the separation between the government and the American people.

The second half of the chapter contains Zinn's account of the Anti-War movement. Zinn describes the movement by categorizing the different groups that acted during it. He records student protests, draft evasions, clerical demonstrations, public opinion, dissident high-ranking officials in the U.S. government, and the disillusionment of both soldiers on the frontline in Vietnam and veterans in America. At the same time, Zinn presents the reactions of the U.S. government to these protests as hostile and violent. Despite these suppressive actions, Zinn argues that the people of the Anti-War movement were critical to stopping the Vietnam War.

It is also important to observe some of the negative effects of Zinn's bias. Although Zinn says in the beginning of *A People's History* that he, "does not want to romanticize [people's movements]," he does so in two noticeable ways.¹⁶⁵ Zinn barely mentions the assassination of John F. Kennedy and omits Lee Harvey Oswald's name, stating, "Three weeks after the execution of Diem, Kennedy himself was assassinated, and his Vice-President, Lyndon Johnson, took office."¹⁶⁶ In a related situation, Zinn completely omits the assassination of President McKinley some chapters before this one. By omitting these stories that had overt political motivations (Leon Czolgosz, an Anarchist, and Oswald, at the very least a Communist-sympathizer), Zinn distorts his presentation of the effects ordinary people on their government. Zinn's omission might have occurred because he did not want to suggest that these two men belonged to the "people" Zinn wanted to unite.¹⁶⁷ Although Zinn promotes the actions of ordinary people throughout his narrative, this omission suggests that Zinn does not want to focus on the potentially negative actions.

Like the diachronicity in Nash's narrative of WWII, placing a selection from Ernie Pyle's account before the outbreak of the war, Zinn manipulates the chronology of his account in order to add emphasis. At the very end of his chapter on Vietnam, Zinn introduces new information about events that led up to Tonkin incident. He writes that after Ngo Dinh Diem, the authoritarian head of Vietnam who was initially supported by the U.S., was ousted by a U.S. supported coup, an assembly of high-ranking American military and State Department officials had a meeting in Honolulu in June 1964 to discuss Vietnam. At the meeting there was a discussion concerning American public opinion and that it, as Zinn quotes another source, "was

¹⁶⁵Zinn 10

¹⁶⁶Zinn 475

¹⁶⁷See p. 15

badly divided, and that, therefore, the President needed an affirmation of support.”¹⁶⁸

Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, an attendee of the meeting, then went to Vietnam to meet the coup leader, Gen. Nguyen Khanh. Zinn quotes a Pentagon historian, “[T]he main thrust of [Lodge’s] talk with Khanh was to hint that the United States Government would in the immediate future be preparing U.S. public opinion for actions against North Vietnam.”¹⁶⁹ Two months after this, Zinn writes, the Gulf of Tonkin occurred. Although Zinn had referred to the meeting in Honolulu much earlier, he failed to mention Lodge’s meeting with Khanh.¹⁷⁰ Zinn emphasizes the direct contact between the U.S. and the Tonkin incident in order make the U.S. government look more insidious.

Despite these two violations, Zinn’s history is still intelligible and open about its angle of presentation. He expresses that angle in a sentence he says he once read: “The cry of the poor is not always just, but if you don’t listen to it, you will never know what justice is.”¹⁷¹ In another sense, Zinn might argue his narrative diachronicity is necessary because whatever event he is describing needs that attention. The Tonkin incident, after all, is still presented in textbooks as an actual historical event. At this point, I will begin my analysis of the chapter on the Vietnam War.

Zinn starts the narrative by discussing Vietnam immediately after the end of the WWII.¹⁷² He writes that the Communist leader Ho Chi Minh participated in the liberation of Vietnam from the Japanese invasion and helped draft a Declaration of Independence from the French colonialists that copied directly from Thomas Jefferson’s in 1776. “All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; among these are Life, Liberty,

¹⁶⁸Zinn 499

¹⁶⁹Ibid.

¹⁷⁰Zinn 476

¹⁷¹Zinn 10

¹⁷²Zinn 470

and the pursuit of Happiness.”¹⁷³ He proceeds to associate the new Vietnamese order with the revolutionary origins of the United States. After France and the United States tried to place Vietnam back under French rule, Zinn quotes Ho Chi Minh, “We apparently stand quite alone. . . . We shall have to depend on ourselves.”¹⁷⁴ In the beginning part of this chapter, Zinn presents the start of the conflict in Vietnam as an act of subordination on part of France and, especially, the United States.

Zinn then writes about the support that Truman provided to the French. He details how much the U.S. provided France, “300,000 small arms and machine guns, enough to equip the entire French army in Indochina, and \$1 billion; all together, the U.S. was financing 80 percent of the French war effort.”¹⁷⁵ Unlike Nash, Zinn does not connect Truman’s motivations to help French colonialism to the Soviet Union’s atomic bomb. Zinn mentions that the U.S. government told the public that it was helping combat the spread of Communism. Yet Zinn also mentions that a secret memo of the National Security Council in June 1952 indicated that Communist control of Southeast Asia would threaten “security interests.” That memo also described the resources of this region as being, “the principal world source of natural rubber and tin, and a producer of petroleum and other strategically important commodities.”¹⁷⁶ Zinn’s implication is obvious: the United States resisted the Vietminh’s autonomy because it would endanger Western control over Southeast Asian resources.

After the conflict between the French and the Vietminh ended in Geneva with a treaty that guaranteed Vietnam’s right to self-determination, Zinn writes that the U.S. quickly acted “to prevent the unification (of North and South) and establish South Vietnam as an American

¹⁷³Ibid.

¹⁷⁴Zinn 470

¹⁷⁵Zinn 471; cf. Nash’s assessment of Truman’s support on p. 55

¹⁷⁶Ibid.

sphere.”¹⁷⁷ Zinn explains this point with two pieces of evidence. First, that after Diem was established by the U.S. as the head of the government of the South, the U.S. told Diem not to host the elections specified in the treaty. Zinn cites a Joint Chiefs of Staff memo in 1954 that predicted that free elections in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam would ensure Communist control. The second piece is a quote from the *Pentagon Papers*, “South Viet Nam was essentially the creation of the United States.”¹⁷⁸ With these two points, Zinn solidifies the U.S. government’s invasive role in Vietnam.

The subsequent pages discuss how Diem’s suppressive regime created resentment among the greater population of peasants. This regime caused massive protests in Saigon and Huè and compelled several Buddhist monks to sit down in public and immolate themselves.¹⁷⁹ Zinn writes that the U.S. stepped up its invasive presence in Vietnam by increasing the number of American troops under both President Eisenhower and Kennedy even before Tonkin. The United States maintained its initial claim that it was helping prevent Communism; Zinn quotes Kennedy, “Yes, as you know, the U.S. for more than a decade has been assisting the government, the people of Vietnam, to maintain their independence.”¹⁸⁰ Zinn’s point here is to contrast the professed intentions of the U.S. government with secret plans to do the opposite. It is important to observe that throughout the narrative so far, Zinn has described how the U.S. government’s processes are divorced from the American public.

This divorce did not spontaneously occur, Zinn argues, but was intended at the founding of the country. The words the Vietnamese borrowed from the two principal American founding documents did not, originally, mean how the Vietnamese wanted to use it (that is, with

¹⁷⁷Zinn 472

¹⁷⁸Ibid.

¹⁷⁹Zinn 474

¹⁸⁰Zinn 475

significant changes towards democracy, in wealth distribution, and in gender equality).¹⁸¹ Zinn does not separate the private interests of the founders (their large estates, slaves, etc.) from their manipulation of the language in those documents. Women, African Americans, Native Americans, and poor Whites were excluded from the phrase, “We the people.” The point, Zinn again states, is not to condemn the past, but to:

[T]ry to understand the way in which the Declaration functioned to mobilize certain groups of Americans, ignoring others. Surely, inspirational language to create a secure consensus is still used, in our time, to cover up serious conflicts of interest in that consensus, and to cover up, also, the omission of large parts of the human race.¹⁸²

Zinn later goes on to discuss how James Madison and other founders sought to prevent a true democracy in the U.S. because they worried about factional strife and the power of the majority.¹⁸³ The Constitution reflected this by its limited applicability and yet extensive enough influence to gain support among, “small property owners... middle-income mechanics and farmers.”¹⁸⁴ This highly-sophisticated system, Zinn argues, has been able to keep Americans divided in wealth, race, and sex and has allowed elite control to prosper ever since. It is not surprising, then, that the American people were left unawares about their government’s actions in Vietnam.

After Tonkin, Johnson was able to escalate the presence of the military and engage openly with the Vietnamese in 1965. Zinn describes the violence inflicted by the U.S. military: the unparalleled rate of dropping bombs, the “free fire zones” in South Vietnam, the destruction

¹⁸¹Zinn 482-483

¹⁸²Zinn 73

¹⁸³Zinn 97

¹⁸⁴Zinn 99

of villages, and the displacement of civilians.¹⁸⁵ Even still, Zinn writes, news of the violence was sparse and the American public did not start taking the brutality of the war to heart until 1968.¹⁸⁶

Zinn records a particularly horrid program of the CIA in Vietnam entitled “Operation Phoenix.”

In this program:

The CIA ... secretly, without trial, executed at least twenty thousand civilians in South Vietnam who were suspected of being members of the Communist underground. A pro-administration analyst wrote in the journal *Foreign Affairs* in January 1975: “Although the Phoenix program did undoubtedly kill or incarcerate many innocent civilians, it did also eliminate many members of the Communist infrastructure.”

Zinn mentions this event because it represents the, “easy acceptance of atrocities” he mentioned at the beginning of *A People’s History*.¹⁸⁷ Supposing that Communism in Vietnam was a threat to the U.S., that analyst justifies the war crimes of the U.S. Because of that progress, it is argued, the U.S. is not accountable for the deaths of thousands of innocent Vietnamese.

Zinn also describes the massacre at My Lai, Seymour Hersh’s exposure of the event, and the trial of Lieutenant William Calley. Zinn presents the methodical process of the executions of four-hundred and fifty to five-hundred people through the testimony of James Dursi, a man present at My Lai, and of Seymour Hersh’s account.¹⁸⁸ “The army,” Zinn writes, “tried to cover up what happened,” but a revealing letter from a soldier and the photographs of Ronald Haeberle helped Hersh expose what happened at My Lai. Lt. Calley was the only officer found guilty of the crimes. Zinn describes how Calley’s sentence was gradually alleviated by the order of Richard Nixon from life imprisonment, to house arrest, and then parole. He also quotes Colonel Oran Henderson, a man accused of covering up My Lai, “Every unit of brigade size has its My

¹⁸⁵Zinn 474

¹⁸⁶Zinn 483

¹⁸⁷See p. 16

¹⁸⁸Zinn 478-479

Lai hidden somewhere.”¹⁸⁹ This story demonstrates two of Zinn’s points. First, that the actions of the U.S. government are detached from the American public since such a horrible massacre was initially silenced. And second, that atrocities can be forgiven because of the nominal progress being made.

At this point, Zinn’s general presentation of the U.S. military’s actions in Vietnam is clear; that it was catastrophic and deceitful. The remainder of this part of Zinn’s chapter concerning the violence of the war discusses the Tet Offensive, the plans of military officials to bomb locks and dams in order to flood the Vietnamese fields and cause mass starvation, and the bombing of Laos.¹⁹⁰ Concerning the last of these, Zinn quotes from a September 1973 *New York Times* article by Jerome Doolittle, a former government official:

When I first arrived in Laos, I was instructed to answer all press questions about our massive and merciless bombing campaign in that tiny country with: “At the request of the Royal Laotian Government, the United States is conducting unarmed reconnaissance flights accompanied by armed escorts who have the right to return if fired upon.

This was a lie. Every reporter to whom I told it knew it was a lie. Hanoi knew it was a lie. The International Control Commission knew it was a lie. Every interested Congressman and newspaper reader knew it was a lie.¹⁹¹

After years of this kind of distortion and tens of thousands of American soldiers killed or wounded, the American population began to resist.

Although Johnson was close to ending the war with a treaty in Paris, upon Nixon’s election, the conflict expanded as bombing raids spread further into Laos and into Cambodia.¹⁹² Zinn argues that while Nixon lowered troop levels because of the unpopularity of the war, the

¹⁸⁹Ibid.

¹⁹⁰Zinn 480-483

¹⁹¹Zinn 483

¹⁹²Zinn 484

violence continued at much the same rate. Here, Zinn's narrative switches to the results of this campaign inside the U.S.

Zinn breaks up the Anti-War movement into different categories: The people in Civil Rights Movement, draftee rebels, massive protests, student movements, public impressions, and the GI opposition. The resistance to the war was unprecedented in American history and a number of astonishing demonstrations occurred. Ultimately, Zinn argues, this opposition, alongside the overwhelming Viet Cong resistance, brought a close to the war.

On the same day Johnson was announcing the Tonkin incident and bombing in North Vietnam, Zinn writes, a group of black and white activists were meeting to honor the deaths of three civil rights workers. A speaker at that gathering, "pointed bitterly to Johnson's use of force in Asia, comparing it with the violence used against blacks in Mississippi."¹⁹³ Zinn also discusses the role of the SNCC and how their opposition caused some members to become arrested. He also mentions the controversial statement of Muhammad Ali that he would not fight a "white man's war." Martin Luther King Jr. is mentioned as well for his outspokenness in 1967, "I speak as a citizen of the world, for the world stands aghast at the path we have taken. I speak as an American to the leaders of my own nation. The great initiative in this war is ours. The initiative to stop it must be ours."¹⁹⁴ Zinn began his narrative of the Anti-War movement specifically with the Civil Rights Movement because Americans oppressed in their own country were apt to sympathize with the Vietnamese.

At the same time, resistance to the war was seen in mass rejections of conscription notes. Zinn describes how the number of prosecutions against these objectors increased from 380 in mid-1965 to 3,305 in mid-1968. By 1969, there were 33,960 objectors. He also records that the

¹⁹³Zinn 484

¹⁹⁴Zinn 485

Selective Service system was unable to meet its quota for the first time in California, May 1969, when only 2,400 of the 4,400 draftees reported for duty.¹⁹⁵ This type of resistance was certainly not as flamboyant as later protests but it is nevertheless a strong indication of American opposition.

Zinn then observes the wide array of protests that occurred in the U.S. Two shocking and separate, but little noted, protests occurred very early on in the war when Norman Morrison, “a thirty-two-year-old pacifist, father of three, [went to the front of the Pentagon,] stood below the third-floor windows of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, doused himself with kerosene, and set himself afire, giving up his life in protest against the war.”¹⁹⁶ Alice Herz, an eighty-two-year-old woman, also burned herself to death in Detroit for exactly the same cause. Zinn records these actions because of their peculiar horror and of the immediate association with the self-immolation of the Buddhist monks under Diem’s regime.¹⁹⁷

The rise in protest occurred because of a “change in sentiment” among the American population. Zinn records how the number of protesters in the Boston Common was only a hundred in 1965 but became 100,000 on October 15, 1969. “Perhaps 2 million people across the nation,” Zinn writes, “gathered that day in towns and villages that had never seen an antiwar meeting.”¹⁹⁸ This wave of opposition later caused the largest mass arrest in American history in Washington when twenty thousand protestors tried to tie up traffic. The police arrested fourteen thousand. Not only were ordinary Americans willing to protest against their government, Zinn observes, but they were also willing to accept the penalties for it.

¹⁹⁵Zinn 485-486

¹⁹⁶Zinn 486

¹⁹⁷See p. 63

¹⁹⁸Zinn 486

Zinn records how this opposition influenced more and more people, even within the government. The case of Daniel Ellsberg and Anthony Russo is given particular attention since Zinn frequently cites the documents they leaked. These two men had worked for the RAND Corporation which did secret research for the U.S. government in Vietnam. Both became disillusioned with the actions of the U.S. and decided to publicize the history of the war they had produced for the Department of Defense. After it was disseminated to Congressmen and the *New York Times*, Nixon attempted to prosecute them under the Espionage Act. Although the trial did not go through because of the Watergate scandal, the release of the *Pentagon Papers* was an unprecedented revelation. “Ellsberg,” Zinn writes, “by his bold act, had broken with the usual tactic of dissidents inside the government who bided their time and kept their opinions to themselves, hoping for small changes in policy.”¹⁹⁹ One implication Zinn wishes his readers to take from this story is that protest can occur at any level of society. No matter where there are injustices, it is possible to resist.

This sentiment was strongly felt among students in the U.S. The Students for a Democratic Society drafted the Port Huron Statement, a “manifesto for participatory democracy,” that continues to assist student protests today.²⁰⁰ Zinn observes how hundreds of thousands of American students participated in protests, thousands had been arrested, and nearly a thousand had been expelled because of their participation. After a demonstration in Kent State University in Ohio was attacked by the National Guard in 1970, four students died and one was paralyzed for life. This sparked the first general student strike in American history and the FBI listed 1,785 demonstrations throughout that year.

¹⁹⁹Zinn 488

²⁰⁰Zinn 490

Public opinions about the war also reflect the tension between the American people and the U.S. government. Although the student protests gave the impression that only the middle class resisted the war, polls throughout the war showed that working class people were strongly against it. Zinn cites a survey from 1967, early on in the war, conducted in Dearborn, Michigan, “an automobile manufacturing town,” that showed 41% of the population wanted the U.S. military out of Vietnam.²⁰¹ A survey by the University of Michigan also showed that people with a grade school education were more likely to resist the war than college-educated people. In September 1970, Zinn cites as an example, “47 percent of the college-educated were for withdrawal, and 61 percent of grade school graduates.” In addition, Zinn cites a political scientist Harlan Han who found that lower-educated opposition to the war was greatly underestimated.²⁰² Zinn summarizes his point by stating that, “the media, themselves controlled by higher-education, higher-income people who were more aggressive in foreign policy, tended to give the erroneous impression that working-class people were superpatriots for the war.”²⁰³ Despite the secretive behavior of the U.S. government and the distortions of those in control of the media, people from the bottom of the socio-economic ladder to the top resisted injustice.

The final group that Zinn discusses were GI’s who were disaffected by the Vietnam War. These soldiers were “mostly from lower-income groups” and their resistance initially began in isolated instances.²⁰⁴ Zinn presents several stories of soldiers who refused to go to Vietnam, who protested against the war in uniform, and who simply deserted. Captain Howard Levy, for instance, refused to teach Green Berets and was court-martialed. Zinn writes, “He said they were ‘murderers of women and children’ and ‘killers of peasants’... The colonel who presided at the

²⁰¹Zinn 491

²⁰²Zinn 492

²⁰³Ibid.

²⁰⁴Zinn 493

trial said: ‘The truth of the statements is not an issue in this case.’ Levy, along with all the other soldiers Zinn mentioned, went to prison.²⁰⁵

As the war went on, soldiers began to become organized and would distribute literature on the conflict.²⁰⁶ Even on the front lines, soldiers would wear black arm bands in solidarity with the protests. Veterans of the war spoke out against the government’s actions.²⁰⁷ Although this does not reflect every soldier’s experience, Zinn wants to emphasize that many in combat were disaffected. At the end of the war, Zinn writes, “700,000 GIs had received less than honorable discharges. In the year 1973, one of every five discharges was “less than honorable,” indicating something less than dutiful obedience to the military.”²⁰⁸ Even in the face of battle, soldiers could not identify with their own country.

As this antiwar opposition raged, the U.S. made one final push to end the war in Vietnam. After legions of B-52s pounded the Vietnamese cities and countryside, the attack failed and global outrage forced the U.S. to end the war. Zinn writes that Kissinger went to Paris and “signed very much the same peace agreement that had been agreed upon before.”²⁰⁹ Zinn then describes how traditional histories present the end of conflicts as coming from the will of leaders. Here, Zinn observes, those leaders were the last to appreciate the idea. Opposition was first and strongest at the bottom of society and progressed upwards. The U.S. government was aware of this and behaved quite sensitively towards “public opinion.” Zinn states matter of factly: “The data is in the *Pentagon Papers*.”²¹⁰

²⁰⁵Ibid.

²⁰⁶Zinn 494

²⁰⁷Zinn 495

²⁰⁸Zinn 496

²⁰⁹Zinn 498

²¹⁰Zinn 499

Zinn argues that all of the protests of these different groups show how perversely the U.S. government behaved when it attacked Vietnam. Despite the immediate reprimands many of these people faced, sometimes with the price of their own lives, people resisted. This resistance proved to weigh heavily on those throughout the government. Zinn observes how Johnson refused to run a second term because he could not appear in public without protesters shouting, “LBJ, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?”²¹¹ Nixon publicly stated that “under no circumstance will I be affected whatever by it,” yet in his *Memoirs*, he admitted that that statement was wrong.²¹² Through this chapter on one of the most volatile periods in American history, Zinn argues to his reader that ordinary people cause the greatest positive changes in society.

9: Conclusion

The changes in historiography examined here show that the process of demythologizing intends to help readers affect their societies in a positive way. Thucydides’ objected to Herodotus’ way of writing history because it alienated readers from their relationship to past events. Zinn opposed traditional American textbook histories because they undervalued the power of ordinary Americans to change the actions of their government. This study, in part, has argued that supernaturalism and exceptionalism distort history and prevent readers from understanding their roles in society.

Herodotus’ *Histories* was the first historical work that respected the growing interest in objective knowledge. Until this point, historical knowledge was spread through poetry which allowed the supernatural to appear wherever the poet decided. Although Herodotus was the first to apply the new science to history, his reverence of the Archaic traditionalism left the possibility

²¹¹Zinn 483

²¹²Zinn 501

of divine intervention open. The various narrative configurations—such as in the superstitious importance of names, omens, dreams, oracles—alongside the actual appearance of the divine, suggest that humans do not have any real control over the course history. *The Histories*, then, are ultimately guided by fate. If none of the characters within the massive work had any choice, it would not be surprising that a reader could apply the thought to their own life.

Thucydides, however, fully embraced the scientific revolution and disagreed with Herodotus' fatalism. He certainly respected Herodotus' work but he thought history had potential to be more than a performance. Thucydides understood that writing history is an evaluation of human nature under a set of circumstances. The Peloponnesian War was an ideal topic since its magnitude and devastation was unparalleled and therefore provided a wide variety of case studies of political behavior. Thucydides realized that history could be forever useful if it could accurately depict the constancy of human behavior.

For Thucydides, the most important quality that affects human behavior is power. The Melian Dialogue described the fundamentals of human interaction when power is completely one-sided. Friendship, justice, hope, and honor have no say in a discussion of power: the most basic of human qualities are irrelevant. Those with power, Thucydides has the Athenians say, are obligated to use it and to increase it. This is the law (*νόμος*) of power and this is why free societies cannot exist alongside tyranny. For the Athenians, it was enough justification to massacre the Melian population.

I argue that Thucydides did not merely create a work to replicate the Athenians' actions at Melos. Thucydides certainly was not a pacifist, but he did not trust war to provide even adequate results. One of the main lessons of Thucydides' history is that war will produce more

war: this is partly why he says, “War is a forceful instructor (βίαιος διδάσκαλος ὁ πόλεμος).”²¹³ It is up to the reader not so much to take lessons from *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, but to put them into action. Otherwise, Thucydides’ history is no more than an interesting story.

The purpose of American history textbooks is to educate students and to encourage them to participate in American society. Unfortunately, textbooks subvert their own intentions because of their exceptionalist attitude. As seen in the analysis of Nash’s *American Odyssey*, the narrative suffers from oversimplification and an uncritical view of the United States’ actions. The greatest actions and movements in the U.S. are ascribed to the initiatives of messiah figures like Woodrow Wilson and Martin Luther King, Jr. This kind of narrative prevents students from understanding the power of their own initiatives and negates the relevance of the textbook.

The textbook presentation of history also educates students to support whatever action of the U.S. government, no matter how misguided the venture is. Since the U.S. is always presented in a positive light, the reader is free to assume that the U.S. is always right. Jeremy McInerney counters this point of exceptionalism by stating that the U.S., “cannot be a great nation if it relies on the false proposition that because it enjoys a sense of moral purpose, that it is therefore obliged or entitled to project its military might abroad.”²¹⁴ That notion of exceptionalism is identical to the justification of the Athenians before they annihilated the Melians. It is dangerous to cling to such shortsightedness because the repercussions are always swift and equally devastating.

Zinn’s history is aware of this fault of exceptionalist thinking. *A People’s History* is skeptical of governments because their actions often do not represent the interest of the greater

²¹³Thuc. 3.82

²¹⁴McInerney. “Reading Thucydides in Washington (3 of 3).”
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjNvkToWZ_U&feature=relmfu>. April 30, 2012.
00:07:15—00:07:33.

population of citizens. In the Vietnam War, the U.S. government justified its actions according to the interests of national security, but those interests served only a few Americans. That is why the government went to extreme lengths to prevent the population not only from having a clear vision of the causes of the war but also from demonstrating against it. Zinn's history is meant to encourage readers to find strength in those who were ostracized from their communities and were punished for acting out against the corruption of their government.

It seems to me that the trust in the supernatural is not that different from trust in the unwavering morality of a nation-state. The two project an idea that allows people to justify anything simply because of their ability to exert power. This is seen in an interview between John Pilger, an investigative journalist and documentary maker, and Duane Clarridge, a CIA agent who was head of the Latin American division in the 1980s. The heated discussion on the responsibility of the U.S. in the coup of the Chilean democratic government is worth noting:

Pilger: What right have you—and I mean you—the CIA, the United States government, or any foreign power—what right do you have to do what you do in other countries? **Clarridge:**

National security interest.

Pilger: But that's a divine right, isn't it? Because the people that you do it to have no say.

Clarridge: Yeah, yeah, well, that's just tough. We are gonna protect ourselves and we're gonna go on protecting ourselves because we end up protecting all of you. And let's not forget that. **Pilger:** Right, right, no I won't.

Clarridge: We'll intervene whenever we decide it's in our national security interest to intervene. And if you don't like it, lump it. Get used to it, world, we're not going to put up with nonsense. And if our interests are threatened, we're gonna do it.²¹⁵

²¹⁵ *The War on Democracy*. Dir. Christopher Martin and Pilger John. Perf. John Pilger. Youngheart Entertainment, 2007. DVD. 01:05:50-01:06:55

This, too, is identical to the power-based argument of the Athenians at Melos—down to the “nonsense (ἀλογίστος)” of justice.²¹⁶

How we view history is largely how we view ourselves. Thucydides does not simply show that people become tyrannical when they have excessive power, he rather demonstrates how pursuit of power is ultimately self-destructive, i.e. the defeat of the Athenian empire. Imperialism, then, is an irrational exertion of force to subjugate other people over some limited amount of time. Zinn wrote his history to combat imperialism by removing exceptionalism. He did this so that his readers could see in American history how the interest in imperial power is almost entirely held by the government and the uppermost classes and not the majority of American people. Zinn hoped that Americans who are concerned about their nation’s imperial power could find strength in history’s “hidden episodes” in which “people showed their ability to resist, to join together, occasionally to win.”²¹⁷ At this point, when so-called conventional warfare is catastrophic, humanity should consider whether the history of war has taught it anything. If history has, we might, as Zinn suggests, condemn war altogether.²¹⁸

²¹⁶See p. 37, 39, & 40

²¹⁷Zinn 11

²¹⁸See p. 17

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