

The Melian Dialogue of Donald Trump

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In 416 BCE, the forces of the Athenian Empire attacked and destroyed the city of Melos, killing the men and selling the women and children into slavery. Before this, however, they called upon the Melians to surrender and become a tributary, or to face the consequences. The Melian leaders disputed the Athenian threats and arguments in what has become justly and darkly famous, in Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War, as the Melian Dialogue.¹ In that, the Athenians from the start called on the Melians not to resort to fancy arguments about *right* or "justice" but merely to address likely consequences. As for themselves,

Then we, on our side, will use no fine phrases, saying, for example, that we have a right to our empire because we defeated the Persians, or that we come against you now because of the injuries you have done us – a great mass of words that nobody would believe. And we ask you on your side not to imagine that you will influence us by saying that you, though a colony of Sparta, have not joined Sparta in the war, or that you have never done us any harm. Instead we recommend that you should try to get what is possible for

you to get taking into consideration what we both really do think; since you know as well as we do that, when these matters are discussed by practical people, the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.²

The last phrase is sometimes shortened to “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”

Donald Kagan’s third volume of his history of the war provides a discussion of the Dialogue, and his massive and measured four-volume history provides extraordinary context for it and for other Athenian speeches of interest in relation to it.³ The phrase or its like appeared in Athenian speeches earlier than this, but at times in conjunction with claims of Athenian legitimacy, moderation and benefits. Here, however, it is the first and the final line of Athenian argument, the nearly pure iron largely unalloyed by such other considerations. Athenian moderation here is limited to the offer of a choice to submit or to die. In later portions of the Dialogue, it becomes clear that Athens is concerned with Melos significantly as a means to overawe potentially and actually restive allies with a real or a possible horrible example. This is scarcely even an “Athens first” argument (theoretically, others could possibly come “second”), more one of “Athens acting solely for itself.”

“The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” Street-corner “realists” might see this as permission to run rampant. Some IR-theory Realists and Neorealists see it as a bleak but fundamental truth, a comment on the realities of power. Other scholars, however, say it is far more and argue that this treatment sells Thucydides short. For them, his overall account of the war and of the speeches and dialogues produced within it leads to far deeper and broader philosophical and IR-theoretical considerations. The scholars noted below cover much the same ground as Kagan, albeit in briefer form in noting these speeches as well as the Dialogue, but are much less circumspect than he is in their conclusions.⁴

For Garst, Thucydides’ speeches are central to unravelling the inadequacy of a Neorealist focus simply on material power and instead realizing the importance of language, of rhetoric, of justifications offered, of links between word and action. Athens was reduced to arguments of *necessity* which ignored or denied other, vital

components of its hegemony. He proceeds to a further discussion of hegemony as a cultural phenomenon in which legitimacy and moral authority are important.⁵ Johnson sees it as an ultimate consequence of a resort to considerations purely of expediency.⁶ White argues that the Dialogue indicates a broader decline from rational self-interest. He argues, ultimately, that the Athenian language in the Dialogue reveals “the reasoning by which a limitless and incoherent ambition works in the world,” and that it abandons any “rational definition or pursuit of self-interest.”⁷

We might go further in elaborating on this point, drawing on the older IR literature. Hans Morgenthau desired that states *do justice to all* (other states) by judging their interests “as we judge our own and, having judged them in this fashion, we are capable of pursuing policies that respect the interests of others, while protecting and promoting those of our own. Moderation in policy cannot fail to reflect the moderation of moral judgement.”⁸ Also worthy of note is a curious, if, it seems, overlooked conjunction of arguments. One early study in J. David Singer’s Correlates of War project found that, in the nineteenth century, high alliance involvement correlated with low war levels. That relation reversed – became positive – in the following period.⁹ *But why?* In a much later and very different article, Friedrich Kratochwil, discussing the notion of *interest*, argued that, earlier in the nineteenth century, a course of action by a state that effectively drove others to combine against it would be seen as clearly contrary to its interests. But as the century closed states (or at least some states) started to define and pursue their interests in ways that tended to disregard the interests of others: they were to be overridden, not considered and respected.¹⁰

The US is not yet Athens *in extremis*, though Thucydides’ account of the deterioration of Athenian democracy bears rereading and though Trump at times seems to be auditioning for the role of Cleon. Nor has American foreign policy hit quite the depth of the Dialogue or the brutality of its argument; his administration has not yet produced an eloquent equivalent in either tone or content. However, the fixation on self and “strength,” the blithe disregard of others in words and deeds, and the matter of any overall coherent, realistic and rational policy and related strategy are surely issues to be raised.

What can “the strong” do? The recalcitrance of the world

So much for an attempt at scholarship. My concern here is with two things: how might the phrase enlighten us as to Trump himself, and how might it and the broader Athenian attitude expressed in the Dialogue apply to themes and their repercussions in current US policy, broader than simply the words and actions of one person?

Le style, c'est l'homme-même: the style is the man himself. While this actually comments on writing style, it may surely be applied more broadly, and with at least equal profit, to Donald Trump himself. Trump is often held to be a transactional type, looking for deals, and this is generally presented as a weakness in him as a statesman, leading to a focus on the immediate gain and the short-term deal without consideration as to how a series of these might add up. But a transactional approach in itself need not logically be short-term and immediate rather than long-term and broader in its focus. Even combined with strength, it could be “*win-win*”, permit generosity and concessions by the stronger, allow an easy wearing of one's superiority. But the darker side must also be seen: the phrase leads one to look for other of Trump's features: strength as domination, supplemented by a tendency to bully and humiliate others in order to diminish them, “winning” as largely zero-sum – and the need to claim a string of such victories, however minor or empty in reality: in real terms the need for a series of public confrontations and demands followed by a claimed win. There seems to be a need to require others to acknowledge subordination, to be public in their deference and in their gratitude for favours received. The setting out of changing, ill-defined complaints and objectives can confuse and distract the other side – what does he “really” want? What can and should we offer? What will be satisfactory and conclude the dispute? It offers many chances to claim the necessary victory, and many chances to go back to the trough for more – foreign policy as a protection racket. In the case of tariffs as an instrument of pressure, these are a gift that may keep on giving, a solution in search of and possibly applicable to multiple problems, a backing for insatiable demands.

The purely personal – including Trump's clear sense of grievance and desire for retribution (a politics of catharsis that obviously appeals to many of his

followers), and his style in wielding “strength” – need not transfer seamlessly and easily into the broader context of political action, but one might reasonably expect some influence. This becomes more likely if we find, as seems to be the case here, a broader trend among the Trump administration’s appointees, its Congressional and other supporters, and their public statements. Indeed, were Donald Trump to vanish tomorrow, his legacy would continue, including in the (undoubtedly somewhat altered) subservient character of the Republican Party. So long as that continues in a roughly MAGA atmosphere, the implications for the US – both at home and abroad – will continue to be felt.

Popular commentary has noted what could be similar themes and styles among some of Trump’s acolytes, hangers-on and appointees. A comparison to private-equity take-overs – “move fast and break things” – is one element here, as is the relative lack of concern for consequences possible in private companies without strong public or shareholder oversight. Such entrepreneurs rely on their ability to repair unnecessary or excessive damage contrary to their intentions, fast enough to not harm their interests. At home, the steamroller of executive orders and resistance to court challenges, and the targeting and justifications of measures directed against the unpopular proceed apace, though reaction may be mounting. Given GOP control of Congress and Trump’s control over the GOP, there is much reason to find parallels here. Distain for and dismissal of the concerns of others – including the leaders of other states – is readily found in Trump’s own comments but also in those of others and in the actions of his administration.

But in the wider world, where the consequences reach beyond a single firm and beyond a single state, such parallels are highly deficient. They are beyond the simple control of a new management. *And the world is recalcitrant.*¹¹ It is not obliged to get caught up in clever legalisms, “constitutional” wordplay and spin. It is not obliged to agree, or even to respond as one might expect – the old adage that the enemy also gets a vote in your plans applies here, too. Ice melts when the temperature rises; it does not care what you say or think. Worse, insult countries and hurt their interests, and the costs accumulate. As the French song goes, “*Cet animal est très méchant. Quand on l’attaque il se défend.*” This animal is very naughty – when you attack it, it defends itself.

So we find that one blinding-clear consequence of the latest US foreign moves is a sweeping loss of trust and credibility – so much changes so fast and so contrary to the existing order among the West that others are left stunned, shaken, and are starting to look at the possibility of having to reorient their relationships away from an – albeit at times uneasy – reliance on the US. Even if these efforts fail, even if some US concerns are manifestly legitimate, the method of proceeding will leave scars slow, if ever, to heal; the cost will be greater than necessary for likely real gains, and some of the changes resulting will be impossible to undo.

All this points to a further and highly problematic issue: what happens when some are not cowed, when they must be approached as equals who can thwart one's efforts, or if objectives are complex and difficult to achieve by their very nature, and if a mere signature on an *ukase* is insufficient to compel obedience? What if results do not match intentions? *What happens when the world gets tired of this?* What will the response be – a doubling down? A judicious reappraisal? An ignominious retreat with a desperate search for some fig-leaf “victory” to assuage wounded pride and the hopes of the folks back home (a combination of Potemkin village and “the Great and Powerful Oz”)? How much of the realities of international diplomacy can the Trump administration tolerate, withstand or overcome, and with what consequences?

Is there a Grand Design – or a design at all?

The Dialogue is taken by some as marking a major shift in Athenian policy. In all the various recent US moves, is there some sense of an overall design, or at least of a broad guiding intent? Is it all mere opportunism in the pursuit of individual projects? Some might claim to find traces within *Project 2025*. We might here suggest an alternative strategy: an à la carte menu– pick the combination you think Trump and his administration are pursuing. Here are some.

1. Broad or at time specific concerns possibly legitimate – that could be pursued, but with this seemingly done in a recklessly abrasive way. The Panama Canal question is one of these. The implications of easing Arctic passage are another, but surely Greenland's defence issues are open to easier revision, as are Canada's. Crucial minerals in both areas are subject to the same proviso. NATO burden-sharing

is a decades-long issue, but is it profitable to seemingly call into question the very existence of the alliance? Specific trade irritants may exist, but tariffs as a blunt, all-purpose instrument for a variety of ill-articulated, almost whimsical objectives?

2. This seems to be part of a general, convulsive effort to “restore” America at home and abroad, akin to similar efforts by other states in history to beat back (rather than adapt to) the forces of time and change. At home, it seems to reflect the accumulation of “culture war” efforts, a carefully nurtured discontent, a disregard (even at times an embracing) of known pathologies in US society and politics. Abroad, it may reflect nostalgia for a period of American dominance, the basis for which has now irretrievably altered. American strength might be increased, but not on the basis of nostalgia and, in current conditions and under the current approach, not without great self-imposed costs. Much of the damage being done will not be easily reversed, and some will not be reversed at all.
3. Is there an urge for the completion of Manifest Destiny over North America? (For obvious reasons, Mexico would be exempt, at best allocated a subordinate but distinct status.) Annexing Canada makes a degree of disembodied economic sense, especially in light of Trump’s concern to “reshore” American manufacturing. Absorbing the Canadian auto industry would, in this light, be an obvious and rational objective. Better access to desired minerals and unimpeded policy control regarding the Arctic would also follow. From a Canadian perspective, however, grounded in the realities of its history from the Anglo-French rivalry in North America onward, and in its current politico-cultural differences with the direction of the US over the last decades, such a move would require a complete repudiation of its past and its present, and even a more moderate prospect of tighter economic integration now would be regarded as a poisoned chalice. Dismiss “51st state” jibes as mere fun, but

they are deeply harmful to the relationship, whatever the outcome. A similar light-hearted treatment will not help with other countries.

In all of this, the greatest unknown: where are we going? Is there a larger vision (divorced or not from reality or a real ability to realize it) or merely a weird drift? Are we heading, intentionally or not, for a more brutal world of two or three Great Powers with their sphere of influence politics and competitions without even a patina of rules other than the Dialogue's? Where would this leave Eurasia (Russia with or separated from its growing Chinese affiliation?)? What, in this case, of Europe and NATO (with or without Ukraine as either an independent or a Russian satellite)? Muscling Ukraine to acquire minerals or Russian *talking* that does not surrender any of its goals are scarcely reassuring. What of the Middle East – will a free hand for Netanyahu or bizarre designs on Gaza (more realistically, an attempt to get Arab buy-in for fear of worse?) really work? Will the US simultaneously pursue confrontation with Iran in a grand effort to recast the entire map of Middle East politics? Is a new Monroe Doctrine intended for South America, and will South America put up with it? How do Japan, Korea and Taiwan figure in US thinking? What of India, Africa, Southeast Asia and Australasia?

These three broad menu segments might yet combine, especially around the “restoration” theme. However, success there would require a much finer, more aware and self-aware touch, and greater willingness for internal, forward-looking adaptation than seems to be desired. A domestic vision seemingly dominated by a period of nineteenth century Robber Barons is scarcely encouraging. Externally, the resolution of specific grievances – real, legitimate or not – might be possible, but would any victories be Pyrrhic in nature and the attendant damage to broader US relations hard or impossible to repair? Beyond these three, none of this seems clear, none really articulated, much less clearly realizable as coherent and cohesive US objectives. Only the great fears of the results emerge.

A final thought

The attack on Melos was followed by the disastrous Sicilian expedition. *Hubris* is followed by *nemesis*.

Postscript

This was written mainly before 2 April 2025. On reflection, I paid too much respect to Trump and his administration by attributing even a modicum of rationality to him and it. I did not allow sufficiently for the force of sheer malign idiocy. Even the Dialogue cannot beat that. Or is this the final step in the Dialogue, an attempt to terrorize everyone into submission? The two are not mutually exclusive.

ENDNOTES

1. Thucydides (translated and introduced by Rex Warner), *The Peloponnesian War*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Classics, 1954. The text of the Dialogue is found in Book Five, Chapter 7, pp. 358-366.
2. Ibid., p. 360.
3. Kagan discusses the Melian Dialogue specifically in the third volume of his more general history of the Peloponnesian War. Donald Kagan, *The Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981, pp.147- 153.
4. Kagan notes the “frank immorality” (p. 149) of the Athenian arguments, though not necessarily endorsing the conclusion that these marked the decline of Athens’ claim for any legitimacy of its empire and its actions beyond “necessity.”
5. Daniel Garst, “Thucydides and Neorealism,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 33, (1989), pp. 3-27. Reading Garst and Thucydides in conjunction with Ikenberry’s study of post-war institution-building is an educational experience. Putting Ikenberry’s arguments through a negative spin helps us to appreciate both the nature of successful institution-building and how institutions might unravel. G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars*, Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2001.
6. Laurie M. Johnson, *Thucydides, Hobbes, and the Interpretation of Realism*, DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993, esp. pp. 124-140.
7. James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstitutions of Language, Character, and Community*, Chicago, Ill.: University

of Chicago Press, 1984, pp. 59-92. The specific discussion of the Dialogue is especially on pp. 76-80, quoted pp. 78, 79.

8. Hans. J. Morgenthau (brief edition, revised by Kenneth W. Thompson), *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, Inc. p. 13.
9. J. David Singer and Melvin Small, "Alliance Aggregation and the Onset of War, 1815-1945," in J. David Singer, *Models, Methods, and Progress in World Politics: A Peace Research Odyssey*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990, pp. 159-200.
10. Friedrich Kratochwil, "On the notion of 'interest' in international relations," *International Organization*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Winter 1982) pp. 1-30.
11. I borrow and adapt this from a comment by John A. Vasquez, "The Post-Positivist Debate: Reconstructing Scientific Enquiry and International Relations Theory After Enlightenment's Fall," in Ken Booth and Steve Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theory Today*, University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, pp. 225-226.