Amidst the poetry and persuasive rhetoric of Ancient Greece, Thucydides drew upon the new methods of social science when he wrote *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. The *History*, perhaps the first instance of prose literature in Ancient Greece, endeavors to objectively record the events of a war which Thucydides says “was the greatest disturbance in the history of the Hellenes, affecting also a large part of the non-Hellenic world, and indeed . . . the whole of mankind” (1.1). Modern historians debate whether or not Thucydides’ work can be classified as a history, despite the fact that the ancient historian states he “made it a principle . . . [not] to be guided by [his] own general impressions” (1.22). However, it is clear that in many instances Thucydides allowed his own life experiences and opinions to color his interpretation of the war that toppled the supremacy of Athens.

On top of rejecting the contemporary modes through which literature was produced in Ancient Greece, Thucydides also rejects the primary method which ancient Athenians used to preserve history—myth, chronicle, and legend. Thucydides declares, “One cannot rely on every detail which has come down to us by way of tradition” (1.20). He even goes so far as to denounce the poets and prose chroniclers of the time by stating that they “are less interested in telling the truth than in catching the attention of their public” (1.21). It is important to recognize how radically Thucydides’ method of recording historical events differs from the historical literature of the time.

Despite the originality of Thucydides’ prose, the reader must be wary of his work. When discussing his treatment of the speeches found in the *History*,
Thucydides states,

I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches. . . so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion was called for by each situation. (1.22)

How are we, as the reader, able to differentiate between the work of Thucydides and the work of these great leaders in the text? Unfortunately, as the only text detailing the events of the Peloponnesian War, the modern reader must trust the validity of Thucydides’ literature in order to form an impression of the period. The modern reader has no conception of whether Thucydides’ sources are Athenian, Spartan, or neutral, and must trust him when he states that he attempted to find the middle ground among his witnesses.

Despite feigning objectivity, the text clearly reveals Thucydides’ own opinions. Throughout the text, he highlights various points of debate during the Peloponnesian War. He focuses on the national character of the Spartans and the Athenians. In fact, during his representation of ‘The Debate at Sparta and Declaration of War’ the speakers spend more time describing each population’s nature than they do deciding whether or not to actually go to war. If we are to believe that Thucydides selectively reported the speeches in order to reflect what he believed should have been said, then we can infer that the historian intended to emphasize the national differences of the two warring factions.

In the debate, the Spartans describe the differences between themselves and their enemies. The Corinthians, speaking to the Spartans, state:

An Athenian is always an innovator, quick to form a resolution and quick at
carrying it out. You, on the other hand, are good at keeping things as they are; you never originate an idea, and your action tends to stop short of its aim. (1.70)

The list goes on and on:

While you’re hanging back, they never hesitate; while you stay at home, they are always abroad . . . of them alone it may be said that they possess a thing almost as soon as they have begun to desire it, so quickly with them does action follow upon decision. (1.70)

In contrast, the Athenian opinion of the Spartans is quite different. When the Melians state that they are relying upon the Spartans to save them from enslavement, the Athenians scoff that “the Spartans are most conspicuous for believing that what they like doing is honorable and what suits their interests is just” (5.105). The Athenians emphasize the Spartan’s careful decision making as if they are failing their allies. The reader cannot ignore the repeated derision exhibited by the Athenians toward the Spartan strategy. Considering the result of the war, Thucydides may be expressing a frustration with the Athenians rash decisions to engage in battle. Conversely, he shows the strengths of the enemy and the hamartia of the Athenians.

The text exposes Thucydides’ negative opinion of the democratic system the Athenians were famous for. For example, the Mytilenian Debate concerns the Athenian decision whether or not to destroy the people of Mytilene, who had revolted against the Athenian empire. After a particularly thrilling speech by Cleon in favor of Mytilene’s complete destruction, the Athenians decide to send a trireme to kill the men and enslave all of the women and children. How-
ever, Thucydides writes that the next day “there was a sudden change of feeling and people began to think how cruel and how unprecedented such a decision was” (3.36). Though trireme was already on its way to Mytilene, the Athenians changed their minds. Cleon, then exclaims in utter frustration “this is the worst thing—to pass measures and then not to abide by them” (3.37) and that the Athenians are “regular speech-goers . . . more like an audience sitting at the feet of a professional lecturer than a parliament discussing matters of the state” (3.38). One can assume from the prevalence of such examples that Thucydides is perturbed by the fickle nature of his fellow citizens.

In another instance, Thucydides recounts the atmosphere of Athens following a forty-day pillage by the Peloponnese in Attica. Much discouraged by the devastation as well as the outbreak of the plague, the Athenians turn on Pericles, whom they had praised as a master orator at the start of the war. Pericles responds by stating “you took my advice when you were still untouched by misfortune, and repented of your action when things went badly with you; it is because your own resolution is weak that my policy appears to you to be mistaken” (2.61). It is important to remember that Thucydides wrote *The History of the Peloponnesian War* many years after the conclusion of the event itself. The destruction of the Athenian empire as a result must be taken into consideration as a factor that influenced Thucydides in his recollection of these events. Living with the result of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides is, in retrospect, able to pinpoint what he perceives to be the cause of the Athenian defeat.

For the modern reader, *The History* brings to mind the state of modern politics. Americans are often swayed by non-factual influences in modern politics, like the average Athenian who “[relies] not so much on the facts which [they] see with [their] own eyes as on what [they] have heard about them in some clever piece of verbal criticism” (3.38). In addition, like Thucydides’ His-
tory, modern political commentary is extremely colored by the personal ideology of the writer. The text encourages the modern American to seek a more active and informed role in their government in order to avoid devastation like that which occurred as the Athenians fought not for their best interests, but for their self-interests.

The Peloponnesian War irreparably changed Thucydides’ ideology, opinions and frame of mind, as it did for so many other Athenians; despite this fact, Thucydides achieved the ultimate goal of his History. He states in his Introduction “[my] work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last for ever” (1.22). It is clear by the extent that Thucydides’ History resonates with modern readers that he reached his goal of impacting—forever—the world’s perspective of the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides states that it is not history that repeats itself, but humans (1.22). Perhaps the study of his History of the Peloponnesian War will help the modern reader to learn from the vices of the Athenians and Spartans when they engaged in that fateful struggle for power and supremacy in ancient times. Thucydides’ words have resonance beyond his lifetime and will continue to impact readers for centuries to come.