

The Peloponnesian War – Athens and Sparta in Savage Conflict 431-404 BC - by Donald Kagan.
Harper Collins 2003.

Professor Donald Kagan's four volume history of the Peloponnesian War is widely acknowledged as being one of the most outstanding modern analyses of a most dramatic period in ancient history. The Peloponnesian War, a one volume version of a more popular bent, is a dramatic and vivid narrative, recounting in minute detail the events that unfolded over the course of three fateful decades, during which time ghastly atrocities were perpetrated, land, property and territory was wantonly laid waste, and many thousands of lives were lost.

The Peloponnesian War was in essence a conflict between the Athenian Empire and the fearless state of Sparta for hegemony in the north eastern Mediterranean during the 5th century BCE. It pitted the naval brilliance of the Athenians against the almost suicidal courage of the Spartan army, ameliorated by the subsidiary forces of their respective allies. During the course of the war, great men and even greater rogues bestrode the international stage, like Pericles, the matchless Athenian statesman, and Alcibiades, the turncoat who played off everyone against the other to his own advantage.

Reading Kagan's account one is constantly struck by the way this ancient piece of history echoes into our own time: of the instability and brutality of the Balkan region, the hubris of Empire, the inexorable roll towards conflict against the widely held better judgements of the many, the subversion of democracy and the unique brutality that human beings perpetrate on each other.

This is a book for all those who love history, as well as anyone who seeks to gain further proof of that timeless truth – that the only lesson that can be learned from history is that no one ever learns any lessons from history.

Rabbi Dr hCarles H Middleburgh