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Professor Else, how do you respond to people who say that studies of the Greeks and Romans or of the ancient Near East are not very relevant to contemporary problems—that the world has changed too much?

I try to point out the dangers of such an overgeneralization. Certainly much has changed in the modern world, and *is* changing rapidly—particularly in technology, communications, weaponry, the physical and biological sciences, the organization of life. But man himself has not changed much, if at all; human nature, human needs, human aspirations, are very much what they were 3,000 years ago. Of course the study of history and philosophy and literature has to do with examining this very issue of what is permanent and constant in human affairs, compared with what is more temporary, variable, accidental, cyclical, or in other ways less constant. The study of other civilizations, especially such complex and sophisticated ones as the Athenian democracy and the Roman Republic, can provide a perspective on such questions.

You would place more emphasis on study of the ancient world than on, say, the Renaissance?

Yes, at this particular moment in time. The study of the Renaissance is enormously fruitful and worthwhile from practically every point of view. However, I think that the problems faced by the Athenian democracy in the fifth century B.C. are more closely similar to the problems confronting America today. Athens was a democracy and a superpower at a time when her people were simultaneously experiencing a collapse in their traditional scheme of moral values. I

think we are in a similar situation—a democratic superpower undergoing a breakdown in our traditional scheme of values.

By traditional American moral values, do you mean Christian values?

Yes, belief in the Christian theology and ethic and a subspecies of it, the Puritan ethic. I'm speaking here of how most Americans behave—of what might be called values-in-action—as opposed to what they might publicly profess. Athens also, in the fifth century B.C., saw a spectacular decline of faith in traditional values and a widespread rise in experimentation, in radical re-examination of values, in reasoning—the active kind of reasoning which pokes its nose into everything, including the sacred cows and holy dogmas of society. The relativism, skepticism, subjectivism, nihilism, immoralism engaged in by some aristocratic or upper-middle-class Athenian youngsters frightened and infuriated the older generation. We see a lot of that today in America. Leisure, combined with a desire to think seriously about society, is as explosive a mixture today as it was twenty-five centuries ago. Mind you, loss of religious faith or belief in traditional *mores* is not an unheard-of thing in history, but it has not happened often to a self-governing people in a conspicuous position of world leadership.

Would you say that the function of the Center here is to promote the dissemination of that kind of historical perspective?

No, the purpose of the Center is really much broader than that. We want to break down some of the



of thought itself. A person who grapples with the mysteries of non-correspondence between two different languages is actually coming to grips with basic problems in logic, semantics, analytic philosophy, rhetoric. It doesn't matter a great deal whether the student is fully conscious of that—whether he is familiar with and can define those subjects; he is into them—struggling with them—whether he realizes it or not. The net result, provided he goes into the other language deeply enough, is that the experience changes his perceptions—perceptions of his own language *and* of other things. The old idea that the study of Latin and Greek helps one to know English better is true enough, but most people think that is merely because many English words are derived from or borrowed from those languages. Unless they have personally experienced the process of translating from a foreign language on a fairly sophisticated level, the more subtle benefits of such work are not apparent to them. The basic point here applies to all subjects: familiarity with a subject is not necessarily knowledge of it, and knowledge of it is not necessarily understanding of it; the differences might be called degrees of insight.

Support for the idea of Americans' learning foreign languages, including those spoken in some of the less developed countries, doesn't seem very strong, does it?

No, and that is unfortunate, because the best means of reaching other people who live on this planet is through their own language, or at least through a third language which the American and the other people may have in common. Dealing with another person in his own language sharpens one's awareness of how he thinks, of how he feels about things. We are not getting through to most of the human beings on earth, and we will not do so until Americans stop relying on the principle that it is up to these stupid foreigners to learn English. This lack of what I call spiritual contact with other peoples is a very serious problem.

Were the Athenians more sophisticated about this than we are?

I think they were more sophisticated in certain ways having to do with uses of language, and with relations between people, yes.

What about the internal workings of their political

system? Did their policy debates in the Voter Assemblies function to disclose basic issues better than our system does?

I think there was something to the face-to-face contacts the Assemblies provided the leaders and the voters. The Athenian political system was an educational system, in a sense. The ordinary man might not be a leading politician, but he held positions on various sorts of planning boards and administrative committees. At various levels, in various ways, ordinary Athenian citizens participated in governmental functions to a much greater extent than the ordinary American citizen does. But it would be wrong to characterize the ordinary Athenians as a group of supersophisticates. Remember that they were naive enough to be talked into some unwise foreign ventures, such as the Sicilian expedition. That touches on the question of the moral uses of power, you see.

Questions concerning the moral uses of power, or of what is moral behavior in either the world arena or the domestic arena, seem a fuzzy area in American political theory, do they not?

Well, you see, moral behavior has traditionally been thought of here in America in the private and individual sense, rather than in a political sense. But morals and politics are intimately related. That's a Greek idea. Morality is the individual side of politics, politics is the public side of morality; the two things are the same thing with different foci. The relationship deserves very careful examination—much more than it has been getting in modern scholarship.

Do you rank Thucydides as one of the significant thinkers in this area?

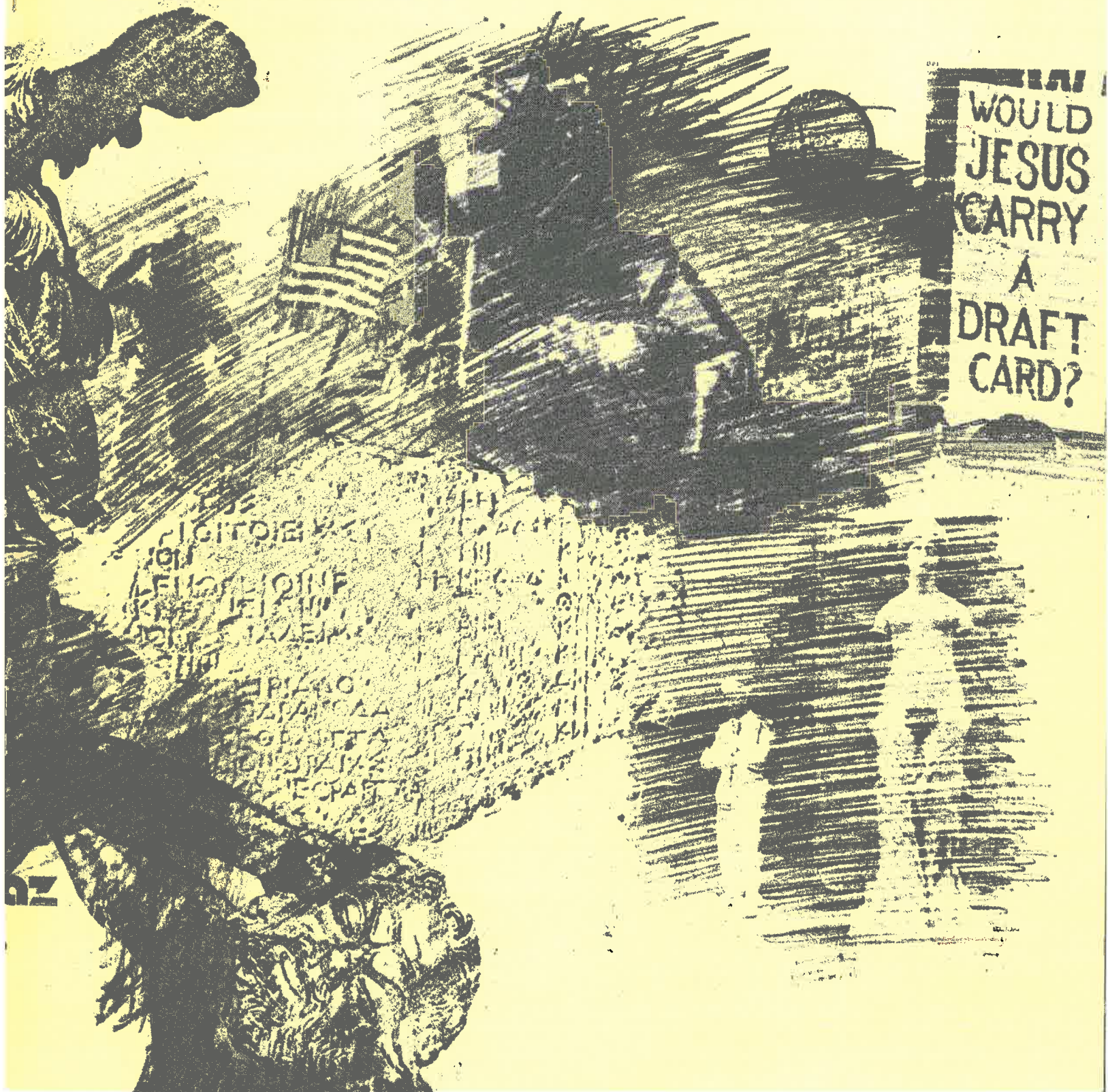
Oh yes. Unquestionably. And, mind you, he was not a professional scholar but a man of affairs, an activist—what the Greeks called a 'practical' man. He was an Athenian aristocrat and general, condemned for political reasons to sit out the Peloponnesian War. So he began to study, analyze, and record its progress. The war began in 431 and continued for 27 years, except for a few brief armistices. In 423, when Thucydides was 32 years old, he was relieved of his command and exiled from Athens. That's when he decided to study and write about the conflict. His education, his experience, his situation, allowed him to record the fall of the Athenian empire—the cam-

nations, before they decided on a course of action. The quality, the probity, of their questions has not been surpassed in the course of human affairs over the last 2,500 years.

The Spartan general, Brasidas, seemed to be an excellent statesman.

Yes, such a constant and wily reviewing of ends and means, ends and means. In so many instances he

gained the support of uncommitted nation-states without doing battle with them—merely by offering them such good terms that they could not afford to refuse. Those conquests cost the Peloponnesians no men and brought in more money and ships. It was Brasidas' deal with the Amphipolitans that cost Thucydides his command. Yet Thucydides seems to treat Brasidas fairly in his *History*; no bitterness, no rancor, just a calm and objective description of how Brasidas outwitted the Athenian generals, time after







former ally, and in spite of her incomparably greater wealth, freedom, and technical know-how, she was defeated and never became a world power again, except for one brief period a generation later. The republic is, of course, Athens between 480 and 380 B.C.

But what if someone in the class objected that historical analogies are unverifiable, subjective, specious, dangerous, fraught with all kinds of possibilities for sophistry or casuistry?

Did I speak of an analogy? Did I mention two republics? But seriously, I would agree with him. I would remind him that he is describing the dangers common to all thought. On that particular analogy, I would say that he need not believe that America will share the fate of Athens; I don't think it will either. In any analogy, the details are not the same; thus it would be unreasonable to assert that such constructs have predictive power. Similarly, it would be absurd to think that we can find the solutions to our current problems in the history books, ancient or modern. However, in this paralleling of Athens and America, I think our troubles are similar or analogous enough, as Thucydides puts it, to allow the experiences of the

Athenians and Peloponnesians to be used as one means—one important means—of working our way toward a better understanding of our situation. As I said, we Americans suffer from cultural and historical myopia, and much of the responsibility for that must rest with the scholars and teachers in our colleges and universities. Under present conditions, nothing better is likely to happen unless outstanding people in both ancient and modern studies join in some productive, collaborative enterprises. That's what we're up to here; that's what we're trying to stimulate. Of course it's an uphill fight, because many people who are in a position to contribute to or participate in this effort have not had much experience with the Classics and therefore tend not to perceive the value of such activities. But that is not true of all of them; some can stand back and look at our society and our universities and move toward our position intuitively.

You're a revolutionist.

Yes, in a quiet way. Education itself is a revolutionary process, you know. There is no telling where it will end once you embark on it. But we *are* embarked on it—we and the rest of the world. So I think we should open up the focus.

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