

LAWRENCE VAN HORN

PROFESSOR KOEPPEN: RIGHT OR WRONG?

*The author of other Civil War period studies published previously, Mr. Van Horn now turns his attention to the argument advanced by Professor Koep-
pen of Franklin and Marshall College.*

Adolphus Ludwig Koeppen was a native of Denmark, a Greek by virtue of long residence in Aegina and the Peiraeus and a consuming enthusiasm for Greek history and archaeology, and an American by virtue of naturalization. A fluent speaker in half a dozen languages, ancient and modern, he was a teacher by profession, a lecturer, a writer, a member of the royal court of Greece, and a spectator at first hand of the inner diplomatic and political history of the Balkan struggles of the early and middle nineteenth century.¹

Professor Koeppen was on the faculty of Franklin and Marshall College from 1853 to 1861 as professor history, aesthetics, and German literature. His idea that the American Civil War would not have broken out if Thucydides had been studied was stated to Robert Nevin (a Franklin and Marshall student and son of faculty member Dr. John W. Nevin) in a letter from Dresden, Germany dated May 21, 1863:

What do you say to this idea of mine: that if all our great leading statesmen, both in South and North, had made a thorough study — reflective and vivifying — of Thucydides, and applying the condition of Greece (Athens and Sparta) in 430 Before Christ to that of the United States (North and South) in 1860 after Christ — the civil war would not have broken out, means found anyhow to impede and hinder the decline of our glorious Republic! This argument brought forth from the platform by the soul stirring eloquence of a Henry Clay, would no doubt have been of the happiest effect, and have crushed the whinings of a Schurz or a Henry Beecher, who were madly stirring the embers to a raging conflagration. Am I right or wrong? Tell me in your next. — At all events, when retired to

private life and the seclusion of the study, take up Thucydides, either the original or the version of Rev. Henry Dale, and you will be astonished to find North and South on every page, and a world of ideas will open upon you.²

“Wrong,” is my answer to Professor Koeppen. Even if Thucydides had been studied and a lesson of the futility of civil war nationally proclaimed, the War Between the States would still have occurred. Why? The answer has been given by Thucydides himself:

But with regard to the facts of what was done in the war, I did not presume to state them on hearsay from any chance informant, nor as I thought probable myself: but those at which I was personally present, and when informed by others only after investigating them accurately in every particular, as far as possible. And it was with labour that they were ascertained; because those who were present in the several affairs did not give the same account of the same things, but as each was well inclined to either party, or remembered [the circumstances]. Now, for hearing it recited, perhaps the unfabulous character of my work will appear less agreeable: but as many as shall wish to see the truth of what both **has** happened, and **will** hereafter happen again, according to human nature — the same or pretty nearly so — for such to think it useful will be sufficient. And it is composed as a possession for ever, rather than as a prize-task to listen to at the moment.³

The most objective explanation of Thucydides' phrase, — the truth of what both **has** happened, and **will** hereafter happen again, according to human — the same or pretty nearly so — is that a society will seek to protect itself when it perceives danger from another society.

Thucydides illustrates this phenomenon vividly in the **Melian Dialogue**, the account of the conversation between representatives of Athens and those of the island of Melos. The Melians had the choice of giving up their government or fighting powerful Athens. They did not accept the Athenian demand to submit and live; they fought and died.

The Athenians thought that to preserve their power over their allies (satellite cities under the rule of Athens) all adjacent city states had to render control. In the **Melian Dialogue**, the Athenian representative says “. . . what is right is estimated by equality of power to compel . . .,”⁴ “. . . and of men we know as a certainty, that in obedience to an irresistible instinct, they always maintain dominion where ever they are stronger.”⁵

To the Athenians it was right that the strong should rule over the weak; but to the Melians it was right that their society be left free to govern itself.

Professor Koeppen although enthusiastic was nevertheless limited in his outlook if he thought that even hard reflection and proclamation on the futility of civil war would have been sufficient to prevent the Ameri-

can Civil War. Again why? For the societies involved, compromise left the picture when survival entered.

For Professor Koeppen's analogy of the North and South to Athens and Sparta let us look to a comparison of the Southerners with the Lacedaemonians (Spartans). Just as the South interpreted a Lincoln victory in the Presidential race of 1860 as an irreconcilable threat to its way of life so the Lacedaemonians regarded Athenian aid to the Corcyraeans as a treaty-breaking step toward war. The Lacedaemonians fought because they were afraid to have Athenian political and economic power increase any farther; the Southerners fought because they were afraid that the increasing political power of the North would direct the country. The fact that both Spartan and Southern leaders were probably right in their prediction of the expanding course of the opposition is not important as understanding that both made the consequence of the opposition's expansion a question of their own survival.

To the South, survival meant a continuation of the status quo power distribution in government which was based on a presupposed sectional balance. If not in the Union, why not out of it? Sentiment like this and its consequent action made the situation one of survival to the North. The Southern notion of governmental separation shattered the great dream that an ever growing America could prove workable the experiment set in motion by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The Northern view was survival of the United States.

A great Greek civil war had been fought and a meaningful history written. Yet this legacy did not prevent the War Between the States. Does the legacy of wars in the past leave us today with the hopelessness of generalization that armed conflict is unavoidable? Not necessarily. Professor Koeppen is right in his assumption that man is capable of preventing war.

Man can have a prosperous and peaceful future if thinking men the world over rise to the occasion of reciprocal understanding — ever mindful that sustained hostile action of any society has its origin in a collective feeling that “. . . we are standing up in righteous cause against unjust opponents.”⁶

¹ H. M. J. Klein and Richard D. Atlick, **Professor Koeppen**. Lancaster: Commercial Printing House, 1938, p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, p. 55.

³ Thucydides I, 22, p. 14 of Dale. The brackets and bold face are Dale's.

⁴ Thucydides V, 89, p. 368.

⁵ *Ibid.* 105, p. 372.

⁶ *Ibid.* 104, p. 371.