In 2005, Joseph Lane Jr remarked: ‘Whenever we get a new war, we get a new Thucydides.’ The fact that scholars and policymakers have turned to the History in response to the two world wars, the Cold War, the Gulf War, the more recent Iraq War and the ‘war on terror’ demonstrates the extent to which Thucydides functions as a mirror for society during hard times. But if wartime has commonly triggered a return to Thucydides, it has not done so without controversy. As evidenced by the disagreement between Kissinger and Reagan over the analogy between the Peloponnesian War and Cold War and the critical reactions to Victor Hanson’s and Donald Kagan’s attempts to apprehend current wars in the Middle East through the lens of Thucydides, the History has been a site of active contestation.

This paper focuses on a recurring theme in the 20th and 21st century wartime reception of Thucydides, namely the challenge of democratic survival in a hostile world. I situate Hanson’s and Kagan’s readings of Thucydides within this long-standing, and unabashedly partisan, conversation over ‘how democracies perish’ in order to consider two questions: What judgments about democracy and its discontents are implicated in their interpretive claims about Thucydides? And how should we evaluate these assessments and the political responses enacted by their readings?