

Kaplan, Robert D. Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos. New York: Vintage Books, 2003.

Jerome Mellon

Volume 24, numéro 1, summer 2004

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs24_1br02

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Mellon, J. (2004). Compte rendu de [Kaplan, Robert D. Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos. New York: Vintage Books, 2003.] *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 24(1), 140–141.

Book Reviews

Kaplan, Robert D. *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos*. New York: Vintage Books, 2003.

Recent events have led political and military leaders to make tough and sometimes drastic decisions, whether it be in response to the 11 September 2001 attacks, or in the case of the war against Iraq. As these decisions inevitably will greatly impact on our lives and our future, it is of vital importance that these decisions be thoroughly examined and analyzed before being made. In *Warrior Politics*, author and journalist Robert Kaplan suggests that history is full of lessons that our leaders would be wise to reflect upon before making such decisions.

In the early pages of his essay he announces his main theory: "Ancient history, as I will demonstrate, is the surest guide to what we are likely to face in the early decades of the twenty-first century." (p.14) He then begins a journey into the works of several of history's greatest political and military thinkers, from Sun-Tzu to Churchill to Homer, reporting on the classics and the views of contemporary scholars, integrating them into a story that he tells the reader in his own journalistic way.

Warrior Politics is a dense essay on what history can teach us through the writings of others, with perhaps the dual objectives of preventing us from reinventing the wheel and of saving us from repeating mistakes that have already been made. While telling his story, Kaplan maintains the reader's attention by drawing a multitude of comparisons between ancient and contemporary history. For example, Kaplan draws very interesting parallels between the Second Punic War told by Livy in *The War with Hannibal*, and the Second World War of 1939-45, as both conflicts engulfed much of what was considered the whole world, as well as between the Peloponnesian War, chronicled by Thucydides, and the Cold War. (pp. 32 and 47) Kaplan's discussion also seems to apply with surprising acuity to the war in Iraq when he writes about the expansion of the American *imperium* (p. 148) or about soldiers - with the discipline and professionalism which that word implies in the West - trained to fight other soldiers, but actually facing less predictable "warriors" like the insurgents in Iraq. (p. 118) Finally, some other parts of his analysis relate with great accuracy to the events of 11 September 2001, which took place after he wrote the book, especially when he mentions how future war may become more savage, involving low-tech actions to divert high-tech US forces, (p. 128) or when he reminds the Americans that the vast oceans which had given them the protection necessary to advance universalist principles is no longer protecting them. (p. 102)

Besides the historical aspect of it, Kaplan's book is also an excellent work of *Realpolitik*, that is politics based on practical and material factors rather than on theoretical or ethical objectives. The pagan ethos mentioned in the subtitle of his book is not clearly defined in Kaplan's essay - the term is used less than ten times - but permeates throughout his entire discussion. His argument is that contemporary leaders should free themselves from tight

and restrictive Judeo-Christian principles and instead turn to writers and thinkers of pagan antiquity.

That so-called concept of pagan ethos or pragmatism leads Kaplan to often praise a Machiavellian vision of politics where leaders must be willing to get their hands dirty and sacrifice moralism to achieve results, and not simply show good intentions. In addition to Machiavelli, Sun-Tzu seems to be a good guide toward reaching that pagan ethos, as Kaplan agrees with the Chinese thinker that every manner of deceit is acceptable if it can prevent a greater evil like war. Perhaps greater subtlety in his discussion of Machiavelli and Sun-Tzu philosophies would have enhanced the credibility of his work.

Although Kaplan's journey into philosophy, history, and politics is a fascinating one, the story he writes is incredibly dense and leaves little room for deeper debates. This could perhaps be explained by his journalistic experience in writing rather condensed stories, or by the fact that Kaplan never really intended to provide more than a well-documented but short introduction to classic theories and essential readings. In addition, one could easily criticize the fact that when selecting the books and authors he would write about, Kaplan deliberately left aside some major names like Tocqueville or Locke.

Warrior Politics remains a thought-provoking book that gives a much-needed historical perspective to the current international situation. It also introduces the reader to authors, books, and concepts that should be known and understood by anyone with an interest in international politics. With *Warrior Politics*, Kaplan lends truth to Machiavelli's aphorism: "Anyone wishing to see what is to be must consider what has been: all the things of this world in every era have their counterparts in ancient times." (p. iii)

Jérôme Mellon, a Quebec lawyer, completed a Master of Arts degree in Intelligence and International Relations at the University of Salford in 2002, and is presently the editor of the internet-based Canadian Intelligence Resource Centre.