The Dangerous Qualities of Hope in Thucydides - Handout
Laurel Fulkerson, The Florida State University: lfulkerson@fsu.edu

1) First sentence of Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War 1.1.1: [Thucydides the Athenian wrote the history of the war fought by the Peloponnesians and the Athenians against one another,] beginning at the start of the war and expecting it to be great and more worthy of treatment than all that had preceded (ἀρξάμενος εὐθὺς καθισταμένου καὶ ἐλπίσας μέγαν τε ἔσεσθαι καὶ ἀξιολογώτατον τῶν προγεγενημένων).

2) Hesiod Works and Days 96-7: [Pandora opens the jar, and many evils fly out,] but Hope alone remained there, in its unbreakable home within the mouth of the jar (μούνη δ’ αὐτόθι Ἐλπὶς ἐν ἀρρήκτοισι δόμοισιν/ ἐνδὸν ἐμείνε πίθου ὑπὸ χείλεσιν).

3) Generalising statement about hope, Thuc. 4.108.4: Men are wont to entrust what they desire to unreflecting hope, and to push aside with sovereign reason what they do not want (εἰωθότες οἱ ἄνθρωποι οὗ μὲν ἐπιθυμοῦσιν ἐλπίδι ἀπερισκέπτῳ διδόναι, ὃ δὲ μὴ προσίενται λογισμῷ αὐτοκράτορι διωθεῖσθαι).

4) Corinthians on Athenians, Thuc. 1.70.3 and 7: daring beyond their resources, running dangers beyond their judgment, and of good hopes, even in dreadful circumstances (αὖθις δὲ οἱ καὶ παρὰ δύναμιν τολμηταὶ καὶ παρὰ γνώμην κινδυνευταὶ καὶ ἐν τοῖς δεινοῖς εὐέλπιδες•) But if it happens that they miss out on something they have tried, they hope again and fill out the loss. For with them alone are hoping and having the same thing when they have put their minds to it, on account of the swiftness with which they take in hand what they have decided (ἢν δ’ ἄρα του καὶ πείρᾳ σφαλῶσιν, ἄντελπισαντες ἄλλα ἐπλήρωσαν τὴν χρείαν• μόνοι γὰρ ἔχουσι τε ὁμοίως καὶ ἐλπίζουσι ἃ ἐπινοήσασι διά τὸ ταχέως τὴν ἐπιχείρησιν ποιεῖσθαι ὧν ἂν γνώσιν).

5a: Cleon’s speech, Thuc. 3.39.3: The Mytileneans became bold about the future and conceived hopes greater than their resources but less than their desires (γενόμενοι δὲ πρὸς τὸ μέλλον θρασεῖς καὶ ἐλπίσαντες μακρότερα μὲν τῆς δυνάμεως, ἐλάσσω δὲ τῆς βουλήσεως).

5b) Diodotus’ speech, Thuc. 3.45.1 and 5: But men are inspired by hope to run risks, and nobody has ever yet entered into a dreadful situation while convinced that he would not succeed (ὅμως δ’ ἡ Ἐλπὶς ἐπαιρόμενοι κινδυνευόμενοι, καὶ οὐδεὶς πω καταγνοὺς ἐκεύτου μὴ περιέσεσθαι τῷ ἐπιβουλεύματι ἢ έλθεν ἢ ἐς τὸ δεινὸν). Hope and desire are everywhere: desire leads, hope follows; desire makes a plan and hope makes the path of luck seem easy; these two emotions are extremely harmful (ὥ τε Ἐλπὶς καὶ ὁ ἔρως ἐπὶ παντὶ, ὁ μὲν ἣγούμενος, ἡ δ’ ἐφεπομένη, καὶ ὁ μὲν τὴν ἐπιβουλὴν ἐκφροντίζων ἢ δ’ τὴν εὐπορίαν τῆς τύχης ὑποτιθεῖσα πλεῖστα βλάπτουσι).

6) Melians and Athenians, Thuc. 5.102-3: for us, yielding without a fight is hopeless, but by acting, there might still be hope of standing upright (καὶ ἤμιν τὸ μὲν εἶξαι εὐθὺς ἄνέλπιστον, μετὰ δὲ τοῦ δρομένου ἔτι καὶ στῆναι Ἐλπὶς ὀρθῶς). Hope is a solace in dangerous situations, and for those who have further wherewithal. For if she harms, she still does not ruin. But for those who put it all on one throw, since she is by nature prodigal, only when disaster occurs
does she make her true nature known, and when she is known she leaves her victim no resources with which to guard against her in the future … [only fools] when the visible grounds of hope leave them in distress, take themselves to invisible ones – divination, oracles, and such things – which ruin men through hopes (Ἐλπὶς δὲ κινδύνῳ παραμύθιον οὖσα τοὺς μὲν ἀπὸ περιουσίας χρωμένους αὐτῇ, κἂν βλάψη, οὐ καθεῖλεν• τοῖς δὲ ἐς ἄπαν τὸ ὑπάρχον ἀναρριπτοῦσι δάπανος γὰρ φύσει ἁμα τὴ γεγονότα σφαλέντον καὶ ἐν ὅτω ἐπὶ φυλάξεται τις αὐτὴν γνωρισθεῖσαν οὐκ ἐλλείπει … ἐπειδὰν πιεζομένους αὐτοὺς ἐπιλίπωσιν αἱ φανεραὶ ἐλπίδες, ἐπὶ τὰς ἀφανεῖς καθίστανται, μαντικήν τε καὶ χρησμοὺς καὶ ὅσα τοιαῦτα μετ’ ἐλπίδων λυμαίνεται).

7a) Embarkation of Sicilian Expedition, Thuc. 6.30: [the men left] with hope and lamentations, (μετ’ ἐλπίδος τε ἅμα ἰόντες καὶ ὀλοφυρμῶν); they hope to conquer but worry that they may never return.

7b) Sicilian expedition was, Thuc. 6.31: the longest voyage from home to date and undertaken with the highest hopes for the future, as compared to their present resources (μέγιστος ἤδη διάπλους ἀπὸ τῆς οἰκείας καὶ ἐπὶ μεγίστῃ ἐλπίδι τῶν μελλόντων πρὸς τὰ ὑπάρχοντα ἐπεχειρήθη).

8a) various Athenian hopes in Sicily, Thuc 6.68: great hope of victory (μεγάλην τὴν ἐλπίδα τῆς νίκης ἔχειν); allies have no hope of safety unless they conquer, 6.69 (περὶ τῆς αὐτίκα ἀνελπιστοῦσον σοφηρίας); victory makes them hope for other allies, 6.71.2 (ὡς ἡπιοτιοίν μετὰ τὴν μάχην μάλλον σφῶν ὑπακούσεσθαι).

8b) Hopes of the Spartan Gylippus, sent to help the Syracusans, Thuc. 6.104: at first arrival, gives up hope of Sicily, but perhaps Italy? (τῆς μὲν Σικελίας οὐκέτι ἐλπίδα οὐδεμίαν εἶχεν ὁ Γύλιππος, τὴν δὲ Ἰταλίαν βουλόμενος περιποιῆσαι).

8c) Nicias loses hope, Thuc. 7.4: Gylippus arrives in Sicily, which Nicias interprets as making his chances on land hopeless (ὁρῶν τὰ ἐκ τῆς γῆς σφίσιν ἤδη, ἐπειδὴ Γύλιππος ἦκεν, ἀνελπιστότερα ὅντα); 7.8 Nicias sends messages home about being in a critical situation, ἐν δεινοῖς.

8d) Gylippus decides to engage in a sea battle, Thuc. 7.21.2: hoping to accomplish something worthwhile by the risk (ἐλπίζειν γὰρ ἀτ’ αὐτοῦ τι ἔργον ἄξιον τοῦ κινδύνου ἂς τὸν πόλεμον κατεργάσεσθαι). Syracusans full of hope, 7.25 (ἐν ἐλπίσιν) and encourage the hopes of their Sicilian compatriots (ἐν ἐλπίσιν εἰσὶ). Syracusan naval victory gives them the confident hope that are now much superior to the Athenians on the sea, 7.41 (καὶ τὴν ἐλπίδα ἢδη ἐξαρΰναν ἐίχον ταῖς μὲν ναοῖς καὶ πολύ κρείσσους ἔσεσθαι). Gylippus hopes even to storm the Athenian walls, 7.46 (ὡς ἐν ἐλπίδι ὅν καὶ τὰ τείχη τῶν Ἀθηναίων αἱρήσει βία).

8e) Athenians find situation hopeless, 7.47, (τὰ τε ἄλλα ὅτι ἀνελπιστά τοὺς ἀφαίνετο); Nicias thinks there is still hope, 7.48, (ἐλπίδος τι ἔτι παρεῖχε πονηρότερα τῶν σφετέρων ἔσεσθαι, ἣν καρτερῶσι προσκαθήμενοι).

8f) Nicias, Thuc. 7.61: encourages troops not to feel an expectation of fear that is like their sufferings (τὴν ἐλπίδα τοῦ φόβου ὁμοίαν ταῖς ξυμφοραῖς. Rather, they should hope for
fortune to take their side (τὸ τῆς τύχης κἂν μεθ’ ἡμῶν ἔλπίσαντες στήναι). Gylippus notes that those been deceived in their estimation of their abilities, against all expectation, therefore give way entirely, 7.66 (παρ’ ἔλπιδα τοῦ αὐχήματος σφαλλόμενοι καὶ παρὰ ἰσχῦν τῆς δυνάμεως ἐνδιδόασιν). Syracusans have had their hopes doubled, by defeating the strongest, and, for the most part, the greatest hope inspires in men the greatest zeal for their endeavors, 7.67 τὸ κρατίστος εἶναι εἰ τοὺς κρατίστους ἐνικήσαμεν, διπλασία ἐκάστου ἢ ἔλπις• τὰ δὲ πολλὰ πρὸς τὰς ἐπιχειρήσεις ἢ μεγίστη ἔλπις μεγίστην καὶ τὴν προθυμίαν παρέχεται).

8g) Athenians realize that they have little hope of escape by land, 7.71 (καὶ τῶν Ἀθηναίων ἀνέλπιστον ἦν τὸ κατὰ γῆν σωθήσεσθαι). They march out, having lost all their ships, and instead of their high hopes, endangering themselves and Athens, 7.75 (τὰς τε ναῦς ἀπολωλεκότες πάσας ἀπεχώρουν καὶ ἀντὶ μεγάλης ἔλπιδος καὶ αὐτοὶ καὶ ἡ πόλις κινδυνεύσαντες). Nicias encourages hope, since men have been redeemed from even worse evils, 7.77 (ὦ Ἀθηναῖοι καὶ ξύμμαχοι, ἔλπις χρὴ ἔχειν (ἤδη τινὲς καὶ ἐκ δεινοτέρων ἢ τοιοῦτος ἔσωθησαν)). He himself is still boldly hopeful about the future, 7.77 (ἡ μὲν ἔλπις ὡς θρασεία τοῦ μέλλοντος). It is, in fact, reasonable to hope for kinder things from the gods, 7.77 (καὶ ἡμᾶς εἰκός νῦν τὰ τε ἀπό τοῦ θεοῦ ἔλπίζειν ἡπιώτερα ἔξειν (οἴκτου γὰρ ἀπ’ αὐτῶν ἀξιώτεροι ἢδη ἐσμέν ἤ φθόνου).