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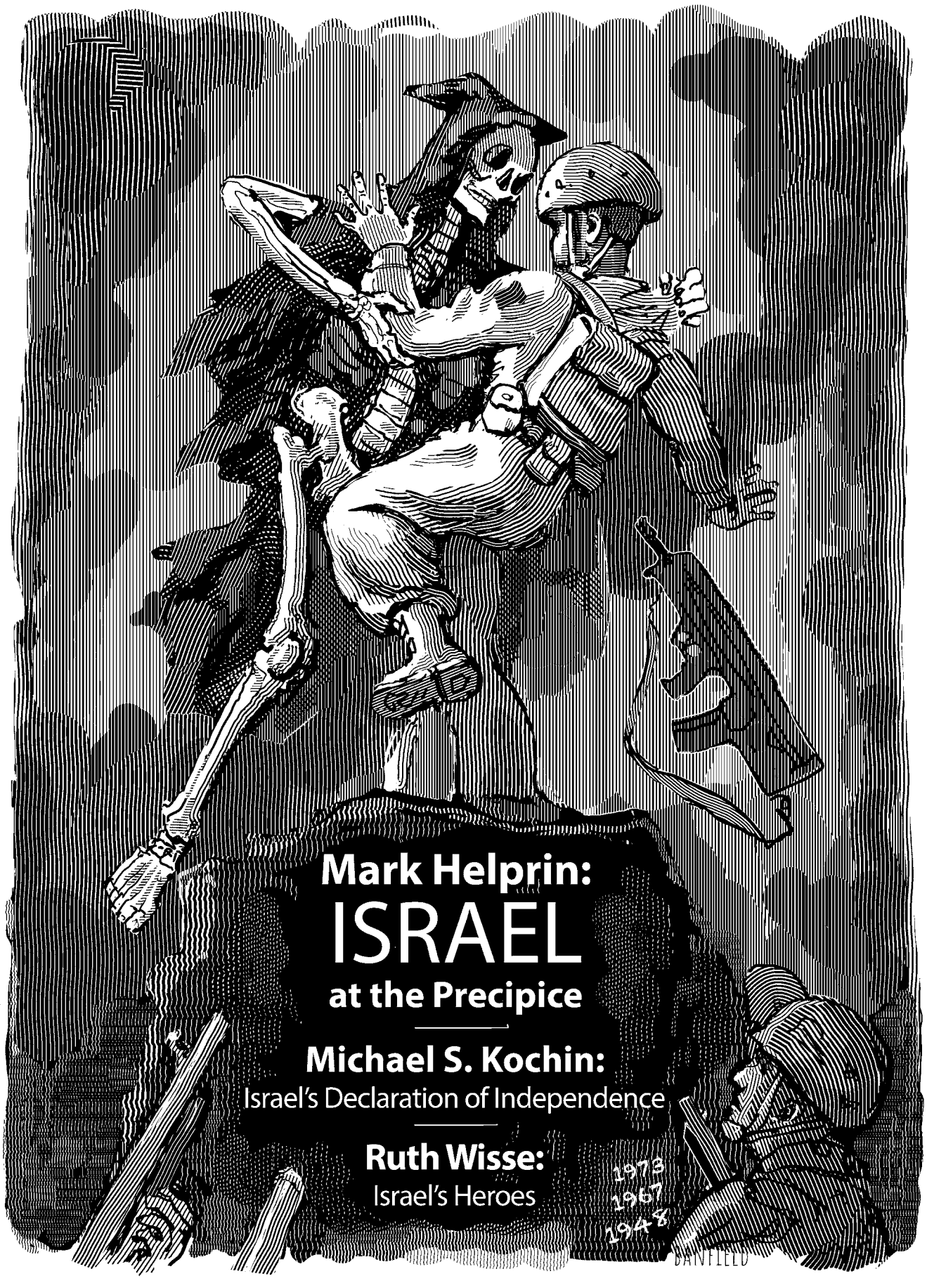

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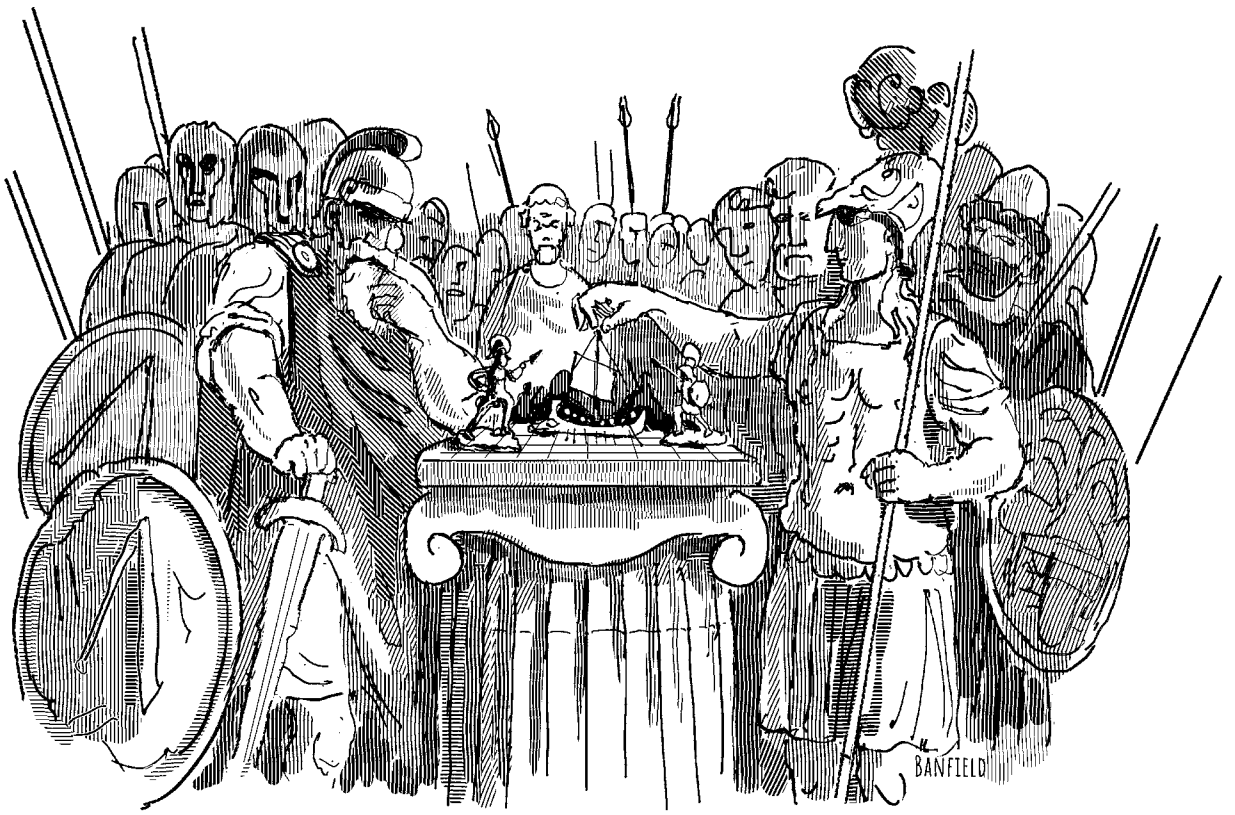
Book Review by David P. Goldman

Sparta's War to Win

Sparta's Sicilian Proxy War: The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta, 418–413 B.C., by Paul A. Rahe.
Encounter Books, 400 pages, $34.99



Athens played out a tragedy of *hubris* and *nemesis* twice in the second half of the 5th century B.C. First, in 454, she presumed to support an Egyptian revolution against the colossal Persian empire and ended up losing around 20% of her male population. Her second act of overweening pride, which inaugurated a punishing new phase of the Peloponnesian War, is the subject of Paul Rahe's *Sparta's Sicilian Proxy War: The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta, 418–413 B.C.* Tempted by the possibility of imperial dominance, Athens intervened in a minor local dispute on the island of Sicily in 415 and blockaded the city of Syracuse. Sparta, Athens's longtime rival for dominance in the Mediterranean, intervened decisively in 415–413. The entire "fiasco appears to have deprived Athens of anywhere from a quarter to a half of her already depleted adult male population."

Rahe is the Charles O. Lee and Louise K. Lee Chair in the Western Heritage at Hillsdale College, where he is a professor of history. This is the fifth book in his series on Sparta, beginning in 2016 with T*he Spartan Regime: Its Character, Origins, and Grand Strategy*, which was a magisterial account of the sources and workings of the Spartan constitution. Western historians from Friedrich Schiller onward have tended to idealize democratic Athens and dismiss Sparta as a brutish armed camp. In reality Sparta's constitution, with its sophisticated network of checks and balances, proved a robust platform for leaders capable of conceiving and executing a grand strategy. Without diminishing the importance of the Athenian victories at Marathon and Salamis, Rahe argued convincingly that Sparta initiated and led the Greek coalition that expelled the Persians from Greece at Plataea in 479.

Now Rahe reads the Syracusan campaign from the point of view of the Lacedaemonian victor rather than the Athenian vanquished, analyzing it as a proxy war in the service of Spartan grand strategy. Thucydides would not have objected: he characterized the Syracusan victory as "the greatest Hellenic action that took place during the war, and in my opinion, the greatest action that we know of in Hellenic history—to the victors the most brilliant of successes, to the vanquished the most calamitous of defeats" (*History of the Peloponnesian War* 7.78). Greater than Marathon, or Thermopylae, or Salamis!

Athens hoped to break the six-year stalemate that followed the Spartan peace proposal of 421. Thucydides reports that Athens voted for war "on a slight pretext, which looked reasonable, [but] was in fact aiming at conquering the whole of Sicily.... The general masses and the average soldier himself saw the prospect of getting pay for the time being and of adding to the empire so as to secure permanent paid employment in the future." Equal in size and wealth to Athens, Syracuse presented a tempting prize. "For centuries, Syracusa had been the largest, most populous and wealthiest *pólis* on the island [of Sicily]," Rahe notes. Its mixed population suffered repeated civil strife. "Nonetheless, it should have been easy for this Sicilian *pólis* to counter Athens' assault," he adds, given Syracusan manpower and self-sufficiency in food and materiel.

Who was the author of this "greatest Hellenic action"? Thucydides' protagonist and Rahe's is the Spartan general Gylippus, who broke the siege of Syracuse in 414 less by bringing in reinforcements than by rallying the flailing Syracusan land forces and out-

maneuvering the Athenian general Nicias. Rahe comments: "I see no reason to doubt Thucydides' report concerning the course of events and mood in Syracuse. There is every reason to suppose that he interviewed Gylippus, Hermocrates, and other leading Syracusans. Moreover, the fact that, after their second try, the Syracusans ceased their attempts to build a counter-wall is itself a sufficient indication that they were at a loss and on the verge of capitulation." Gylippus' intervention, then, rescued Syracuse from Athenian conquest and tipped the balance of power in Sparta's favor.

Unlike some of his colleagues, Rahe does not invent contrafactual scenarios in which Athens would have and should have gotten the better of the exchange. These exercises remind me of acquaintances from the Deep South who, after a bourbon or two, will recount in obsessive detail the major battles of the Civil War and explain why the Confederacy really should have emerged victorious. Instead, Rahe uses the Syracusan affair as a test case to explore not only how Athens lost the Peloponnesian War, but also how Sparta won.

From this perspective, Athens's behavior emerges as a display of almost suicidal recklessness. The count of Athenian citizens fell by three fifths in nearly four decades of war, writes Cornell classicist Barry Strauss in *Athens After the Peloponnesian War* (1986). The vast majority of able-bodied citizens were classed as either hoplites, if they could afford the required armor, or *thētes*, if they could not. "Hoplite numbers were cut by 50% or more between 431 and 394, from 22,000 to c. 9,250," writes Strauss. Moreover, "it is difficult to imagine more than 5,000–7,000 *thetes* in 394. Hence, the adult male citizen population of Athens after the Peloponnesian War was 14,000–16,250. It had been over 40,000 in 434, so the cost of the Peloponnesian War to Athens in citizen population was some 60%."

There have been several modern wars of similar duration (roughly 30 years) and comparable cost. Central Europe probably lost 40% of its population during the Thirty Years War of 1618–1648; France lost 1.4 million to 1.7 million of its 6 million military-age men in the Napoleonic Wars; the American Confederacy lost 28% during the Civil War; and Germany lost 5,330,000 of 17,718,714 men aged 15-44 years, or about 30% of its total manpower, in World War II.

What mania for conquest motivates men to court destruction on this scale? Rahe cites a warning from the moderate Athenian leader Diodotus, son of Eucrates, as reported by Thucydides: lust (*erōs*) for power and money, sharpened both by poverty and wealth, drives armies headlong into disaster. Every French soldier, Napoleon said, had a field marshal's baton in his rucksack. During the Thirty Years War, Commander Albrecht von Wallenstein offered the landless freebooters of Europe an opportunity for loot and glory. The Germans fought for renewed imperial dominion, and Confederate generals dreamed of a slave empire stretching deep into Latin America.

The Athenians were no less hungry for new acquisitions—and they were compulsive gamblers. If *Waiting for Godot* is a play where nothing happens twice, Athens at the peak of its power and perspicacity played out a tragedy where *everything* happened twice. The city's leadership class should have come away from the disaster in Egypt with their ambitions severely chastened. Instead they seem to have doubled down. In Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Lady Augusta Bracknell observes that losing one parent is a tragedy, while losing two seems like carelessness. After years of misbegotten overreach, it is hard to credit casual explanations that chalk Athens' Sicilian defeat up to mere contingencies such as the blunders of their commander Nicias at Syracuse (many though there were), or the assembly's ruinous decision on the eve of battle to exile its best general Alcibiades (who promptly offered his services to the Spartan enemy).

Taken together, this string of Athenian misjudgments looks characterological. The whole thing brings to mind an aphorism of the pre-Socratic sage Heraclitus: ἦθος ἀνθρώπῳ δαίμων *(ēthos anthrōpō daimōn)*, usually mistranslated as "character is destiny." In fact it means that a man's *ēthos*, the unique character instilled in him by culture and habit, is his *daimōn*, or guiding spirit. Talented as the Athenians were, their city was an accident waiting to happen. Their democracy at times rivaled Jacobin France in self-destructiveness. If the French Revolution ate its children, democratic Athens killed or exiled hers: "Something on the order of one-fifth of Athens' elected *stratēgoí* were tried for treason or misconduct...and…most of the commanders were executed…or exiled," Rahe reports. The paranoia and vindictiveness of the warmongering demagogue Cleon toward his enemies recalls that of Maximilien Robespierre.

But Athens's failures cannot go more than halfway toward explaining the outcome of the Sicilian expedition or of the Peloponnesian War. There are instances, to be sure, in which the loser's errors have more inherent interest

than the winner's strategy. In *The Storm of War* (2009), historian Andrew Roberts argues vividly that Hitler's missteps rather than Allied acuity determined the outcome of World War II. But that was not the case in the Sicilian campaign, Rahe argues. Rather, it was the balance of Athenian vices against Spartan virtues—the most compelling of which was *sōphrosunē*, more or less "moderation"—that made the war Sparta's to win or lose.

To be sure, Alcibiades' defection presented a "golden opportunity" to Sparta, as Rahe observes. But chance favors the prepared mind. Rahe refers approvingly to the "civic piety and *sōphrosúnē* of the sort characteristic of the Spartans and urged on the Athenians in 415 by Nicias." But the statesman Pericles, whose larger-than-life personality dominated the crucial first stages of the war, "attempted to reconcile the individual citizen's natural interest in his own private welfare with a devotion to the common good." This was a delicate balancing act that could only last while Pericles himself lived:

> [I]f anyone could rein in the Athenians in this fashion, Pericles was the man. It is no wonder that his contemporaries called him "the Olympian." There was something almost superhuman in his capacity to hold his fellow citizens in check.... What cannot be doubted, however, is that, in the absence of someone of Pericles' stature and judgment, the Athenians of this time were apt to follow their instincts and do the bidding of *érōs*.

A generation later, after Athens's defeat, Plato rejected the Periclean project altogether. In a 1963 essay on "Plato's Funeral Oration" (*Classical Philology*, volume 58), Charles Kahn argued that Plato's *Menexenus* is "an attack upon the prevalent view of the Athenian grandeur and destiny...which Themistocles and Pericles had created.... [Plato] is appealing to the traditions of Marathon, Salamis and Plataea, where Athens and Sparta stood side by side, against what he sees as the imperial madness of Pericles and of his would-be imitators in the fourth century." Other scholars cite Socrates' speech in *Republic* 9.573: "A man becomes tyrannical in the full sense of the word...when either by nature or by habits or by both he has become even as the drunken, the erotic, the maniacal." In *Gorgias*, Socrates tells the political philosopher Callicles that Pericles left the Athenians more savage than he found them, and that they therefore became "more unjust and inferior." Socrates concludes: "Then upon this view, Pericles was not a good statesman."

For his part, Rahe accuses Pericles of playing with fire by unleashing the prerational passions of his citizenry and trying to direct them toward the good:

> In eroticizing politics, Pericles broke with the inherited political model and initiated a moral revolution.... *Érōs*, when awakened, is not a passion conducive to *sōphrosúnē*. Nor is it compatible with reason, moderation, or restraint. It is more apt to give rise to *manía* and *húbris*.

Thucydides "knew this all too well" and used the protest of Diodotus to rub it in. As Rahe summarizes it, "Poverty will of necessity engender daring [*tólma*] and, by means of *húbris* and pride, wealth will nourish greed [*pleonexía*]." Then "'each citizen, acting in concert with all,' is inclined, when led by hope and an erotic desire for grandeur, to overestimate his city's chances of success *'alogístōs*—in a manner devoid of calculation and impervious to speech.'"

Pericles thus joins the list of tragic figures that includes Friedrich Schiller's Wallenstein, leaders who became creatures of forces they themselves set in motion. For all his statesmanship, Rahe concludes, Pericles was the author of Athens's ultimate failure. "The political eros that Pericles encouraged," he concludes, "was incompatible with the caution that he also preached." His successor Cleon was

> fierce and unrelenting [as] a champion of the war and of imperial expansion.... The demos that mattered to Cleon was not the poorer citizens as such. It was the population of tradesmen, artisans, and salarymen situated in the town of Athens, in the Peiraeus, and nearby.... For the rural population—the farmers of Attica, those who were rich and those who were comparatively poor—he displayed little sympathy.

Rahe's incisive presentation suffers very slightly from two minor editorial defects. To refer to historical persons by their patronymic (e.g., "the son of Xanthippus" in place of "Pericles") is an unnecessary archaism. Also, Greek citations are transliterated, which seems superfluous: any reader capable of understanding the original will also be able to read the Greek alphabet. Rahe argues that the subversiveness of the pre-Socratic phi-

losophers eroded the traditional piety of the Athenians. He argues that Pericles himself was a "one-time pupil of the philosopher Zeno of Elea" and a "disciple and confidante of the materialist philosopher and natural scientist Anaxagoras," who made an "ill-conceived attempt to substitute the universalist, cosmopolitan theology of the philosophers for the particularist civic religion of his fellow Athenians." Rahe's brief summary of this complex idea is supported by extensive footnotes, but its passing treatment in the text distracts from the main thrust of his narrative. Pericles was the apostle of civic *erōs* rather than reason; for that matter, Alcibiades himself was the pupil of Socrates who inveighed most bitterly against *erōs* and its consequences. In any case the philosophers didn't favor war. Plato, Aristotle, Euripides, and Aristophanes were unambiguous enemies of Athens's war party, and Sophocles (who arguably depicted Pericles through the character of Creon) probably was too. But this is a minor distraction from a compelling presentation.

The flaws of the Athenians placed the direction of the war in the hands of Spartan rather than Athenian grand strategy. As Rahe explained in the first volume of his series (and recapitulates in his introduction), Sparta's egalitarianism—at least among its narrow caste of citizens—underlay its success. "Since, in infantry combat, the strength of this formation was determined by its weakest link," he points out, "it left little, if any, room for individual heroism and imposed on everyone in the front ranks an equal responsibility for the welfare of the whole." For geographic and demographic reasons, Sparta had little to gain by expansion: it was, Rahe says (quoting Otto von Bismarck), a "saturated power" which "had everything that a community with her character could hope for, and the pursuit of more would be likely to endanger her possession of what she already had." Sparta's power rested on its hoplites, but for that reason "it was a hot-house flower. Its existence depended on art, which is to say: indoctrination, education, and a daily regimen." And so,

> taken as a whole, the grand strategy of classical Lacedaemon was brilliantly designed for the purpose it was intended to serve. It had, however, one defect. It presupposed that for all practical purposes the Peloponnesus was, under Sparta's hegemony, a world apart—which, to be fair, it had been for more than half a millennium and still was at the time that this strategy was first formulated. If, however, there ever came a moment when a power equal to or greater than this Lacedaemon appeared in force—or even threatened to appear—at or near the entrance to that great peninsula, the Spartans would have to rethink this strategy and recast it to meet an unanticipated challenge.

That challenge at last emerged as Athens turned the alliance against Persia into an imperial project that presented an existential threat to Sparta:

> The grand strategy that [Sparta] had articulated in the mid-sixth century and then adjusted and readjusted in light of the Persian and Athenian challenges was no longer viable. The Athenians really were intent on their destruction; at Mantineia, they had come close to achieving it; and the Lacedaemonians knew it. Furthermore, in the long run, if Sparta did not put an end to Athens' dominion over the sea, other opportunities would present themselves, and eventually the Athenians would succeed. The reckoning with the Athenians that the Lacedaemonians had sought for five long decades to sidestep now had to be faced.

Rahe's account of the military campaign at Syracuse reflects the keen eye of a historian who has walked every part of the original battlefields not presently occupied by new high-rise construction. He weighs the ancient sources and assigns authenticity when they diverge. Ultimately, he leaves open the question of whether Athenian defeat was inevitable once Gylippus took command, or whether a more competent Athenian general than Nicias might have rescued the situation. But he leaves no doubt that Athens itself had been asking for defeat for decades, and that Sparta was well prepared to oblige.

Harvard Professor Graham Allison created a stir by comparing the United States (the established power) to Sparta and China (the rising power) to Athens in *Destined for War* (2017), which I reviewed in these pages ("Must We Fight?," Fall 2017). Allison's book was a provocation to Americans who like to think of themselves as the heirs of Athenian democracy. In some ways we are: Our recklessness and narcissism have produced an uninterrupted string of strategic setbacks, from Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria to Ukraine. We have voted ourselves rich, to the point that federal transfer payments account for 22% of our personal consumption expenditures, up from 16% 20 years ago and just 6% in 1945. China may be the rising rather than the established power, but its character is more Spartan than Athenian. Throughout its thousands of years of history China has looked inward and exercised caution about foreign involvement. America for the last century can hardly be said to have done the same. Paul Rahe does not draw out the lessons for contemporary grand strategy, but his book requires us to do so for ourselves.

David P. Goldman is deputy editor of Asia Times*, a Washington Fellow of the Claremont Institute's Center for the American Way of Life, and author, most recently, of* You Will Be Assimilated: China's Plan to Sino-Form the World *(Bombardier Books).*