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The Spartan way of war

by Victor Davis Hanson

A review of *Sparta's Second Attic War* by Paul A. Rahe

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE

SPARTA'S SECOND ATTIC WAR

The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta,
446–418 B.C.



PAUL A. RAHE

Paul A. Rahe

Sparta's Second Attic War

Yale University Press, 408 pages, \$29.00

Sparta's check of imperial Athens in the inconclusive so-called First Peloponnesian War (460–445 B.C.) foreshadowed a remarkable subsequent twenty-eight-year growth in Lacedaemonian power and influence. At the war's end, Sparta had established itself as the only impediment left to an increasingly Athenian Greece.

Fourteen years later, a second, and far deadlier, Peloponnesian War broke out. The continuing, hard-fought Spartan upswing was capped off by her dramatic victory at the Battle of Mantinea (418 B.C.), which saw Sparta prevail over Athens—Sparta's chief Peloponnesian rival—and surrogate Athenian allies. That battle mostly ensured that Sparta would not lose in any renewal of the stalemated Second Peloponnesian War.

The Spartan surge between 446 and 418 B.C. is the theme of Paul A. Rahe's fourth volume on Sparta's history, its culture, and its rivalries with democratic Athens, entitled *Sparta's Second Attic War*.¹ His envisioned hexalogy will eventually cover three centuries of Spartan growth, dominance, and gradual decline. The final two books will presumably be devoted to the last fourteen brutal years of the Peloponnesian War (a proposed volume 5, 418–404/3 B.C.) and the post-war decades of Sparta's unilateral but shaky dominance, and her eventual decline (volume 6, 403–362 B.C.).

Rahe's ambitious project is by any measure a remarkable feat—even if at its origins the history was likely never envisioned as a systematic multi-century account of Sparta. In its original two volumes, the exact chronology and scope of the eventual effort were unclear. After all, rarely do scholars in their mid-sixties, after a lifetime of prodigious publication in fields as diverse as Athenian history, the French and British Enlightenments, and the 2,500-year history of constitutional republicanism, embark on what will likely become a three-thousand-page, six-volume project—part narrative history, part densely argued political analysis, part carefully sourced and heavily footnoted model of classical scholarship—while maintaining a demanding undergraduate teaching load.

But then again, Rahe was a Ph.D. student under Donald Kagan. Kagan's own monumental four-volume history of the Peloponnesian War (1969–87) remains a landmark of narrative history, common sense, and astute political insight—and was often at odds with the contemporary determinist historiography of the time.

In Rahe's four volumes thus far, a number of themes emerge. In their emphases on political and military history, volumes 1 through 4 are likewise often contrarian and antithetical to the current direction of historiography in general, and in particular the more recent cultural focuses of classical studies.

Rahe does not believe that states are just equal players in a game of strategic chess, whose foreign policies hinge on pursuing their self-interest through balances of power, alliances, and preemptive wars. Instead, Greek poleis, like modern nations, are also reflections of all sorts of idiosyncratic internal tensions and competing political, cultural,

social, and economic interests. These constant rivalries and gyrations often expressed themselves in volatile foreign policies and help to explain national conduct. In Sparta's case, its age-class systems delayed marriage and childbearing, resulting in the crisis of ὀλιγανθρωπία, or chronic military manpower shortages and population shrinkage, accentuated by ritual infanticide of the supposedly "unfit" and occasional natural disasters. Sparta was insular in part because it feared the effects of any massive battle loss on its already fragile demographic makeup. That reality in turn explained a contemporary reputation for slowness in projecting force beyond the vale of Laconia. One of the many Spartan enigmas—the reluctance to deploy an otherwise superior military—was not really an enigma at all.

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Rahe has noted throughout his volumes that Sparta's signature helot question was also dual-edged. The late eighth-century B.C. need to form an internal police state to ensure that the conquered helots ("those taken") of Laconia and Messenia stayed on their plots to produce food, and supply the Spartan military state, explains much later Spartan military deterrence. Sparta's original paramilitary force, with time and sustenance to train and drill constantly against internal enemies, eventually evolved, by the early fifth century, into a crack expeditionary army, one even deadlier against Greek rivals than against Sparta's restive serfs. And yet the very need for domestic vigilance against an enemy to the rear also contributed to the well-known Spartan risk-avoidance abroad.

Rahe in this additional regard is reminiscent of his advisor Kagan, who had argued that the decisions of the Corinthians, Spartans, Athenians, and others in the Peloponnesian War reflected their own intramural rivalries between war and peace parties. This focus on political parties seems obvious today, and had been generally accepted until the 1960s, when the gifted historian Moses Finley argued more for Greek "primitivism" and only loosely formed "factions." From anthropologically based models, he posited that sophisticated political awareness and organized political parties were unlikely in premodern societies, where there was allegedly neither much technological innovation nor economic rationalism. Instead, shame, honor, and factional tribalism explained both strife and decision-making.

From the other side, the Marxist historian G. E. M. De Ste. Croix's rival 1972 treatment of the Peloponnesian War (*The Origins of the Peloponnesian War*) saw instead a polis binary between victims and victimizers. His pro-Athenian account was defined by class struggle, pitting, in

Manichaeism, radical democracies of have-nots under Athens against reactionary oligarchical haves that looked to Spartan leadership. In this larger context, Rahe reminds us that Kagan's approach was neither falsely modernist nor determinist, but empirically reflective of the views of Greek historians, orators, and playwrights, and also epigraphical evidence of strikingly sophisticated political calculations behind foreign policy choices. Inside some fifteen hundred city-states were constant tensions between what we would now call right-wing, left-wing, and compromise parties that helped explain often volatile changes in foreign policies and alliances.

Rahe's multivolume history is also characterized by a second theme, one of "grand strategy," the subtitle of two of his volumes. Here, Rahe means all the forces—economic, cultural, social—within a society whose interests are advanced by foreign policy and in turn allow a state to project power. Strategy, in contrast, is the narrower focus on how to envision wartime tactical successes within a more holistic matrix of defeating enemies by military force or isolating them in peace.

Successful grand strategists are excellent military planners, but they additionally properly calibrate national means and ends by assessing economic resources, internal political stability, class interests, and an array of known unknowns from the financial to the psychological. In this regard, Rahe shows that purportedly blinkered Spartan foreign policies gradually proved more astute than those of sophisticated Athens. The Athenians proved cautious when daring was needed at Mantinea, and were reckless in pursuit of the unlikely, if not impossible, on Sicily. And it was Athens that rarely thought through, in a cost-benefit analysis, whether the ends of its grand projects had sufficient means to ensure their success or were even worth the costly investments—a weakness attributed by Thucydides to the volatility of the Athenian *dêmos*.

If, in a reductionist sense, the eventual winner of the Elephant/Whale standoff in the Peloponnesian War would be determined by which power mastered the forte of the other, then land-power Sparta's new navy between 413 and 404 B.C. proved far more determinative, with Persian money and allied help, than did the hoplite ground forces of the sea-focused Athens.

A third implicit premise is Rahe's attempt to resuscitate the reputation of ancient Sparta. For much of the twentieth century, the Spartan mystique was hijacked by fascists and Nazis as the ideal barracks nation, in which institutionalized militarism ensured discipline, patriotism, and authoritarianism—and superiority over purportedly decadent democracies. The Spartan victory in the Peloponnesian War was offered as proof of that alleged predominance. Hermann Göring, in unhinged fashion, assured the German people that the trapped Sixth Army at Stalingrad was making a courageous last stand in the manner of the three hundred Spartans at Thermopylae—as if Nazi invaders were Greek defenders, as if waging genocidal aggression were analogous to the defensive fight for constitutional freedom.

Meanwhile, Soviet and radical Trotskyite "Spartacus" leagues had adopted Sparta for its fondness for forced, institutionalized equality, egalitarian monotones of common dress, landholding, sustenance, and housing, and the absence of minted coinage. All were seen by the nineteenth- and

twentieth-century Left as the moral forebears of an empowered Western commune of the proletariat.

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Rahe's empathy for Sparta is, of course, quite different. Sparta, along with Crete, originated the idea of tripartite consensual government with legislative, judicial, and executive checks and balances. The Spartan Constitution was later often acknowledged as the basis for

subsequent Western constitutional monarchy and republicanism. Its inherent political stability made Sparta mostly free of the coups and revolutions found elsewhere in the Greek world. And while Sparta operated on a brutal suppression of the helots, a more insidious chattel slavery was for the most part absent from the classical Spartan state, as were the bugbears of massive overseas colonization and maritime empire. Moreover, its unmatched hoplite army was often put to Panhellenic use, most famously by the three hundred at Thermopylae and as the "Dorian Spear" that crushed the Persians at Plataea.

Rahe emphasizes the underappreciated dynamism of the Spartan constitutional system through its century-long deadly encounters with two powers greater than itself in terms of manpower, material wealth, and empire—Achaemenid Persia and imperial Athens. But the successful war against Xerxes (480–479 B.C.) and Sparta's role in the cold war that followed (479–454 B.C.), together with some forty-five years of fighting against Athens in the successful First (460–444 B.C.) and Second (431–404/3 B.C.) Peloponnesian Wars, cannot be understood alone by traditional measurements of polis dynamism. Sparta's population was relatively small (it could usually field only about ten thousand hoplite soldiers). It had few if any natural resources other than the fertility of Laconia and Messenia. Sparta was not monetized to any great degree. It had no easily exchangeable currency or reserves of gold and silver bullion.

Further, Sparta was an inland state, with only a rudimentary port at Gythium, some twenty-seven miles distant. While it eventually built a large fleet with Persian subsidies, for most of its history it either had little need of triremes or relied upon naval support from allies. Unwalled Sparta had few forts to speak of, and certainly nothing comparable to the vast Long Walls of Athens or Corinth.

That Sparta was located deep in the southern Peloponnese offered natural defense—as the Persians learned in 480 B.C. But as the city-state turned expeditionary, such remoteness ensured that Spartan hoplites faced formidable logistical and tactical problems in marching northward through the narrow Corinthian Isthmus to the distant "dancing floor of war" in Boeotia, or in detouring southeastward into Attica, or in continuing northward into Thessaly and Macedon.

Herodotus relates a curious scene, from the Ionian Revolt (499–493 B.C.) in Asia Minor, of Ionian Greek heralds under Aristagoras (the Ionian leader of Miletus) failing to enlist Spartan help—in

part because the parochial Spartans had little concept of Asian–Aegean geography, and thus no inkling of the vast size of the Persian Empire. So Spartan leaders were shocked to learn from their Greek brethren that Susa was a three-months’ journey from the Aegean coast—and thus hardly worth the cost of a proposed Panhellenic march into such a vast interior.

In other words, what made Sparta powerful were its institutions, its traditions, its ethos, and its stable and pragmatic constitution. In a society stereotyped as parochial and unimaginative, it is not surprising to learn that the most innovative, daring, and often successful generals on any side of the war were sons of helot mothers, renegades, and connivers in constant rivalries with stodgy Spartan kings and ephors. Brasidas, Gylippus, and Lysander, almost alone in the Peloponnesian War, mastered grand Spartan strategy, fathomed the intrinsic vulnerabilities of Athens, and understood the need for alliances with those with money and ships. All three were subversive iconoclasts, and not surprisingly all suffered violent deaths in battle or disappeared amid scandal.

Rahe’s current volume covers the end of the First Peloponnesian War down to about halfway through the Second Peloponnesian War. He focuses mostly on the so-called Archidamian War (431–422 B.C.) and the first years of the Peace of Nicias (421–414 B.C.), known to Greeks of the time ironically as the aborted “Fifty-Year Peace.”

Concerning the first years of the war, Pericles’ decision not to contest the soil of Attica, but to retreat inside the city walls before an invincible Lacedaemonian invading army, proved catastrophic. Rahe rightly notes that the ossified Spartan strategy of agricultural devastation could neither prompt the Athenians to come out to contest their occupied farmland (and thus be defeated) nor do enough damage in brief invasions to starve the city out. Yet no one counted on the great plague of 430–429 B.C., which ran rampant in the crowded and fetid city and destroyed a quarter of the Attic population.

With the epidemic came the death of the hexagenerian Pericles, the shrewd architect of three decades of Athenian imperialism. Athenian seaborne raids around the Peloponnese had accomplished little. Athenian tributary allies such as the large island of Lesbos had begun to waver that Athenians could no longer collect their tribute, and so they revolted. An ill-fated Athenian invasion of Boeotia ended up in a decisive defeat by Thebes at Delium.

Sparta was winning. But, as Rahe notes, it gained traction largely by remaining cautious and reactive. In this regard Bismarck’s purported quip about the United States—“God has a special providence for fools, drunkards, and the United States”—applies well to Sparta. During the Archidamian War, it was the beneficiary of Athens’s blunders and bad luck, rather than its own insight and daring. Sparta’s unimaginative invasions of Athens ceased once Athens finally, in 425 B.C., stumbled upon an innovative strategy of sending an expeditionary force deep inside the Peloponnese to encourage helot insurrections at Pylos, while defeating a small and hapless Spartan force on the nearby island of Sphacteria.

The unthinkable then happened when 292 Spartan survivors of the battle surrendered and were brought to Athens. The democracy threatened Sparta with their executions, should they ever invade Attica again. Up to this point, as Rahe points out, Sparta's conservatism had played well. But after Sphacteria, the pace of the war by needs accelerated. A humbled and shocked Sparta now took risks, as the general Brasidas sought to break apart the Athenian empire far to the north. When the proverbial "mortar and pestle" of the war, Brasidas and the Athenian Cleon, were killed at Amphipolis, the two exhausted belligerents settled for a breather in 421 B.C.

During this cold war, the brilliant Athenian schemer Alcibiades persuaded the Argives and other anti-Spartan forces in the Peloponnese to prompt war with Sparta at Mantinea (418 B.C.), the battle which the historian Thucydides considered the greatest of his age.

Rahe sees the ensuing Spartan close-run victory during the "peace" as the "turning point" of the entire war. Sparta's Peloponnesian alliance was now secure. Its military superiority was restored after the disgrace of Sphacteria. Athens was stymied. And in desperation, the democracy soon restarted the war and shortly suffered its greatest catastrophe, as it sent forty thousand men of its empire into oblivion on distant Sicily—ironically seeking to destroy the Greek world's other large democracy, Syracuse.

So Rahe ends his engaging volume not with the Peace of Nicias, as one might have expected, but with Mantinea. After that win, a new generation of Spartans, most notably Gylippus and Lysander, soon crafted a grand alliance of victory comprising Boeotians, Sicilians, defecting Athenian subjects, and Persian money—beating the Athenian navy, and thus at last ending the twenty-seven-year-long war. We await the final two volumes of Rahe's remarkable history to learn how Sparta won the final phase of the Peloponnesian War, but then eventually proved as inept a hegemon as it had been preeminent in war.

Finally, we must ask whether Athens could have won the Peloponnesian War. As the conflict ended, a youth in Thebes must have studied the Athenian strategic lessons of their respective successes and failures at Sphacteria and Mantinea. And thereby he learned to appreciate the utility of urban fortifications, the popular resonance of democracy, the Achilles' heel of Sparta (the helot), and the need for strategic focus. So, thirty-three years after the defeat of Athens, the great Theban liberator Epaminondas defeated and humiliated Spartan invaders at Leuctra. And then, the following winter, he mustered a massive Panhellenic hoplite army, staged a preemptive invasion into the heart of the Peloponnese to destroy the Spartan alliance, encircled Sparta with the armies of the fortified democratic cities of Mantinea, Megalopolis, and Messene, and freed the Messenian helots—ending the legendary dominance of Sparta for good and doing what Athens dreamed of but had never possessed the vision, discipline, and leadership to accomplish.

¹ *Sparta's Second Attic War: The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta, 446–418 B.C.*, by Paul A. Rahe; Yale University Press, 408 pages, \$40.

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